



Hootenanny Festival Veers From Tradition, but Not Its Roots

BY RANDY LEWIS
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TIMES STAFF WRITER

The annual Hootenanny Festival in Irvine has turned into the focal point of the year for Southland roots music enthusiasts, and Saturday's sixth edition--an 8 1/2-hour affair--held two key surprises that elevated it from a heartfelt musical celebration to a truly special event.

Those surprises--from the grandson of country's greatest star and the granddaddy of rock guitarists--more than compensated for the absence of a roots-rock or country legend that has closed out previous Hootenannies.

Hank Williams III made his long-delayed Southern California premiere with a barnstorming performance that exploded any preconceptions about his musical leanings formed by his 1999 debut album.

He and his quartet hit the stage midday like a runaway train and simply picked up steam from there. In place of the old-school honky-tonk expertise he displays on the album, Williams roared through increasingly punk-charged country like a barroom brawler in search of a fight.

He said his sophomore album, due in the fall, will be called "This Ain't Country." The title tune made it clear that what he means isn't that he's turning his back on his country roots, but that his approach has nothing to do with what's dominating country radio today.

Leaving ballads and any interest he may still have in introspection for another day, the tall, wiry, 26-year-old singer simply pummeled out some of the fiercest breakneck country-punk imaginable for 30 minutes and was gone.

The two-thirds reunion of the Stray Cats--bassist Lee Rocker and drummer Slim Jim Phantom--appeared in danger of defining "anti-climactic" on the bootheels of Williams' set--until Rocker brought out Scotty Moore, the recent Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee whose playing with Elvis Presley figured crucially in the birth of rock 'n' roll.

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It was an unscheduled return appearance for Moore, 68, who played Hootenanny '97 as a duo with Presley drummer D.J. Fontana. He plugged in without fanfare and demonstrated the stingingly clean licks he came up with 46 years ago in the Sun Records studio in Memphis that helped Elvis revolutionize popular music.

Rocker took the vocals on "That's All Right," "Blue Moon of Kentucky" and "Mystery Train," with everyone focusing on summoning the spirit rather than carbon-copying the sound of the groundbreaking original versions.

Among the day's delightful ironies was that the most authentic roots country music came not from the direct descendant of one of country's founding fathers, but from the offspring of one of the best punk groups of all.

The Knitters--singers John Doe and Exene Cervenka and drummer D.J. Bonebrake of seminal L.A. punk band X, former Blasters/X guitarist Dave Alvin and bassist Jonny Ray Bartel--reassembled to root one more time through their country and folk influences.

From the country-fried two-step "Poor Little Critter in the Road" to stripped-down but still driving reworkings of such X standards as "Burning House of Love" and "This Is Supposed to Be the New World," the Knitters mostly revisited past glories but did so with passion replacing any sense of easy nostalgia.

Their closing rendition of Steppenwolf's "Born to Be Wild," jumping between slow two-step verses and pumping rockabilly choruses, cast Doe and Cervenka as the Ike and Tina Turner of roots music, two people who never do anything nice and easy for long.

The one non-Yank on the bill--Dave Vanian, lead singer of first-wave British punk band the Damned--broke in a new lineup of his ad hoc Phantom Chords side project. Defying the heat in his leather black jacket, Vanian crafted a sort of psycho-western sound merging atmospheric, echo-laden guitar and keyboards with propulsive, clip-clopping rhythms under his emotionally raw vocals.

The least eventful sets came from the most costume-dependent acts--the Royal Crown Revue and the Reverend Horton Heat. The Royals' horn-driven swing was competent at best, and though the Texas-based Horton Heat brought the crowd closest to major moshing, neither group's set evoked the air of a special occasion that infused other sets by such Southland stalwarts as Cadillac Tramps, the Blasters and James Intveld.

In place of Hall of Famers such as Chuck Berry, Buck Owens or Jerry Lee Lewis, who have headlined the festival in years past, Chris Isaak closed this year and wisely shifted the mood from the high-energy sets that characterized the rest of the day.

Though his dark, moody rock at first seemed out of place in the bright, late-afternoon sunlight, the Stockton rocker gave the thousands of Hootenanny-goers their first chance to slow down before he picked up the beat to close the show on a festively danceable note.

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