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The Telegraph

Country To Country Festival, The O2 Arena, review: "impressive"



Lady Antebellum – the act who have had the most success on this side of the Atlantic – were the highlight of the C2C weekend, says Sarah Carson.

Country 2 Country, the now-annual festival held at the O2, has grown since its 2013 debut from a multi-act concert to a celebration of all that modern country music has to offer. The main acts included Lady Antebellum, Luke Bryan, Lee Ann Womack and Florida Georgia Line and this year's two-day spectacle was bigger than ever. It showcased talent at every level of Nashville's broad spectrum of talent, from earnest singer-songwriters to the big, brassy and "bro".

The variety in bands was reflected in the attendees: part of the fun of the weekend was guessing which acts people were had come to see; from the cowboy-hatted Confederate flag wearing American expats to the Radio 2 crowd; to the teenagers in checked shirts; and families with small children.

Sunday headliners Lady Antebellum – the act who have had the most success on this side of the Atlantic – were the highlight of the weekend, and offered relief after three performances from Kip Moore, Brantley Gilbert and Jason Aldean that were so heavy on the drums and guitar (not helped by poor mixing) that it felt like being at an Eighties rock concert. Judging by the number of seats that were occupied just for late in the evening, it would seem that many fans had come just to see Lady Antebellum. The trio's chemistry, and love of performing, shone; their harmonies were superb and they seemed genuinely humbled to have so many Brits singing back the lyrics to their hit song Need You Now.

Their set – though it sadly lacked a fiddle player – was most in keeping with “traditional” country styles and had little in common with the more “bro” acts on Sunday. Aldean's set was enjoyable, but his smooth, deep vocal was let down by a distracting video of women in hot pants, adopting postures you might normally see on an advert for a pay-per-view cable channel.

The festival also offered a platform for unsigned artists to have their music heard on several pop-up stages throughout the O2. In addition, satellite stages meant that the time between main stage artists didn't drag (which was an improvement on last year's festival). Highlights of this section were Sam Hunt, Nashville's answer to Ed Sheeran, Sam Palladio, star of TV series Nashville and promising British bands The Shires and Ward Thomas.

Bob Harris and Co did an impressive job with the festival in offering UK fans a fantastic chance to experience what's big in Nashville right now, and to hear artists who, on their own steam, might not have been able to play a major UK venue.

Overall, the contrasts in musical styles at the festival summed up the dichotomy in country music now: between trucks and tailgates, and true, heartfelt lyrical and vocal talent.