Long Gone John gets a long goodbye

MUSIC

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Artists and fans lined up to give thanks to a music mogul for years of support and cherished records on his retirement from the business.

No, Clive Davis is not packing it in. If he ever does, the send-off will be a huge gala with the biggest names in the pop world paying tribute.

This event was at the tiny Silver Lake club Spaceland the musicians on hand last Friday for the most part hardly known outside of indie-hipster circles. The mogul-in-question — or anti-mogul, as he's often called — was Long Gone John, the sole proprietor of the Long Beach-based Sympathy for the Record Industry label, which he is shuttering so he can move to a forested stretch of beach near Olympia, Wash. Sympathy, despite an astonishing 750 releases by 550 acts in the course of 18 years — including early albums from the White Stripes and Courtney Love's Hole — racked up cumulative sales in its entire history that would barely make a forested stretch of beach near Seattle

Oh, and unlike a Davis event, this night was long on humility and short on hype. The guest of honor didn't even make a speech and only reluctantly came on stage to accept a cake presented by organizers. In fact, he even forbade the night's five bands from mentioning him from the stage — though that edict was broken right off the bat.

"If it wasn't for Daddy Long Gone, a lot of us wouldn't have records out," said Lisa Marr, fronting a one-night reunion of her '90s power-punk trio Buck. "No one would even know we existed."

The sentiment was echoed throughout the night, from sunshine-pop revivalists Candypants, girl-group/countrybilly noir merchant Miss Derringer, fuzzed-up garage-rock band the Ettes and unruly rebel-rockers the Willowz, as well as musicians and fans in the audience who'd merely come to pay their respects.

"The thing about John is every record he puts out, all he cares about is making it a fabulous work of art," said Kristian Mermis), perched on a barstool near the stage, where a steady stream of friends and well-wishers came to pay their respects.

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But the business has slowed to the extent that reaching even that modest goal became a constant struggle. Citing a need for fresh air (literally and figuratively), he says it's time to move north — lock, stock and the massive collection of toys (an obsession surpassing even his music passion) that fill his Long Beach home.

He certainly didn't seem to care about sales totals or profit. Other than the White Stripes — whose first three albums were on Sympathy but who left non-amicably for greener pastures — Hole and perhaps Japan's the 5.6.7.8's (featured in Quentin Tarantino's "Kill Bill, Vol. 1," odds are pretty good that you've never heard of, let alone heard, much of anything from the label.

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So what does it all add up to, legacy-wise? The music this night was threaded by an overall retro feel and the presence of at least one woman in each band (both common among Sympathy acts), but showed a wide range of approach.

Opening act Candypants, a quintet fronted by art-kewpie singer-flutist Lisa Jenio, could easily have fallen on the wrong side of the Ironic Curtain with its version of the Monkees' "Star Collector" and such originals as "I Want a Pony" but showed enough sincerity to be more Ariches than arch. (That's good.)

Miss Derringer, with singer Liz McGrath's prom-night hairdo evoking a small-town Reese Witherspoon, mixed Ronnie Spector with Loretta Lynn. (More good.) The Ettes, another trio, followed the garage-classique model of such Sympathy-
related acts as England's Billy Childish and Holly Golightly and Motor City notables the Detroit Cobras and, yes, the White Stripes. (Uh-huh, quite good.) And the Willowz finished on a very loud note, finding the common ground between the Stooges and Lynyrd Skynyrd. (Deafeningly good.)

But for all that, no one on the scene seemed able to put a finger on just what musical legacy Long Gone John is leaving behind. Most commented on his methods and passion, but ultimately said they had no answer.

John gave it a go, in a manner of speaking: “Eighteen years of performance anxiety, instability and poor judgment. That pretty much sums up my story.”

Note, though, that he was smiling broadly as he said this. And despite a reputation for being prickly at times, as well as his insistence that he did not want to be the center of attention, he spent pretty much the whole night beaming through his shaggy curls.

"Maybe from seeing that all these people like him he'll change his mind about leaving," said Falling James; the Leaving Trains singer has been a longtime friend of the label. "Though he doesn't like people liking him."

It did seem he could only take so much of it. Or maybe he wanted to avoid maudlin goodbyes: Before the Willowz were far into their set, and without any fuss or ceremony, John was long gone.

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