

New Year's Eve with Rickie Lee Jones

The couple of rehearsals were disorganized to the point of being pointless. Not only did the charts have lots of penciled-in changes to indicate song forms, Rickie often changed the song forms from one run-through to the next. Even the melody was often heavily embellished, if not changed entirely.

This was particularly challenging for at least one of the half-dozen band members, whose prior knowledge of Rickie didn't extend beyond hearing a few times her big hit, "Chuck E's In Love." Following along with Rickie at the rehearsals was less challenging for band members like guitarist Buzz Feiten, who had toured with Rickie.

The 1987 New Year's Eve performance was at the historic and imposing Los Angeles Palace, on Vine St. near Hollywood Blvd. Rickie's show was at the Palace Court, a smaller 100-seat venue within the Palace, upstairs and to the right.

Like the rehearsals, the performance was very loose, with Rickie often surprising the band with changes in song form. It wasn't a slick show by any means, but the enthusiastic audience seemed to be jazzed to hear Rickie in a smaller and more intimate setting.

Toward the end of the show, Rickie surprised everyone by asking the audience for requests, one of which was, in the holiday spirit, "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas." It's highly unlikely that, based on the preceding looseness, the request, or the response, were pre-arranged. Without giving the band a tempo or asking for a reference pitch, Rickie—who does not have perfect pitch—immediately started singing, and without any accompaniment whatsoever.

To everyone's amazement, Rickie sang the request absolutely straight, pitch-for-pitch, word-for-word. No embellishment whatsoever. It seemed as if she was operating under the supposition that any change whatsoever to "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" would be a sacrilege to the audience member making the request, or the composer Hugh Martin.

If any band member had a thought of accompanying Rickie, this was soon abandoned, either because the band member didn't know the chord changes, or was mesmerized by the thoroughly honest, unaffected, almost reverent performance. Later, as the band agreed backstage, it was Rickie's performance that had stopped them in their tracks.

Often, at the conclusion of a song, the audience suppresses a response until they are certain the song has ended. But that didn't seem to be the case here. After Rickie sang the final note of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," seconds passed as the audience, and band, collected their thoughts and grasped that something special had just transpired. A day later, the LA Times deemed the performance there "...the stuff of legend."

http://articles.latimes.com/1987-01-02/entertainment/ca-1637_1_palace-court