

Hall of Fame songwriter JD Souther leaves Linden audience spellbound

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, NEWS-TELEGRAM ARTS EDITOR
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When JD Souther took the stage with his trio at Music City Texas in Linden a few weeks back, the sold-out crowd probably expected to hear a set list that included “New Kid,” “Faithless Love,” “Sad Café” “Heartache Tonight,” and, of course, “Only Lonely.” Souther was in the middle those hits, writing – or co-writing – them for The Eagles and Linda Ronstadt. He also wrote “Her Town Too,” with James Taylor. No one who lived through the 1970s and 80s can deny his influence on the “Laurel Canyon Sound,” as they called it. That sound is what made him famous.

But JD Souther is so much more than one genre of music, as he proved that magic night when he stepped up to the microphone, opened his heart and proved why he belongs in this year’s class of Songwriter Hall of Fame inductees.

Souther led with “I’ll Be Here at Closing Time,” from his 2008 record, “If The World Was You.” It’s a quiet, intimate song about a man who’s marking time until a waitress gets off work so he can whisk her off into their future. At first, the tune might seem more fitting for an encore, but it proved the perfect way for Souther to introduce himself and his trio – Chris Walters on the piano and Jerry Navarro on the upright bass.

The deceptively simple lyrics put the audience on notice. This was no ordinary artist going through the motions of a gig, delivering someone else’s words and feelings. This was a guy who takes his craft seriously. This was a guy who was going to make them think – and feel – from the first tune to the last.

Next came “Go Ahead and Rain,” another song dripping with exposed emotions associated with new, untested love. The crowd sat perfectly still – it was like they were holding their breath – stunned and surprised by what was happening right in front of them.

Now that he had our attention, it was time to bring out the hits. The trio made it a few bars into “New Kid” before the audience caught on. “Ah. That’s something we know,” they seemed to say as they broke into applause.

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However, Souther's arrangement of the song – made famous by the Eagles – had a new feel. The tempo's been slowed a bit and there's a depth to the lyrics not realized before. Souther was bringing the crowd along, one baby step at a time, schooling them about the importance of the feeling behind the words.



Then, came "Faithless Love," and the mostly-over-50 crowd really came alive. The story sinks in a bit more this time around because rather than delivering the song as power ballad, as Souther's one-time flame Linda Ronstadt did, he let the delicate arrangement crack our hearts open with a velvet hammer. There was a collective sigh in the hall when he finished.

Before we could recover, Souther began "Silver Blue," a broken-heart ballad from his 1976 masterpiece, "Black Rose." We should all experience love like this once in our lifetimes. This stripped down version could be used in a master class for aspiring – and experienced -- songwriters. It is the summit of storytelling.

Souther picked up the pace a bit with a cover of "Bye, Bye Blackbird," displaying command of the classics from the Great American Songbook. His father was a big band singer, so he grew up hearing a lot of great music. He also included "Ain't Misbehavin'," adding more layers of music history to the evening.

A beautiful "I Will Take Care of You" (a request shouted from the audience) and "Banging My Head Against the Moon" were followed by The Eagles' hits. "Sad Café" and "Heartache Tonight" had the crowd singing, along with "Only Lonely," Souther's 1979 number one hit. The house was rocking. And, then it was over.

Souther's enjoyed a long career for many reasons. Growing up, he was exposed to a lot of different kinds of music and was smart enough to absorb it all. He's in touch with his feelings and isn't afraid to put them on paper. He was in the right place at the right time, coming up through the ranks with Don Henley, Jackson Browne, Glenn Fry and Linda Ronstadt. Additionally, he knows the importance of surrounding himself with good musicians. Walters' piano is impeccable. Navarro's upright bass hit all the sweet spots. The three men were

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completely in sync throughout the evening, and Souther was more than willing to let Walters and Navarro shine during several brilliant solo turns.

For the first encore, Souther sat down at the piano, opened a vein and gave us "Talking to the Moon," a song he wrote with Linden's native son and Eagles member, Don Henley.

It's one thing to play and sing a song competently. What Souther did was something else altogether. He left a piece of his soul on that piano bench. And we were lucky enough to be there to experience the moment.

For me, the highlight of the evening was "For All We Know," the 1934 classic by J. Fred Coots and Sam M. Lewis. Souther's years of making music have taught him how to interpret a beautiful melody – how to get out of the way of the lyrics – and how to hold an audience in the palm of his hand for a few lovely moments. It was perfection.

For almost 10 years, Music City Texas has showcased artists who have made a positive impact on the music business. With JD Souther and his trio, they raised the bar. It was a night I'll not soon forget.

Not sure what they'll do next, but I'm looking forward to it.

For more on Music City Texas, click [here](#) .

For a clip of Souther doing "For All We Know," click [here](#) .