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# Jack Johnson delights fans in Irvine

Review: The laid-back star superbly mixed mellowness with messages at Verizon.

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Newsflash: Jack Johnson's music isn't just for surfers anymore.

Yes, he surfs. Yes, he plays ukulele. And, yes, there is probably another surf film in his future. But Friday night's show at Verizon Wireless Amphitheater in Irvine reminded that Johnson is an exceptional singer, songwriter and guitarist whose talents transcend flip-flops and suntan oil.

Even better: He's a standout live performer. Two solid opening sets, from Culver City Dub Collective (featuring Paula

Fuga) and Rogue Wave, could not placate the capacity crowd. They came for one thing, and one thing only – and Johnson did not leave them disappointed.

He took the audience through his growing and increasingly outspoken songbook, one that shows an artist at the top of his game. With a solid band behind him, Johnson's songs took on added depth and variety that is not always so apparent on his albums. All too often artists feel compelled to reproduce note-for-note the music they produce in the studio. Not so with Johnson. From tempo changes on "Flake" to the electric buzzing of "Bubbly Toes," he proved unafraid to tinker with tunes while still keeping the recognizable essence of the song intact.

Johnson's voice – like his persona – is so smooth and mellow that, although it carries well in a big outdoor venue, it's custom-made for singing backup and harmony. Which Johnson did gladly several times during his set.

Zach Gill, who played piano and accordion, was given center-stage a couple of times, performing a song he wrote called "Girl I Want to Lay You Down," which Johnson aptly described as "baby-making music." It was a rare treat to hear the higher tenor of Rogue blend with Johnson's cooler bass tones in perfect harmony, a moment topped only by Johnson's collaboration with Fuga on her beautiful ballad "County Road."

Culver City Dub Collective was an easy choice for opener, given its blend of funk, reggae and jazz special-ordered for a Johnson crowd. But it was Fuga who stole the show, seducing concert-goers with a strong voice that packs the sultriness and soul of Aretha Franklin. The Hawaiian native is sure to have more fans – and album sales – after Friday's show.

In contrast, Rogue Wave seemed like an unusual choice as a touring partner. The group put the rock back into indie-rock during its 45-minute, but it may have been too great a mood shift for the audience after the cool vibes of the Dub Collective. Those who listened carefully, however, might have noticed a certain funk in the band's bass lines during more melodic moments, something that surely caught Johnson's attention. But, that aside, this night was all about Jack, embraced by this Southern California crowd as the major star of this decade that he has become.

My seating area included at least two families with kids under the age of seven, and behind me sat a teenage boy with his mother, who assured him more than once that she was enjoying the show, bearing witness to Johnson's wide appeal. There's innocence to Johnson's lyrics, a celebration of sun and a commitment to living in the moment that can speak to people of all generations, a fact Johnson acknowledged when he dedicated "Upside Down" to all the families in attendance.

Yet Johnson has a serious side as well, and he openly used his forum – the microphone – to appeal to the audience without being preachy. His "Save Trestles" shirt was a silent protest against the proposed extension of the 241 Toll Road, and he also promoted the Peace Alliance. He dedicated "Monsoon," with its lyric "all of life is one drop of the ocean," to the Surfrider Foundation.

What Johnson does best, though, is simple: just a man and an acoustic guitar. No movies playing in the background, no complicated arrangements, no backup vocals. Saving the best for last, he kept that starker side from the audience until the encore, when he walked back onstage alone. The five songs he closed with, including "Angel," "Better Together," and a moving version of Jimmy Buffett's "A Pirate Looks at Forty," were well worth the wait, proving that less really can be more.

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