

Black-hatted singer, as white hat country hero

Country star Clint Black returned to the Solvang Festival Theater, showing off still-sparkling hits, his deepening songbook, and advancing guitar chops

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Some kinda' wonderful chemistry can happen when good, world-class country music lands at the Solvang Festival Theater, with its secret, could-be life as a miniature variation on the Santa Barbara Bowl, North. It happened when country star Clint Black returned on Wednesday night, in a benefit for the theater, rekindling memories of his show there 14 years ago.

Much has changed in the intervening years, and much remains the same. Although on the far side of his '90s heyday of chart-topping hits (five No. 1 songs, for instance, from 1989's "Killin' Time" album), Mr. Black has amassed an impressive song catalog over time, through last year's strong "On Purpose," his first new album in a decade. Hearing him now offered a refreshing blast of energy and authenticity at a time when many bemoan the lack of "country" on modern country radio.

In Solvang, Mr. Black showed that he sings as strongly as ever and is playing guitar better than ever (evidenced in his creative and nimble workouts on his Telecaster). He also has wry humor intact, as when he mock-warned the crowd early in the show, "I've strategically placed five mistakes in the show. I'll leave it to you find them."

A fine songwriter, from his earliest days to his new album, Mr. Black stuck mainly to the original music mandate on this night, with a couple of notable exceptions, nodding to his major influences.



COURTESY PHOTO

Clint Black

He polished off his sharp Willie Nelson imitation, with a sinewy tone and quivery vibrato, and channeled his hero Waylon Jennings on "Are You Sure Waylon Done it This Way."

Other echoes of country music history filter into Mr. Black's vocabulary, including western swing of the Bob Wills kind, on "One More Payment." From his 2005 album "Drinkin' Songs and Other Logic," we heard "Code of the West,"

influenced by Roy Rogers, and the fragile state of the world just post-9/11 (featuring a tasty dobro solo by outstanding new multi-instrumental member Jason Mowery).

CONCERT REVIEW

After starting out solo acoustic on a few tunes, including the new "Better and Worse," Mr. Black's luminously fine and infectious band joined in and upped the ante of musical excitement and twang. The crowd buzz factor perked up on "Better Man," the first of many No. 1 hits to come, back in the fading moments of the '80s. The idea of redressing an old song came to the fore with the new clothes on his song "State of Mind," written at 18 but rethought in a style more slow and bluesy, though building in intensity. He played it straight and strong, however, on his "greatest hit" "Killin' Time," sounding as fine as it did in its "youth."

For encores, the band dove into "Nothing but the Taillights," and a blissfully extended version of "Tuckered Out," a fast-patter, quick two-beat cooker from his 1993 album "No Time to Kill." Jam-packed with country artist names, here, it was also jam-packed with hot licks during an extended riff-trading session — with Mr. Black's licks among the hottest of the lot. The finale confirmed that we, and country music more generally, were in very good hands this night.