

CALENDAR

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STAGECOACH FESTIVAL



ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

HEADLINER Shania Twain belts out a number Saturday on the second of three nights of the Stagecoach country music fest at the Empire Polo Grounds in Indio.

AN ICY PERFECTION

POP MUSIC REVIEW

Shania Twain offers a masterful if bloodless set

MIKAEL WOOD
POP MUSIC CRITIC

Shania Twain sounded so good Saturday night at the Stagecoach country music festival that I briefly wondered if she'd been replaced by a robot.

Her perfect pitch wasn't the only thing that raised that possibility.

Headlining the annual three-night event at Indio's Empire Polo Club, Twain — whose performance was softening the ground before the release later this year of her first album in more than a decade — sang with incredible precision as she moved through the tightly crafted hits that made her one of the most successful pop stars on the planet in the 1990s and early 2000s.

"Whose Bed Have Your Boots Been Under?," "That Don't Impress Me Much," "I'm Gonna Getcha Good!": Each was a masterful display of vocal control, with Twain navigating tricky intervals like someone sheltered in a private recording studio rather than standing on a dusty field whipped by desert winds. [See Twain, E3]



ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

COUNTRY MUSIC'S Willie Nelson performs on the Palomino Stage, one of many top-tier stars who showed up to play at the 2017 festival in Indio.

Coachella's little country cousin blossoms as a star

BY RANDY LEWIS

Hollywood trekked to the desert for a surreal meeting of reality and fantasy at the 2017 Stagecoach country music festival in Indio, demonstrating how the younger, twangier sibling of the Coachella Valley Music & Arts Festival has come into its own during the last decade.

It happened a few minutes before Willie Nelson was due to take the stage for his marquee performance. Nelson agreed to delay his set for a few minutes so that director-writer-actor Bradley Cooper and his crew could film a shot intended for his forthcoming remake of "A Star Is Born" — a concert scene featuring Lukas Nelson and his band, Promise of the Real.

The surreal part was that a couple of thousand fans who'd just been singing along with Tommy James and the Shondells' 1968 garage-rock classic "Mony Mony" heard nothing from the stage except the occasional crash of a cymbal or the thump of a bass drum.

And yet a star has been born in the world of music festivals: [See Stagecoach, E3]

MUSIC REVIEW

A Ninth tinged by mystic yearnings

David Lockington leans on Eastern inspirations to close season in Pasadena.

MARK SWED
MUSIC CRITIC

A symphony of symphonies, the Beethoven Ninth is where the composer "finds a solution of his intolerable yearning by making himself one with the human family," British author J.W.N. Sullivan once wrote in study of Beethoven's spiritual development.

On Saturday, in this season of Beethoven Nincths (to

say nothing of intolerable international yearnings), it became the Pasadena Symphony's turn toward oneness.

But where to turn? The Ninth, which typically lasts between 65 and 70 minutes, begs for context. Jeffrey Kahane's Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra offered a Ninth a week earlier that became an opportunity for the outgoing music director to make a political statement with a profoundly humanistic spoken introduction to the score. Next week in New York, another outgoing music director, Alan Gilbert, has chosen to preface a New York Philharmonic [See Pasadena, E8]



JOHN SCIULLI Getty Images

Night of magic and magenta

MOCA presents a shimmering, colorful celebration in honor of artist Jeff Koons, above. E2

A billion dollars the 'Fast' way

The latest in the "Furious" franchise passes a big worldwide box-office mark. E4

Comics E6-7
TV grid E8

Roasted in absentia

Hasan Minhaj wins over the Trump-less correspondents gathering.

LORRAINE ALI
TELEVISION CRITIC

No one had a harder gig Saturday than comedian Hasan Minhaj, except perhaps for the poor soul who had to tell President Trump that Minhaj didn't blow it roasting the commander in chief onstage at the White House Correspondents' Dinner.

The senior correspondent for "The Daily Show with Trevor Noah" was the latest in a long line of hosts, including Seth Meyers, Rich Little and Bob Hope, at the annual Washington black-tie event.

All have roasted the press and presidents alike.

But unlike those big names, the lesser-known political satirist Minhaj, 31, had to fill a gaping hole in the festivities while making stiff faces like Wolf Blitzer laugh.

That's because Trump wasn't there. He's the first president since Ronald Reagan in 1981 to bow out of the annual event (and Reagan was recovering from an assassination attempt). Trump instead had his own rally earlier in the day, in front of supporters in Pennsylvania, where he called news outlets like the New York Times and CNN failing, incompetent and dishonest.

"We've got to address the elephant that's not in the room," said Minhaj near the jittery beginning of his monologue. "The leader of our country is not here. And

that's because he lives in Moscow, it's a very long flight. As for the other guy, I think he's in Pennsylvania because he can't take a joke."

C-SPAN broadcast the dinner in its entirety, as they did a march in Washington earlier Saturday where an estimated 200,000 people protested Trump's climate policy. In between the march and the dinner programming was a broadcast of Trump's pep rally in Harrisburg.

It was a C-SPAN trifecta of political tension, rancor [See Dinner, E5]

Samantha Bee's alternative snacks

The "Full Frontal" host's D.C. soiree featured hors d'oeuvres, not dinner. E5

STAGECOACH FESTIVAL

Photographs by ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

DIERKS BENTLEY plays host by tending bar while hanging outside his trailer before headlining the Stagecoach country music gatherings's Friday night festivities.

Hoedown has hit the big time

[Stagecoach from E1] Stagecoach has grown from a scrappy, smaller, countrified answer to Coachella when promoter Goldenvoice launched it in 2007 to what last year was the fifth-highest-grossing music festival of any kind.

What also was evident this year was a maturation of Stagecoach's identity and drawing power, which manifested in more guest appearances during performances by the scheduled artists.

Pop-R&B singer Elle King joined Friday's headliner Dierks Bentley for a live rendition of their hit country duet "Different for Girls" before rising California singer-songwriter Jon Pardi also turned up on stage with Bentley for a Twitter-ready musical meeting.

Willie Nelson welcomed several of his musical admir-

ers, first singer-songwriter Jamey Johnson, who co-wrote the title track with swamp rock king Tony Joe White for Nelson's just-released album, "God's Problem Child."

For the finale of a show that coincided with the Red Headed Stranger's 84th birthday on Saturday, a wagon full of guests ambled on stage during Nelson's performance of the Carter Family country-gospel standard "Will the Circle Be Unbroken." They included veteran punk rocker John Doe, Americana singer-songwriter Margo Price, L.A. roots-country-folk singer-songwriter Cindy Wasserman and the biggest surprise of all, Nelson's Farm Aid co-conspirator Neil Young, who blew a mean harmonica duet with Nelson's harp player, Mickey

Raphael, to the fans' delight.

Shania Twain got a little help from her friends Kelsea Ballerini and Nick Jonas during her headlining performance on Stagecoach's Mane Stage on Saturday.

Behind the scenes things were no different. Sir Tom Jones arrived quietly backstage to catch Friday's performance by his early rock 'n' roll hero, Jerry Lee Lewis, who turned in an impressively fiery set at age 81.

All those took place before country kingpin Kenny Chesney was to close out the weekend.

"That's always been my dream," said Stacy Vee, Goldenvoice's director of talent, who lines up Stagecoach acts while her boss, Goldenvoice chief Paul Tollett, focuses on Coachella.

"That kind of thing makes a show special not

just for the fans but for the performers too," she said early Sunday in her air-conditioned trailer.

"I just got the sweetest note from Jamey Johnson, thanking me and saying that getting to join Willie and sing with him on his birthday was something he will never forget."

Festivals are places where fans look for good times and celebration, but occasionally musicians attempt to dig a little deeper.

One of the weekend's most moving performances came from North Carolina-reared singer-songwriter Rhiannon Giddens, who employed a carrot and just a little bit of the stick while introducing one song.

"We're all beautiful people," she said with a broad smile, introducing folk singer Richard Farina's riveting

ballad "Birmingham Sunday," about a 1963 bombing of a Baptist church in Alabama that left four girls dead and injured 22 others.

"But sometimes we do things that aren't beautiful," Giddens said, "and it's important to remember events like this so we can work together toward the things we all believe in."

Little else in the way of political commentary emanated from Stagecoach's stages during the three-day festival. The biggest issues for most fans were whether to miss Kip Moore on the Mane Stage to see Nelson across the lengthy Empire Polo Field on Saturday or whether to make it to the festival grounds early enough each day to check out up-and-coming acts such as singer-songwriter Aaron Lee Tasjan, country-pop

singer Bailey Bryan or Minnesota's winsome male harmony-centric band the Cactus Blossoms.

And where does Stagecoach go next?

With the sounds of Garth Brooks' honky tonk standard "Friends in Low Places" echoing across the grounds through the festival PA system, Vee smiled at the thought of one of the few contemporary country superstars who has yet to play her festival.

"We'd take Garth in 2018," she said. "Or 2019, 2020 or any other year he wants to play. I'm not sure he's ever done anyone else's festival. And I like to kind of drop hints once in a while like, 'Dolly — have you seen what we've got going on here?'"

randylewis@latimes.com
Twitter: @RandyLewis2

**ELLE KING**, known for her hit "Ex's & Oh's," also helped out Bentley on "Different for Girls."**MICKEY RAPHAEL**, left, of Willie Nelson's band jams on harmonica with surprise guest Neil Young.**MARGO PRICE** laid down some old-school rough-and-tumble honky tonk while on the Palomino Stage.

Twain's stage presence needs fine-tuning

[Twain, from E1]

Yet all the power she was bringing to the music — including a bouncy new tune, "Life's About to Get Good" — kept blowing away between songs as she addressed the crowd in a weirdly stilted manner that suggested she'd never interfaced with another human.

"This is the party of the year for me," she said with laughable emptiness at one point, the words seemingly determined by an algorithm. "I really feel very welcome."

Later in the show, before "You're Still the One," she described her signature ballad as "a community spirit song" but made the community in question sound like a server farm.

And anyway that inter-

pretation is exactly wrong: The reason "You're Still the One" will live forever — why, indeed, it survived the breakup of Twain's marriage to her former creative partner, Robert John "Mutt" Lange — is because it shrinks the world to the tiny space between two people. It's a song that convinces you (if only for three minutes) that community is irrelevant.

I can understand Twain's desire to reframe "You're Still the One" as something else, of course. She's said that her painful divorce is partly why it's taken her so long to follow up her last album, 2002's excellent "Up!"

Who'd want to remind herself every night of a broken promise? But the sing-

er's cheerful optimism wasn't persuasive; it felt untested by any use in the real world.

That disconnected vibe was especially vexing because in other ways Stagecoach demonstrated Twain's importance to the current country scene.

Earlier Saturday, Maren Morris played an impressive set that confidently blended traditional country sounds with slicker textures from pop and R&B — a once-heterodox gesture Twain helped normalize with her zillion-selling "Come On Over" album.

Elle King, known to many for her modern-rock hit "Ex's & Oh's," similarly benefited from that evolution when she dropped in to sing

"Different for Girls" with Dierks Bentley during his headlining performance on Friday night.

Morris and King were part of a larger female presence at this year's festival that also included two singers whose proudly old-fashioned styles — Margo Price's rough-and-tumble honky tonk and Nikki Lane's ringing country-rock — take less direct inspiration from Twain.

Yet there's no doubting Twain's role in extending the womanly self-determination that's resurged in country music recently following the decline of so-called bro country.

"It's kind of a real female moment," she observed before she brought out Kelsea

Ballerini, another young country star deeply attuned to pop, to do "Any Man of Mine." Twain went on to say that she was seeing signs of "female assertion," then added in a kind of don't-worry tone that men like it.

"They find it sexy," she said. Ballerini's appearance was a clear indication that Twain, 51, wants her new music to reach listeners beyond her now-middle-aged demographic. So was a cameo by Nick Jonas, who turned up for an unannounced duet on Twain's "Party for Two."

But the chemistry in their performance was purely transactional; Twain spoke glowingly of Jonas before and after the song but in the most generic terms

imaginable — "handsome," "talented" and so forth — as if she'd merely selected him from a database, unconcerned with how they'd actually look together onstage before an audience.

Twain ended the show with a typically assured rendition of "Man! I Feel Like a Woman!" her exuberant late-'90s smash about going totally, thoroughly, unapologetically crazy.

Before she started the song, though, she told the crowd how much playing Stagecoach had meant to her — and how she planned to celebrate backstage.

Potato chips, she said. A huge bag. Dill-pickle flavored.

mikael.wood@latimes.com