

Review | Jack Johnson

By JOEL FRANCIS
Special to The Star

Kansas may be a landlocked state, but for two hours on Monday night there was prime beachfront property in Bonner Springs.

Surfer-songwriter Jack Johnson brought a mellow vibe that matched the cooler weather and gentle breeze. There were some empty seats in the middle section, but the lawn in back and area up front were both comfortably crowded.

Fans started singing along on the opening lines of “You and Your Heart” and with the exception of a few tracks Johnson recorded with Hawaiian singer Paula Fuga, didn’t let up until the closing refrain of “Better Together,” the final song. Many songs were greeted with spontaneous exclamations by the fans in the back. The more fortunate closer to the stage shouted their feelings directly at Johnson, who engaged them a couple times.

Backed by a three-piece band, Johnson let his lyrics carry the conversation, intermittently interrupting himself to point out the half moon hanging over the lawn or to read a sign from a fan who had driven 700 miles without sleep to see the show.

Stacked together, the similar tempo and feel of his songs blended together like the gentle sway of the tide washing against the shore. The atmosphere was amplified by a large, curved screen behind the band that projected pictures of swirling water, palm trees, album covers and, occasionally, the action onstage.

Along the way, Johnson was joined by several guests.

ALO guitarist Dan Lebowitz added some nifty slide to a cover of Steve Miller’s “The Joker,” and texture to a couple of ukulele-driven numbers. Fuga duetted with Johnson on “Turn Your Love,” one of his songs, and “Country Roads,” one of hers. G. Love brought some blues harp and much-needed energy to “Rodeo Clowns” and “At or With Me.”

The best cameos, however, came from within Johnson’s band.

Bassist Merlo Podlewski burst from his fixed spot at the back of the stage to drop a lively rap into “Staple It Together.” Keyboard player Zach Gill was the secret weapon. He splashed some honky-tonk piano into “Red Wine, Mistakes and Mythology” and added an elegant introduction to “Go On.” Gill gave “Mudfootball” a zydeco feel with his accordion solo.

Detractors may argue that too many of Johnson’s songs mine the same tempo and sound alike. It would be hard to refute that argument. But Johnson’s songs are also dominated by the concept of philia. Watching several thousand fans sing and celebrate together, it’s impossible to deny he didn’t realize his dream, if only for a few hours.

G. Love

One of two opening acts, G. Love told the large crowd about a previous gig at the Grand Emporium when he drank so many gin and tonics he passed out against the microphone.

G. Love was armed only with a harmonica and acoustic guitar, so his 45-minute set would have fit nicely at that or any of Kansas City’s blues clubs.

New song “Milk and Sugar” echoed Mississippi Fred McDowell’s “Coffee Blues.” “Freight Train Blues” was offered in the same arrangement Bob Dylan used on his debut recording, while “Mystery Train” featured a long instrumental introduction that made the familiar song unique. In between, G. Love delivered crowd-pleasing originals “Cold Beverages” and “Booty Call.”

jack johnson setlist

You and Your Heart; If I Had Eyes; Taylor; Sitting, Waiting, Wishing; The Horizon Has Been Defeated; Inaudible Melodies; To the Sea; Go On; Upside Down; Red Wine, Mistakes, Mythology; Bubbletoes; Mellow Mood (Bob Marley cover); Wasting Time; Breakdown; My Little Girl; Turn Your Love (with Paula Fuga, Dan Lebowitz); Country Road (with Fuga, Lebowitz); Flake (with Lebowitz); The Joker (Steve Miller cover) with Lebowitz; Banana Pancakes; Mudfootball; Good People; Rodeo Clowns (with G. Love); Staple It Together (with G. Love); At or With Me (with G. Love); Encore (Jack Johnson solo): Do You Remember; Home; Times Like These; Gone; Angel; Better Together (with full band, G. Love, Fuga, ALO).

