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CONCERT REVIEW

Mellencamp's come far since the '80s

Concert at the Embassy shows clearly how he has developed as a musician.

By James Grant of The News-Sentinel
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"Good evening, I'm John Mellencamp. We came 1,000 miles to see you tonight," John Mellencamp told the nearly sold-out crowd Tuesday night during his concert at the Embassy Theatre.

Mellencamp, who last played Fort Wayne in 2007 at Memorial Coliseum, gave a powerhouse performance for an enthusiastic audience that lasted more than two hours.

Mellencamp, who was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2008, showed why he is not only a member of that esteemed hall but why he was also a recipient earlier this year of a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Americana Music Association.

The night began at 6:45 with a documentary movie that chronicled his 2009 tour of minor league baseball parks with Bob Dylan and Willie Nelson as well as the making of his latest album, "No Better Than This."

The film seemed to capture perfectly who Mellencamp is now as a musician – more of a folk troubadour along the lines of Bob Dylan than the young man who penned "I Need a Lover," his first hit from 1979.

The movie also seemed to capture the feeling of a lonely, desolate late night on a rural country road that seems to envelop the music that Mellencamp has recorded in the past few years.

As luck would have it, sitting next to me was someone with a unique perspective not only on the film but on Mellencamp himself – his Seymour Senior High School classmate Nancy Wright Eikenberry from the Class of 1970.

"Pure John, laid back, black and white – just like him," Eikenberry said of the film. "I've followed his career over 35 years. What you see is what you get. I like the new songs (in the film), but I was glad they blended in the old songs as well."

Coming onstage at 8:30, Mellencamp and his band opened with "Authority Song" from his 1983 album "Uh-Huh."

The song took on a more rockabilly feel that, while sounding familiar, was given new life in a stripped-down arrangement that sounded more 1950s than 1980s.

From rock to folk to country and honky-tonk, Mellencamp effortlessly glided between genres to create an engaging show.

Much like the late Johnny Cash, Mellencamp is able to take the force of rock music and combine it with country, blues and themes of the American everyman to form a unique blend that is real and raw.

The first third of the show consisted of Mellencamp and his band playing in this rockabilly/roots style. The second third consisted of Mellencamp either playing solo on his acoustic guitar or with his band also playing acoustic instruments. The third and last part was a full-out rock 'n' roll assault.

Fans of the early 1980s John Cougar Mellencamp era may have been a little disappointed, as the show was filled with a lot of his recent material, such as "No One Cares About Me" (from his new CD "No Better Than This") and "If I Die Sudden" and "Don't Need this Body."

These songs are more direct and less sunny than, say, "Hurt So Good" from 1982, but more rewarding for people like me who find his newer material more engaging.

Early in his career, Mellencamp's music was good but not that different from the many other acts crowding the airwaves and MTV of the early '80s. Starting around 1985, his music seemed to take on much more serious and poignant overtones.

Songs like "Rain on the Scarecrow," about a man who loses his family farm to foreclosure, and "Minutes to Memories," where a 77-year-old steelworker from Gary reveals the simple truths of life to a young man riding beside him on a Greyhound bus, gave Mellencamp's music a uniquely Midwestern perspective, with an urgency and passion that made him stand out from many of his contemporaries.

Tuesday night, Mellencamp brought that same feeling to his performance. Yes, old favorites like "Cherry Bomb," "Jack and Diane," "Pink Houses" and "Small Town" were played, but many took on a more informal, country-influenced feel that made them sound fresh.

The highlights of the evening for me were the song "Jack and Diane" being reinvented with a country hoedown feel, the blistering full-out rock of "Rain on the



Scarecrow” and Mellencamp's solo guitar acoustic numbers as he exchanged humorous quips with the audience.

It was a great night of music – and a testament to how much Mellencamp believes in his songwriting and his willingness to change.

He may not be the same songwriter or performer he was in the 1980s, but that's certainly not a bad thing.