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James McCartney seemed to be off at Brass Rail

By James Grant for The News-Sentinel
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Expectations are funny things.

Those words kept rolling through my mind Thursday night as I watched James McCartney, son of Beatles legend Paul McCartney, perform at The Brass Rail, 1211 Broadway.

McCartney was in Fort Wayne promoting his second full-length album, "The Blackberry Train," and performed for a small but enthusiastic crowd of about 150 people at the tiny bar snuggled among a small strip of antique stores.

The Orange Opera, a local band, took the stage first around 8:15 p.m. and played a wonderful hourlong set of, appropriately enough, Beatles-inspired rock mixed with a '70s ELO feel that featured tight musicianship and great vocals.

After a rousing version of the Beatles' "Why Don't We Do it in the Road" (from the Beatles classic "White Album"), the Orange Opera left the stage and McCartney quietly walked over and set up his equipment by himself.

Barely looking at the audience, McCartney adjusted his mic and, with the help of one of the Brass Rail staff, got settled in.

Dressed in a black T-shirt and jeans, McCartney performed a set roughly 60-65 minutes long that featured him alone onstage singing and playing electric and acoustic guitar.

I have to say that I am a fan of James McCartney's music. His first two albums are very enjoyable, melodic and musically multi-textured, and he is a good songwriter and has a bright recording future ahead of him.

Last night though, McCartney seemed oddly disconnected, almost distracted, as he sang songs from his current album "The Blackberry Train" as well as some of his earlier material. Songs such as "Too Hard," "Waterfall" and "Ballerina," all from "The Blackberry Train," took on new meaning in the stripped-down approach McCartney gave them in concert.

"Ballerina" in fact was one of the highlights of the night for me.

Urgent and passionate, McCartney attacked this song and the rest of the songs in the show with a determined grit that gave them a much leaner, almost punk sound than the multi-textured pop/rock sound they have on the recordings.

Unfortunately, I think McCartney is better suited to the style he has in his recordings. I admire the bravery of McCartney's choice to bare his soul in such a raw way onstage and attempt to reinvent his music in a live setting.

At times this approach worked well, but only in small doses; the lack of musical variety really hurt his performance. For me, the one major thing that hurt McCartney was his reliance on doing most of the songs on electric guitar with no backing band. While his vocals were impassioned, the electric guitar didn't fill the sound enough to really give the songs a lasting impression on the audience.

The songs began to blend together and the audience, while supportive, grew restless and didn't seem to get emotionally involved in the music.

Unfortunately, McCartney's lack of connection to the audience and his distracted manner didn't help the situation.

The only words he spoke all night were "Having a good time?" which he said quietly midset, and "This is going to



James McCartney, son of former Beatle Paul McCartney, plays Thursday night at The Brass Rail. (By James Grant for The News-Sentinel)

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be my last song," right before he closed the show just after 10 p.m.

While only occasionally stopping to get a drink or wipe his face, McCartney remained almost stone-faced throughout his performance. This lack of interaction gave the impression that McCartney wasn't that interested in being onstage or that he somehow was off his game.

The highlight of the evening came for me when McCartney did three or four songs on acoustic guitar midway through the show. These songs had a much more folksy feel, which suited McCartney's voice much better, and he sounded more relaxed and less shrill than on some of the electric songs.

Though McCartney didn't come across to me as an engaging performer, the night was nonetheless filled with good music. As a lifelong fan of Paul McCartney's music, maybe I was expecting James to be too much like his father.

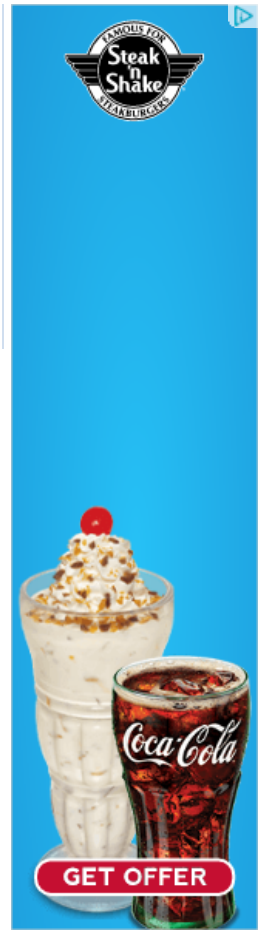
All in all, I'm glad that I got to see James McCartney perform. And maybe he just had an off night or maybe my expectations were off, as I really enjoy his recordings.

As I said, expectations are funny things.

This column is the commentary of the writer and does not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of The News-Sentinel.

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