Spectacular human sexual response

Human Sexual Response, in concert

Wednesday, Oct. 31 at Spur.

Halloween is always a special night. Halloween 1984 was extra-special for Boston music lovers, as Human Sexual Response made its return to the stage after a 2½-year hiatus. This one-time-only reunion concert featured a house packed to the gills (imagine the Green Line during rush hour, only worse) and a highly anticipated crowd in ghoulish costume belting the evening.

Although the band was externally popular in its hometown of Boston, it never seemed to catch on anywhere else except for the occasional college campus radio station. Maybe HSR was too artsy to be a dance band, or too dancy to be an art band, but for whatever reason the band members decided to pick it. Maybe the thought of playing to additional audiences at Jonathan Swift’s (but nowhere else) became a bit refreshing.

Human Sexual Response was always a little bit different. The instrumentation (guitar, bass, drums) was fairly standard, certainly by the new-wave ethos of the late 80’s, but FOUR vocalists! Four vocalists who danced and weaved even while belting out reasonably non-melodious harmonies? Maybe they simply weren’t different enough to catch on in its era when the wunderer, the better was the rule and tooo the band which didn’t conform to the conventional views of non-conformity.

The songs were also a bit of the ordinary, dealing mostly with variations on the theme of, well, sex. (The band name is derived from the famous Masters and Johnson sex survey of a previous generation.) The songs were often so tongue-in-cheek that it became difficult to take the band seriously, which hurt the credibility of the tunes conveying a deeper message. They were clever, too clever for their own good, as it turned out, and much of the humor undoubtedly sailed over the heads of many a neophyte listener.

The band released two records late in its career: Figure 14 in 1980 and a year later. Perhaps if they had considered its career: Figure 14 in concert. They were also quite visual, sporting Halloween costumes that would have sent Al Franken (though nowhere else) running for the exits. One might imagine the complete abandon and wall of sound that Human Sexual Response generated in concert. They were also quite visually oriented, and this was in pre-MTV days.

Lead vocalist and primary songwriter Larry Symons, along with guitarist Rich Gibberson, bassist Chris MacLachlan and drummer Malcolm Travis, formed another band out of HSR’s ashes. Wild Kingdom is still active in the local disc scene, but has never achieved quite the notoriety and popularity of the earlier combo. Vocalists Casey Cameron, Windle Davis and Dain Laksot all retired from the professional music world.

As the stage curtain was finally drawn away, Human Sexual Response was revealed to be a pulsating tone-poem featuring a pulsating bass guitar. In addition, the sound of broken glass (of course) and Gilbert’s screeching guitar (he comes in on his guitar and synthesizer playing is undiscoverable) is really almost three completely different songs in one.

Jackie Onassis, from the first record, follows this rule. This is Human Sexual Response’s most popular song, and the first one to make the band stand out from the rest of the local music scene. It is the only one in which Baugher doesn’t sing lead. Cameron, the group’s only woman, handles the choruses on the send-up of the First Lady of tabloid-dom:

I want to be Jackie Onassis
I want to wear a pair of dark sunglasses,
Oh yeah...
First the world will call me
Bovver—yeah!
Then I’ll change my name to Jackie K.
After my date with tragedy
I’ll arrest tourists take care of me
I want to be Jackie Onassis, oh yeah.

In a Roman Mood’s “12345678910,” a song with more time changes than Human Sexual Response has members, was next, followed by “What Does Sex Mean to Me?” from Figure 14, the band’s most straightforward iteration of sexual norms. “Land of the Glass Pincaces” from the second record provided one final quiet moment before the group launched into its three numbers, each a cover of “A Question of Temperature,” a relic of 60s proto-psychedelia called from Roman Mood’s, “Dolls,” replete with horror-movie plotting (“The day the dolls came alive”) and a theme song, “Cool Jerk,” both from the debut disc.

After a short break, Human Sexual Response returned to perform “Guardian Angel” (from Roman Mood) and a song they often played but never recorded, the thin McCloy song “Hong On Snooz,” which in itself was a ripoff of “Louie, Louie.” Another break, and the band returned for the final encore: “I Want to Be Your Cow,” an unreleased original, found itself vocally downs on all four tracks with the audience mooing its approval.

And then it was all over. The house lights came on, and the thousand-plus sweaty bodies spilled out into the chilly November air. Even though Human Sexual Response didn’t play “Fame Fuil,” a song which almost got them banned on several occasions, it was certainly an evening which will long be remembered by both old fans who had seen the band dozens of times and those who had only heard the rumors about how great HSR was.

Unfortunately, there are no plans to re-unite the band, even after such an exhilarating, intense, fun show. Oh well, maybe next Halloween someone will convince Button to make a comeback. Perhaps even the Sacred Belfegore would return.

Drew Blakemore

New record a real let-down

Belfegore, a new LP by Belfegore on Elektra Records.

I began listening to Belfegore with expectations of hearing something new and interesting. After all, my band traded up of a guitarist (Mickel Clausen) from Montréal, a drummer (Charly T. Charly) from Dusseldorf, and a bassist (Raoul Walton) from the Boston promised to be different. Unfortunately, it’s a promise Belfegore can’t deliver on their debut LP.

This album is a misguided attempt to merge funk with hardcore punk rock. Clausen provides a melodic, laid back vocal, but his guitar and synthesizer playing is uninteresting. Charly’s drums are noticeably not only for its loudness, and Walton supplies very rudimentary funk bass lines. Their overall musicanship leads me to believe they chose to mix these two music forms, not for artistic reason, but because they couldn’t come up with better material. Despite all these failures, the composing stands out as the real weakness of the album. Typically, each song starts out as one riff which is maintained with faithful devotion for about four minutes. “Seabird Seadrone,” for example, would have been better titled “Seabird Sledown.”

“Questions” is a slow, pleading synth-based number that goes nowhere. It sounds something like Rush in an album.

In contrast, “Wake Up With Stress” is an up-tempo guitar/synthesizer song, along the lines of Gang of Four. Yet this song also goes nowhere, repeating over and over a simple funk rhythm while Clausen whistles the vocal. “Don’t You Run” sounds like a poor copy of Waeg Ching’s “Dance Fitol Days.” The other tracks, with one exception, are variations on these three songs.

The one track, by far, on this album is “All That I Wanted.” Only on this song does Belfegore sound like a band with a solid backbone. Their musicanship for the cries of Clausen and his guitar. “All That I Wanted” is a headbanger you can dance to. However, even this song Belfegore’s best, comes off sounding like an imitation of The Sex Pistols without and not something new.

While the idea of putting hardcore and punk together has merit, Belfegore doesn’t show that they can do it any better. On a scale of 1 to 10, I’d give this album a 5.

Mitch Glavin