

SugarWaterFestival2005CoorsAmphitheatreDenverTextTVS

Sugar Water Festival. Coors Amphitheatre, Denver, August 2, 2005.

By Tim Van Schmidt

After the intense maleness of the recent Sounds of the Underground Tour, a show devoted to female artists was welcome indeed. The Sugar Water Festival brought four female acts- Erykah Badu, Jill Scott, Queen Latifah and Floetry- onto the stage at Coors Amphitheatre on August 2. But not just any acts- these were contemporary rhythm and blues artists who are setting the pace for others in the genre. And these women not only had talent, but also proud attitudes which went a long way toward securing the delight of the fans.

To label the Sugar Water artists rhythm and blues, soul or any other old fashioned moniker is probably a mistake. The music these acts made was varied and flavorful and included elements of several different genres- urban soul, hip hop, jazz, funk, blues and even a little classical and reggae. Much of the music was upbeat, but all of the artists were willing to bring things down to a low simmer at times, adding a keen sense of dynamics and drama. This show music- perhaps rooted in rhythm and blues- was fresh with contemporary sounds.

Floetry kicked things off with their dual-vocal mix of singing and rapping, adding a sense of up-and-coming youth to the show. Latifah then dominated the stage with a far-ranging mix of music styles- from show tunes and hip hop favorites to a soulful reading of "California Dreaming"- and a personality that roused the crowd. With a calm, congenial as well as purposeful stage presence, Scott then brought a sense of grace to the festival, even stopping the flow of hits to perform some operatic vocals, scatting classical scales. Badu finished the evening with her own masterful mix of funky, jazzy band arrangements and her streetwise vocals.

If you had to pick a single highlight of the evening, though, it would have to be Latifah's long excursion into the crowd toward the end of her set. While the band roiled on stage with an upbeat groove, Latifah left the stage and (with bodyguards helping) picked her way through the crowd all the way up one aisle and down the next. This simple bit of showmanship electrified the amphitheatre- everyone was out of their chairs, craning their necks, people laughing in delight, yanking out their phone cams, and rushing towards the star. "U-N-I-T-Y" indeed.

What Latifah did physically- to actually get down into the crowd- was what each act seemed to be doing on stage. Each performer spent portions of their sets casually talking to the crowd, telling them stories and making chatty comments. Badu has even turned the process into a long song where she muses out loud about life and drug abuse. The conversational appeals toward the audience worked some magic, drawing the fans closer than they would be with just a string of familiar songs.

But more, the things that the Sugar Water women talked about is key to understanding why such a festival is important. That is, each of the performers- Floetry, Latifah, Scott and Badu- shared messages of encouragement and empowerment- at times irreverent, but mainly positive. This is where the attitude comes in. In the midst of being real women themselves- as evidenced by their

songs about living and loving- the Sugar Water artists encourage their fans to look at their own lives and not only deal with problems, but also go ahead and celebrate personal talents. That Latifah left the stage and actually rubbed shoulders with the real women (and men) in the audience served to cement the bond.

Without these positive affirmations, this would have been just another good show. Each performer added plenty. Latifah, Scott and Badu all had well-oiled big bands. The weather even cooperated. But what was sweet about the Sugar Water Festival was the personal outreach that went above and beyond the funky tunes.