

Johnson kicks back, to his fans' delight



Jack Johnson (pictured in Spain) kept his songs short and sweet. (Daniel Ochoa de Olza/AP/ File)

By Marc Hirsh

Globe Correspondent / August 8, 2008

MANSFIELD - Credit Jack Johnson for knowing himself and his audience. His style of laid-back folk-rock might not be to everyone's taste, but if you're attuned to it, he can serve it up to you in spades. And he did exactly that at the Comcast Center on Wednesday, dishing out nearly two hours of beachcomber vibes that did a lot to counteract the cool, cloudy evening.

A lot of artists in his position would be tempted to capitalize on the freedom of live performance by stretching their material out. But what kept Johnson from ambling aimlessly was his insistence on sticking to the relatively concise pop-song format found on his albums.

That was the case even with songs that might have lent themselves to indulgent jammery. The psychedelic Santana groove of "Staple It Together" featured spotlights for everybody - Johnson on guitar, Zach Gill on organ, and Adam Topol on drums, capped by a dorky rap by bassist Merlo Podlewski - but the solos were kept at a manageable length. "Mudfootball" was a two-man performance featuring a guitar tech Johnson called Boogie, who provided bluesy acoustic fills while Johnson kept the song grounded.

Then there was the solo for "Go On," where Johnson did everything but actually pick the strings of his electric guitar; he patted them, struck the back of the neck and let the feedback and the movement of the fingers on his fret hand drive the notes. It was just long enough to throw off sparks without burning itself out.

It may have also helped that "Go On," with its hanging-arpeggio piano line, was one of a handful of songs that evoked the current light-but-tight incarnation of Wilco. Gill was instrumental there, with his electric piano fueling "Do You Remember" while the old-fashioned variety fired up "Sitting, Waiting, Wishing." He also got so into "Good People" that he knocked over his glockenspiel and sheepishly commented, "There goes 2200 bucks."

Of course, if things got fired up too much, it wouldn't be Jack Johnson anymore. He didn't sing so much as toss off phrases in tune, and his encore, when an artist traditionally ups the ante, was essentially a solo acoustic set with an assist or two. But any man who can garner a big cheer for a song originally written to accompany the adventures of an animated monkey ("Upside Down" from "Curious George") clearly knows what works for him and for his fans.

Former Slowdive/Mojave 3 frontman Neil Halstead opened with breathy, lightly rustic acoustic songs that weren't slow, exactly, but were certainly characterized by a deliberateness of tempo. The atmospheric guitars of Rogue Wave followed with spacious songs that were a strong fit for the airiness of the outdoor stage.