

The Morning Call
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ELTON JOHN AT ALLENTOWN'S PPL CENTER SHOWS HE'S STILL STANDING (AND SETTING RECORDS)

When Elton John started his concert Tuesday at Allentown's PPL Center with the nine-minute "Funeral For a Friend/Love Lies Bleeding" — the juxtaposed orchestral-and-rock suite that opened his most successful album, 1973's "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road" — it served notice.

But it was with his second song that John made that statement clearer. Just months from his 70th birthday, 47 years into a career that has made him the fourth best-selling solo artist of all time, John broke out his 1974 song "The Bitch is Back."

It told the PPL Center crowd — both a record-fast sellout for the arena and, the venue announced, officially its largest crowd at more than 10,000 — that John still views himself as the ultimate showman.

"I'm better than you," he sang, spitting out the words before sitting atop his piano and spinning. "It's the way that I move/The things that I do."

Indeed, John's 25-song, two-hour-and-40-minute show was better than most — filled with highlights of his career: 18 Top 10 hits, a third of them No. 1s and nearly a dozen of them gold or platinum.

And if John's voice has lost some of its nuance over the years, he did his best to make up for it in emphasis. The early "Benny and The Jets" was stomping and forceful; "I Guess That's Why They Call It the Blues" playful and bluesy, indeed.

If there was a pitfall, it was that John sometimes too much replaced nuance with bombast on those early songs. But as the concert progressed, he balanced that — pairing, for example, the softer hits "Daniel" (on which his emotional delivery was entirely appropriate) and "Someone Saved My Life Tonight," on which sparser accompaniment from his six-man band put more focus on his singing.

Or when he paired "Philadelphia Freedom" — such a good song, though perhaps too stylized — and a 14-minute "Rocket Man," also stylized with a seven-minute piano intro and two-minute exit, but earnestly sung.

Or when he paired "Tiny Dancer" — his voice and its music coming together wonderfully — and a 12-minute "Levon," with a great piano intro and a long, complicated run at the end.

Two songs from John's latest disc, "Wonderful Crazy Night," released in February — its first single, "Looking Up" and latest single, the largely piano-and-voice "A Good Heart," were fine, but not in the league of his bigger hits. Nor was the rare "Have Mercy on the Criminal."

But John clearly saved his best for some of his best songs. "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road" was strong, but stronger was a run of the under-appreciated 1992 hit "The One" and his 1970 breakthrough hit "Your Song," both alone on piano, and exuberantly played "Burn Down the Mission" and fun and loose "Sad Songs Say So Much."

But perhaps the night's highlight was a late-in-the-set "Don't Let the Sun Go Down on Me," which got a standing ovation.

And as the penultimate song of the main set, he played "Your Sister Can't Twist (But She Can Rock 'n' Roll)" from "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road."

It only served to make the main-set-closing "Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting" seem even more rollicking, which he told the crowd to sing and at one point stopped playing piano and let them. It, too, got a standing ovation.

John opened his encore with "Candle in the Wind," the re-release of which after Princess Diana's death in 1997 made it an 11 million-seller, second only to Bing Crosby's "White Christmas," playing alone on piano. Then he closed with his 1972 platinum hit "Crocodile Rock," with the whole crowd singing along.

The show didn't eclipse John's high-water mark for the show: His 2010 concert at Reading's Santander Arena, with which he broke that venue's attendance record and played slightly longer.

And with a career so long and successful, even in a generous show there were obvious omissions. He skipped five No. 1 gold and platinum hits, including "Island Girl" and "Don't Go Breaking My Heart," as well as his "Lion King" soundtrack smash "Can You Feel the Love Tonight" and favorite "Pinball Wizard."

But it's clearly a compliment that one of the biggest criticisms is you want to hear more from him.

And if "The Bitch is Back" at the start of the concert was a warning, it was a song late in the show that spoke more eloquently about John's station in his career.

"I'm still standing better than I ever did," he sang on his 1983 hit "I'm Still Standing." "Looking like a true survivor/Feeling like a little kid/I'm still standing." Indeed he was.