

Live: Lee Ranaldo Plays It Straight At Glasslands

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Lee Ranaldo
Glasslands Gallery
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Better than: Another '90s band playing a '90s album start to finish.

There wasn't a whole lot of noise from Lee Ranaldo's new quartet under the cloth clouds at Glasslands on Saturday, but there was plenty of crunch. Removing the art abrasions from Sonic Youth's formula, Ranaldo and company—including SY drummer Steve Shelley and guitarist Alan Licht—brought their alt-skills to bear on the kind of project Geffen Records might've have killed for in 1993. Ranaldo's first proper batch of solo songs wasted few moves in delivering the straightest music yet contrived by a member of Sonic Youth, although it did employ dozens of the little tricks he's picked up over the past 30 years—chiming guitar gongery, Television-style leads, detuned open chords. (His album comes out on Matador in March.)

A warm, plaintive voice in Sonic Youth to counter the art-cool of his bandmates, Ranaldo's only extra-Sonic pop has been the occasional Bob Dylan or Neil Young cover for a tribute album; the nine new songs he played on Saturday come cut mostly in the classic-rock mold. "Turn your face to the light, the wind whispers your name," he sang on "Hammer Blows," one of many lines that landed on the Neil Young side of the Sonics' Neil/Ginsberg divide. But the band emphasized the music's insideness. Licht, a veteran abstractionist who's been playing it mostly not-straight since his early '90s days in Lovechild, took most of the 45-minute set's solos. Perhaps the only link to the free textures he and Ranaldo have spent the much of the past decades exploring, Licht's attack was sharp and clean, evoking Television's Richard Lloyd and Tom Verlaine. On the flip side, the band's most traditional elements—and the most abrupt divide between Ranaldo's new project and Sonic Youth—were played by five-string bassist Irwin Menken, whose darting lines were (dare we say) outright dudely.

Ranaldo's band had played a warm-up set for Wild Flag earlier this fall at Bell House, which occurred the same day his SY mates Kim Gordon and Thurston Moore announced their separation; the Glasslands show was its proper coming out. Ranaldo and Shelley's playing often felt like a natural extension of Sonic Youth, their quarter-century musical relationship manifesting itself in easily flowing crescendos and numerous moments of effortless eye contact as Ranaldo silently counted off a song's next section. Despite all the alt and volume, each song reached for quiet transcendence, like the multi-part "Fire Island," and the set-closing "Shouts"—about Occupy Wall Street, of course—which stretched into one of the few jams where Ranaldo joined Licht in squall.

"You'll have to give us a moment of sugar-coated indulgence here; I've been waiting to play this since I was in junior high school," he announced before a cover of The Monkees' "You Just May Be The One." There's all kinds of symbolism in Sonic Youth's Dark Horse finally emerging into a role that plenty of SY fans wish he'd embraced earlier. '60s (or even '70s) Los Angeles pop is a fine reference point for Ranaldo's music, even with the chiming guitars that are strictly New York. Sonic Youth's future plans might be unclear, but Ranaldo's surely pretty happy he has some songs he can sing in the meantime.

Critical bias: Been waiting for Ranaldo's solo album since figuring out he was the one singing "Wish Fulfillment" on *Dirty*.

Overheard: "Hey, I'm *working* here."—Bassist Irwin Menken to some dude trying to grab a microphone.

Random notebook dump: The talk-box thingee makes Lee sound like Marge Simpson.

Setlist:

Angles

Dream

Off the Wall

Xtina

T.N.C.

You Just May Be The One

Fire Island

Hammer Blows

Shouts

Lost

—

Genetic