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Hoosier rocker back to basics

John Mellencamp will give local fans a stripped-down sound of his music

By James Grant of The News-Sentinel
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Let me throw some names at you: Johnny Cougar, John Cougar Mellencamp, John Mellencamp.

Depending on how old you are, you may recognize one name more than the others, but they all belong to one performer — Indiana's own Rock and Roll Hall of Fame singer and songwriter John Mellencamp.

Mellencamp's incredible career has lasted more than 30 years and includes 22 Top 40 hits, such as "Hurt So Good," "Pink Houses," "Small Town" and "Jack and Diane" spread out over 20-some albums. Recently, Mellencamp released his latest CD, "No Better Than This."

He will be performing songs from this album, as well as a selection of his biggest hits, during a concert Tuesday evening at the Embassy Theatre.

According to a Billboard magazine interview with Mellencamp, this show will provide fans the opportunity to experience the stripped-down sound of his latest music, which echoes the Sun Records-era rock-and-roll sound of the 1950s. The concert also reflects a feeling of rock shows of the past by opening with a documentary about the making of his new album instead of an opening act.

"It'll be like Alan Freed, like the old Moondog shows," Mellencamp said in the interview with Garry Graff for Billboard magazine this past August.

"When you went to see his shows, there was a movie, like 'The Girl Can't Help It' or something, and then three or four bands played.

"I'm gonna come out and play with upright bass and cocktail (drum) kits and a lot of acoustic instruments. I'll play for, like, 40 minutes that way. Then the band will leave, and it'll just be me with an acoustic guitar for 40 minutes, and then there'll be 40 minutes of rock 'n' roll. You'll get three different types of John Mellencamp, and you'll get a movie."

On his latest CD, Mellencamp took the unusual step of recording the album with one microphone in mono sound in several locations, including the legendary Sun Studios in Memphis, Tenn. Much like a lot of the early rock and folk music that made an impression on him as a young teen, this CD packs an emotional punch that Mellencamp feels is lacking in today's pop music.

"It has a quality that technology has taken away from us over the years," Mellencamp told Billboard magazine. "It's what we loved about all those records. James Brown's records had that on there. Those first five Rolling Stones records sounded fantastic. Those early (Bob) Dylan records You just don't get that today."

While his career may have begun by singing formulaic pop songs, Mellencamp has grown into one of America's finest songwriters.

In the past two decades, he has written a wide range of songs that have explored the social and political problems that affect rural America, especially the ups and downs of life in the heartland.

That impassioned songwriting is highlighted in a four-CD box set called "On Rural Route 7609" that was released this past summer. This set focuses more on songs people may not be familiar with rather than showcasing his greatest hits.

"We tried to make it like a process of discovery, that perhaps somebody could listen to this set and discover these songs," Mellencamp told Anthony DeCurtis in the essay that's a part of the 72-page book that comes in the CD set.

Discovery is a good word that describes what Mellencamp is aiming at with both his music and his live show.

If you decide to go see him perform live, you might discover more substance than you were expecting and also some great music along with the hits you already know.



More Information

R-O-C-K in the Embassy

What: John Mellencamp performs in concert

When: Tuesday: Doors open at 6:30 p.m., film starts at 6:45 p.m. and concert begins at 8:30 p.m.

Where: Embassy Theatre, 121 W. Jefferson Blvd.

Cost: \$42, \$72 and \$102. Tickets are available at the Embassy box office, Ticketmaster outlets, www.ticketmaster.com, and charge-by-phone at 1-800-745-3000.