In the first of a series of Boston-area promotional concerts, Bobby Whitlock played at MIT, in a packed Sala de Puerto Rico. Bobby should be familiar to those who have followed Delaney & Bonnie and the Dominos, as their organist, guitarist, and occasional writer and vocalist. He has a distinctive, rough, sometimes plaintive voice, well suited to the type of music he has been, and is, playing—rock & roll with strong country and blues influences. In fact, several of the songs from his album and concert are old D&B cuts; he opened with “Where the Wild Things Are” by John McVie, and got a well-deserved acknowledgment several times. After putting the gigs together, the sound was a little undistinguished accompaniment, with the possible exception of the lead guitarist, Bobby really got into his act, grimacing, screaming, sometimes almost crying; he got the band and the audience warrupd after only a couple of songs. Probably because they were using rented equipment, and this was one of their first gigs together, the sound was a little muddy, but the crowd was very “patient and attentive,” which Bobby acknowledges several times. After putting off the requests for “Layla” by playing some cuts off a second album, Bobby performed the best received song of the night, “Thorn Tree in the Garden,” from the Dominos album, as an acoustic and vocal solo, and got a well-deserved ovation.

Bobby Whitlock is continuing in the tradition of the Bramlettes and Derek and the Dominos and, with some practice, will bear further listening. If you liked Layla, you'll probably like Bobby Whitlock.

His major claim to a wider fame is his ability to take parts of great songs and make them his own. Chris Smither is one of the most listenable of recent rock musicians, with a voice that would resemble Kris Kristofferson's or John Prine's, and a playing - rock & roll with strong country overtones that are familiar but which defy connection or placement with anyone else. Paul Pena is a blind guitarist who sees things in a nice way, nice enough to belie his disability and make the rest of us feel a little better after listening to his music. His first album is an extremely comfortable collection of blazing rock with a soulful accent. It is expressive and sensitive, but more importantly, it is one of the most listenable of recent rock releases.

Pena's songs are an interesting combination of lyric and rhythm, done in a voice that would resemble Kris Kristofferson or Kristofferson could sing on key. Unlike most rock singers, he chooses to sing in a low-key, controlled manner, although on several tracks he proves that he is quite capable of cutting loose. He works his voice around a four-piece backup group who rely on tightness and good sound mixing to set off a clear style that is clean but not flashy. Lest you should be deceived by the advertisements, however, he is not the new Jimi Hendrix that Capitol is promoting. Pena's work carries none of the fuzziest that stuck Hendrix's style apart from all others. There are a few recurring lead themes that bring Hendrix down to mind, but on the whole, his style is individual and needs no abstract comparisons to establish the fact that he is very, very good in his own right.

Few first albums are as good or as professional as Pena's recorcing. He shows songwriting abilities that, sadly, are often lacking in rock releases. His music will appeal to those of you who enjoy good guitar, or happy, rocking blues, or even catchy melody lines; this album is a little better after listening to his music. His first album is an extremely good rock & roll with strong country overtones. Bobby Whitlock proves that he is quite capable of cutting loose. He works his voice around a four-piece backup group who rely on tightness and good sound mixing to set off a clear style that is clean but not flashy. Lest you should be deceived by the advertisements, however, he is not the new Jimi Hendrix that Capitol is promoting. Pena's work carries none of the fuzziest that stuck Hendrix's style apart from all others. There are a few recurring lead themes that bring Hendrix down to mind, but on the whole, his style is individual and needs no abstract comparisons to establish the fact that he is very, very good in his own right.

Chris Smither drags on

Don't It Drag On – Chris Smither (Poppy)

Chris Smither is one of the most established of Boston-Cambridge musicians, in the ranks of будспал, Reed Little, Jaime Brockett, Peter Geremia, and many others. His music claims to a wider fame than is his help in writing “The Tlattle,” which Brockett has since made a classic. “Don't It Drag On” stands up well with the reputation he has, but it does little to further it, and bring him out of the group of talented, but not all that successful musicians, like those mentioned above, and Townes Van Zandt, David Bromberg, David Blue, and even countless more.

Chris Smither's voice is not that great (kind of flustering, waverings), but it goes well with a lot of what he sings. His playing on acoustic guitar also fits well, as does most of the music on their album on Don't It Drag On, but it's nothing fantastic. The Dead's “Friend of the Devil” and the Stones' “No Expectations” are done well by him, as are most of his original songs. Yet the album is, and this is probably why Chris Smither and innusables of his peers will remain relatively unknown, not terribly memorable. It's all right, but it just falls short of being really great.