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Roch rocks the house down

By COLIN MACLEAN
Edmonton Sun

ROCH VOISINE
Jubilee Auditorium, Edmonton
Friday, December 1, 2000

■ Roch Voisine's assault on the English-speaking world may have stalled in recent years but, I guess, no one told the nearly sold-out audience last night at Edmonton's Jubilee Auditorium.

The singer's appeal seems to cut across the whole demographic with as many males as females in the audience. Most seemed to be the 30somethings that Voisine has carried effortlessly from "bubble gum" to "adult contemporary."

For years the tousle-haired poster boy with the chiselled features has been trying to crack the English-speaking market and whether this translated into CD sales or not, most of the pre-concert conversations in the lobby seemed to be in English.

The first half of the show was a sort-of Roch's greatest hits - ranging from his breakthrough Helene to his biggest, Kissing Rain.

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The singer sauntered onto the stage casually dressed in a black T-shirt and jeans and just started to sing. From time to time members of his tight seven-piece backup group joined him but mostly it was Roch, his guitar and 1,200 of his closest friends.

"This is nice and cozy," he observed in his best boyish, aw-shucks manner. "Just like a living room."

The face still maintains its pretty-boy looks, but it's become a bit craggier and the voice has deepened and broadened - at times displaying an unexpected depth and range not exhibited on his CDs.

The second half of the concert was composed of chestnuts roasting on an open fire in support of his new album Christmas is Calling.

There is no doubting the album comes from the heart. The singer took four months this summer to put the thing together and he certainly puts the stamp of his style on the songs - singing them with conviction.

Some of the traditional carols are a bit of a surprise as they are run through the relentless Voisine pop-rock blender and come out homogenized - the sort of thing that is generally filed under the title of "easy listening" and which disappears into the white noise of Christmas pop radio .

With a couple of terrific exceptions. He delivered an ever-building version of The Little Drummer Boy and at the end of the concert, the singer was joined by a driving local group, the Northwest Bible College Celebrations Choir, for a couple of quite powerful renditions including a heartfelt version of Oh Holy Night that brought the audience to their feet. The songs, taken from his CD include Joy to the World, Sleigh Ride, What Child is This, Silver Bells and so on.

In recent years, it has become fashionable for critics to dump on Voisine for, I dunno, for not being Elton John. I think too many of my burnt-out, battle-hardened brethren suffer from soggy synapses

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and scarred eardrums from too many evenings listening to Pearl Jam or Marilyn Manson.

There may be a bit of Christmas turkey white meat here but Voisene has a winning stage personality. He may never find a place with the Three Tenors but he sings with feeling in a pleasant lite, brite voice.

Last night's concert was as welcome as the first snow of winter that covers a dark brown world.

And lingers in the mind for about as long. ■

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