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Review: Lady Antebellum owned the night, bringing hits, horns and 'Heart Break' to Phoenix with Kelsea Ballerini



When I caught up with Hillary Scott two days before the Lady Antebellum tour launch, she was excited for people to hear the latest wrinkle in their sound.

After shaking things up at the ACM Awards by inviting a marching band to join them on their latest single, "You Look Good," they've added two horn players to their live show, one on trumpet, one on trombone.

And as great as those additions to the lineup sounded on a very funky "You Look Good" during Friday's performance at Ak-Chin Pavilion, those horns have already become, as Scott promised, an integral part of the show.

They even took the stage before the three principals – Scott, Charles Kelley and Dave Haywood – to lead the other members of the backing band in a funky instrumental before breathing new life into "Downtown" and a punchier "Our Kind of Love."

They didn't play the whole set, drifting in and out as needed after the third song, "This City" from Lady A's new album, "Heart Break." But any time they were on stage, they definitely made their presence felt, from their solos on the gospel-flavored "Good to be Alive" to the Stax-revival vibe they brought to a rousing rendition of "Crazy in Love" by Beyonce, with opener Kelsea Ballerini joining Scott on vocals.

Other highlights of the set ranged from a stripped-down, acoustic-guitar-driven "Dancin' Away with My Heart" to a pretty "American Honey" that gave their lead guitarist and mandolin player a turn in the spotlight and a very emotional reading of "Thy Will" from the faith-based album Scott recorded with her family, backed by Haywood on piano and Kelley on harmonies.

An organ-fueled "Good Time to Be Alive," a song that made me think of Curtis Mayfield the first time I heard it, segued seamlessly into "People Get Ready." An understated cover of Shania Twain's "You're Still the One" featured a really cool mandolin solo and touched off a massive singalong.

And after bringing the set to a climax with a horn-fueled "You Look Good," they maintained that momentum while

bringing the set to a close with "Lookin' for a Good Time," a spirited "Something Like That" with Beatlesque horns and opener Brett Young on vocals, "Crazy in Love" and "Love Don't Live Here," which Kelley introduced with a touching tribute to the late Gregg Allman.

The encore started with Kelley covering Phil Collins' "In the Air Tonight," which segued into "Bartender." And they signed off with the heartfelt country power ballad that remains their biggest single, "Need You Now."

Phoenix is one of the first stops on their first tour back since taking a "creative break" at the end of their tour in support of 2014's "747." And they definitely seemed to be re-energized by the hiatus.

As Scott told the audience, "It has been a little over two years since we've been able to step up on a stage like this and we are so excited to do that."

They only played four songs from "Heart Break," which doesn't hit the streets until June 9, but the title track, "Good Time to be Alive" and "You Look Good" already feel like future Lady Antebellum staples. And they touched on all the biggest hits that allowed them to "step up on a stage like this," from "Love Don't Live Here" to "Compass" and "Bartender."

Ballerini had just turned 14 when "Love Don't Live Here" hit the charts. She scored her first hit in 2014 with the platinum "Love Me Like You Mean It" and won New Female Vocalist of the Year at last year's ACM Awards.

She's got a good voice and a sparkling personality that helped her establish an instant rapport with the audience she invited to "make a 20,000-person living room together."

After opening strong with "Love Me Like You Mean It," she offset hits as big as "Dibs" and "Peter Pan" with album cuts that felt like singles (if "Stilettos" isn't her next single, someone's asleep at the wheel at Ballerini's label).

But the highlight of her set for me, without question, was the playful "I Hate Love Songs," a '50s-style R&B ballad that earned big laughs for her delivery of lines as inspired as "I think cupid is stupid and violets are purple, not blue."

In fact, forget what I said about "Stilettos" being her next single. She should get back in the studio and make this song the hit it's meant to be while it's still fresh enough for her to sing it like she sang it Friday night in Phoenix.

Brett Young lived here?!

Brett Young played a much shorter set on a much smaller stage, he and his bandmates having set up their gear in front of Ballerini's backline, which in turn, had been set up in front of Lady Antebellum's huge production.

But Young made the most of his limited time on that sliver of stage, walking on to 50 Cent's "In Da Club" before leading his band in "Close Enough." He bonded with the crowd by telling us, "I lived here for a little bit and desert heat's something you forget about."

After "You Ain't Here to Kiss Me," Young went on the stump for country radio by way of introducing "the No. 1 song in the country right now," a romantic power ballad called "In Case You Didn't Know." Then he gave another speech about the importance of country radio before bringing his set to a close with his breakthrough single, "Sleep Without You," also a romantic power ballad, a trend that suits his leading-man-next-door appearance.