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Elton John is 'Fantastic' at Memorial Coliseum concert

By James Grant of The News-Sentinel
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Elton John called himself Captain Fantastic on his 1975 autobiographical album "Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy," and for good reason.

As he displayed last night to a sold-out crowd at the Memorial Coliseum, John still is quite fantastic and age has not dimmed his ability as a performer nor his desire to put on a first-class, entertaining show.

John emerged in a mist of fog and, from the moment he took the Coliseum stage, the roar of the audience let him know Fort Wayne was glad to see him and that his music still resonated with them.

Dressed rather stately (yet rock star-like) in a long black suit lined with sequins that had a large white Z on his back and cuff sleeves and wearing a pair of pink sunglasses, John opened the show with "The One", a song from his hit album of the same name from 1992.

Even with a minimal stage setup that consisted of just his black Yamaha piano, a large LED light display above him and two large video screens on each side of the stage, John showed he is a truly

magnetic and gifted performer who needs nothing more than his music to enthrall an audience.

Song after song, hit after hit, John rummaged through his illustrious catalog of classics, performing such fan favorites as "Your Song," "Rocket Man," "Daniel," "Bennie and the Jets" and "Crocodile Rock."

Longtime Elton John followers were also rewarded when John performed some of his lesser-known gems, such as a medley of "Carla Etude/Tonight" (from his albums "The Fox" and "Blue Moves" respectively) and "Mona Lisas and Mad Hatters" (from his "Honky Chateau" album) and "The Greatest Discovery" (from his second album entitled simply "Elton John").

John is one of a handful of performers who has the ability to keep an audience spellbound without the aid of pyrotechnics or a massive stage set.

Without taking a break, John performed alone at his piano with only the occasional addition of synthesizer to accompany him for nearly three hours. Throughout the night John's voice was strong and, though it did strain occasionally on certain notes, it was still remarkably expressive and full of passion.

Having seen Elton John perform in concert once before with his band

in 1992, this show was a much more intimate affair that highlighted John as a singer-songwriter over the madcap Elton John stage persona he's crafted over the years.

The intimate nature of John's performance did have one drawback: The audience got up frequently as if John was playing an 11,000 seat living room, which was a little distracting at times.

Though the audience was skewed toward people in their 40s and 50s, there were also quite a few younger people in attendance from tweens to teens to people in their 20s and 30s.

Diane Dubbelde of Fort Wayne, who wasn't even born during John's most popular period from 1970-77, has been looking forward to seeing John perform as she heard his music frequently growing up.

"He's awesome," Dubbelde said. "My dad used to listen to him all the time. I like his music, the songs are memorable."

As for the show, Dubbelde summed up her feelings with six words: "Loved it, loved it, loved it!"

Another person who really enjoyed the show was Fort Wayne native Jennifer Balsarotti, who drove with her husband, Joe, from their home in St. Louis to see the show.

She had seen John perform previously with his full band but wanted the opportunity to see him perform solo.

"It rocked my world," Balsarotti said of the show. "Unbelievable, it was awesome. Really, out of this world. One of the best shows I've ever seen."

The highlight of the evening for me was when John came out for his final encore and took about five minutes to sign autographs on T-shirts, programs, albums and anything else put in front of him by



fans near the front of the stage.

Just before he launched into his final song, a medley of "Circle of Life/Can You Feel the Love Tonight" that he wrote for "The Lion King" film and soundtrack, John sincerely thanked the crowd for supporting him all these years and said it's that love and support that keeps him performing.

It was a touching and emotional end to a superb performance by a legendary musician who genuinely loves performing and is able to communicate that love to his audience.

Captain Fantastic? Indeed.