

Review: Glen Campbell at Rodeo Austin

By John T. Davis | Monday, March 19, 2012, 10:54 AM

Glen Campbell brought his “Goodbye Tour” to Rodeo Austin on Sunday for a genuinely moving performance.

As has been widely reported, Campbell is in the early stages of Alzheimer’s and has announced that this will be his last tour. Additionally, his latest album, “Ghost On the Canvas,” will be his last of new material. “I’ve done a lot in my life,” he writes in the album’s liner notes, “(and) most of the things that happened were because of music, because of the records, and now it’s time to just close that book.”

So, the Austin show was the latest stop in a victory lap capping one of the most exceptional careers in pop music. His 17-song set consisted almost entirely of his hits, and it could have been three times as long and not accommodated them all. The guy had 81 songs on the charts, after all (and 15 of those were No. 1).

Given the bittersweet nature of this tour and Campbell’s condition (which he has been courageously candid about), it was impossible not to scrutinize his performance for signs of the disease, and they are there. There were slips in a few of the lyrics, and his daughter Ashley (Campbell’s tour band includes three of his kids) had to help put a capo on his guitar at one point.

But, looking trim and sharp in a rhinestone-spangled blue jacket with a matching indigo Stratocaster, Campbell seemed as much the instinctual showman as ever.

His zest for performing was undiminished, his bourbon-smooth tenor voice could still hit the falsetto when it was called for, and his many lead guitar solos were fluid and sharp, recalling why he was once (as a member of the famed Wrecking Crew group of L.A. studio musicians) the go-to session guitarist for the likes of Frank Sinatra, the Beach Boys and Elvis. His fulfillment and satisfaction in performing seemed palpable.

And his own hits, especially the great songs by Jimmy Webb, remain timeless and moving. In their heyday, Campbell was Webb’s perfect vehicle, in the same way Dionne Warwick was for Burt Bacharach or Willie Nelson was for Patsy Cline.

“Galveston,” “By the Time I Get to Phoenix,” “Where’s the Playground, Susie,” “Didn’t We” and the timelessly haunting “Wichita Lineman”—all by Webb—made up a pillar of Campbell’s set; all beautifully rendered, all calling up their own memories.

The show was filled out with hits Campbell plucked from other writers; Allen Toussaint’s playful “Southern Nights,” John Hartford’s “Gentle On My Mind,” Elmer Bernstein’s “True Grit,” and, inevitably, his massive 1975 hit, Larry Weiss’ “Rhinestone Cowboy,” which earned Campbell his first standing ovation of the night.

Campbell only performed three songs from the elegiac “Ghost On the Canvas,” and that’s a pity (though fans were, of course, there for the hits). It is an understated, moving, eloquent swan song, easily of a piece with the best works of his career.

He saved his very last song for one of that album’s most moving titles, the reflective and at-peace ballad, “A Better Place”: “I’ve tried and I have failed, Lord/I’ve won and I have lost/I have lived and I have loved, Lord/Sometimes at such a cost...Some days I’m so confused, Lord/My past gets in my way/I need the ones I love, Lord/More and more every day...One thing I know, the world’s been good to me/A better place awaits, you’ll see...”

There might perhaps have been one or two dry eyes in the house; mine was a little misty, I’m not ashamed to admit. Whatever the future holds for Campbell, he seems to be facing every day with humor, conviction, resolve, and a guitar in his hand. I wish him well.