



Concert review: Rascal Flatts made to order for State Fair

(8/7): <http://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/music/2016/08/07/concert-review-rascal-flatts-made-order-state-fair/88363152/>

Like most other state fairs, the Wisconsin State Fair is not hip. It provides homey comforts, from the presence of family — including baby, grandmother and livestock — and the deliciousness of deep-fried foods to entertainment that attendees can appreciate for its tremendous familiarity.

Saturday night, such familiarity made Rascal Flatts a nearly flawless match with the fair's Main Stage.



After a mildly surprising introductory fanfare and a light show vaguely reminiscent of something from a high-end Pink Floyd tribute act, the sextet — three founding

members up front, three touring members mostly in back — settled into pleasing the people with country-pop hits.

The first song, “Summer Nights,” could have passed for a bro-country ode to drinks and girls if not for Gary LeVox, who, despite looking like a suburban dad too ready to tell too many stories about his varsity-football days, sang about bikinis and bonfires with completely unthreatening tunefulness.

He notarized his aw-shucks amiability during a medley of ballads like “I Melt” and “Come Wake Me Up,” the latter a relatively harmless compilation of heartbreak clichés and a Nashville mirror held up to a Journey ballad.

(Keyboardist, bassist and singer Jay DeMarcus, LeVox’s cousin, actually led the group into a couple false-start Journey covers amid downhome verbosity indebted to the Grand Ole Opry’s corniest bits.)

Some selections, including a gleamingly scrubbed remake of Tom Cochrane’s “Life Is a Highway” and a shaved-and-pressed Neil Young-ish “Fast Cars and Freedom,” let third co-founder Joe Don Rooney kick up easily laundered dust via politely rocking guitar solos.

Even when Rascal Flatts stepped beyond its lite-twang remix, it raised a couple of eyebrows rather than shocking a lot of sensibilities.

A shortened version of Prince’s “Purple Rain,” complete with big-screen reminders of who Prince was and LeVox’s gentle acknowledgment of Prince’s passing, omitted the most passionately purple parts of the classic.

And the use of electronics to push the foursquare “Stand” against a backing meant to evoke the Phil Collins smash “In the Air Tonight” seemed less interesting once the band segued into a full-on simulation of the smash.

Nevertheless, the set was basically pleasurable and the spectators were more than basically pleased, an outcome that a band with 16 years of experience and 16 No. 1 hits could be expected to engineer.

Opener Kelsea Ballerini, with two No. 1 hits and maybe three years of public experience, was less assured. Yet she shared the headliner’s ability to absorb all kinds of pop with a C&W sponge. She was pretty and agreeable and familiar.