

Year in Review 2008: Pop Music

Byrne, Odetta and Cardinals among memorable concerts

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Odetta

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Big pop, rock and blues shows abounded here on big stages in 2008.

The Police with Elvis Costello, Bob Dylan, Wilco, the Black Crowes, Santana, John Mayer — even Yes and Rush — played at our major venues: Saratoga Performing Arts Center, the Times Union Center, the Palace, Proctors and Tanglewood.

However, many of the most exciting shows lit up smaller stages, with The Egg, WAMC and clubs getting their share of star-time.

Gazette writers reviewed nearly 200 rock shows in 2008, and they have narrowed down to a top 10, along with some honorable mentions.

TOP 10 CONCERTS

Here are the top 10 rock concerts, listed chronologically, in the Capital Region in 2008, according to Gazette pop music reviewers Michael Hochanadel, Brian McElhiney and David Singer.

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Santana, April 10 at the Times Union Center — The spiritual pop-star/philosopher just gets better and better at guitar, and he created gigantic excitement with an army of percussionists. The show was essentially a long percussion solo sprinkled with a variety of vocal melodies and guitar solos, all tense, some beautiful and some thrilling. His ballads were gorgeous and controlled. We didn't need songs, only his solos, but he offered up the great ones anyway, specifically "Black Magic Woman" and "Soul Sacrifice."

(Singer)

Arrested Development and Robert Randolph and the Family Band at the African-American Music Fest, July 16 at the Empire State Plaza — Arrested Development exploded, reaching back both to their own hits and some Sly Stone songs displaying their

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roots and their ambitions, and introduced newer songs. Smart, sizzling music for the feet, the heart and the head, it connected powerfully at all levels. Randolph brought extra guitar and pedal steel players to expand a funky sound that has hit with massive force since he first took his “sacred steel” gospel/blues from church to jams. Devastating in his thrilling, earthy closing set. (Hochanadel)

Odetta and MotherJudge, July 21 at Albany’s Washington Park – Despite being in a wheelchair and a bit hoarse on occasion, Odetta still commanded attention for a powerful set of blues and spiritual numbers that stretched for an hour and a half. Whenever she opened her mouth to speak or sing, the audience sat in silent reverence. Sadly, this performance marked her last appearance in the Capital Region before her death on Dec. 2. (McElhiney)

Lez Zeppelin, Aug. 1 at Washington Park – Steph Paynes is the best woman guitarist I’ve ever heard play. She can play Jimmy Page like Jimmy Page, including the solos in “Custard Pie,” “Since I’ve Been Loving You,” and the slide work in “In My Time of Dying.” Hearing bands play Zeppelin is thrilling. Hearing women play it is more than that, especially “The Ocean,” “Immigrant Song,” “Kashmir,” “No Quarter” and “Black Dog.” (Singer)

Wilco and Andrew Bird, Aug. 8 at Tanglewood – Jeff Tweedy and company managed to turn this amphitheater gig into something that felt more like an intimate rock show at a club, creating instant rapport with the fans and turning many numbers into sing-a-longs. Although the set may have been lacking in material from “A.M.” and “Being There,” the band was in top form on what it did play, tearing through solos and extended jams with high energy and immense ease. (McElhiney)

The Allman Brothers Band, Aug. 19 at Saratoga Performing Arts Center – They not only refuse to fossilize, they are entering their own new era with their dream-team lineup of Warren Haynes, Derek Trucks, Jaimoe Johansen, Butch Trucks, Oteil Burbridge and Gregg Allman. Haynes kept them mean and nasty, still playing wicked leads through “Done Somebody Wrong” and “You Don’t Love Me.” Gregg Allman sounded strong and healthy through classics like “Midnight Rider” “Hoochie Coochie Man” and the coolest “Come and Go Blues.” They’re as good as they ever were which, at one time, was as good as it gets. (Singer)

Cardinals Featuring Ryan Adams, Sept. 8 at The Egg – Mercurial, prolifically inspired and with gloriously poor creative impulse control, Adams led the Cardinals through a sprawling show spanning more than two hours and welding noisy metal meltdowns to lyrical laments that could have emanated from some hillbilly hollow, and cheerfully chugging country-rock. A real band, with white-hot chemistry or mellow ease as the songs demanded, in which Adams played like one of the guys. He performed big, underlining the big feelings behind the songs and drawing everyone inside. All the Cardinals played and sang well, but you couldn’t take your eyes off Adams when he sang. (Hochanadel)

Sam Phillips, Sept. 14 at WAMC’s Linda Norris Auditorium – In her bright red dress and lipstick to match, the thin, elegant blond singer seemed more Sally Kellerman than Aimee Mann, to whom she’s sometimes compared for her angular looks and thin voice. For a singer who deals fearlessly with difficult subjects, Phillips and her exceptional band made the listening – well, not easy exactly, but fascinating for sure – in a slightly too short, action-packed show that surprisingly marked the local debut of this surpassing and sophisticated talent. (Hochanadel)

The Experience Hendrix Tour, Oct. 16 at the Palace – Guitarists, including Buddy Guy, Johnny Lang, Eric Johnson and Kenny Wayne Shepherd tore into their tunes, each capturing their little piece of the giant. Originals Mitch Mitchell and Billy Cox graced us for a short performance (Mitchell died at the end of the tour), the guest players came on non-stop without break, playing the monumental tunes “Purple Haze,” “Foxy Lady,” “Bold as Love,” “Are You Experienced,” “Fire,” and then “Spanish Castle Magic,” making the night unforgettable. (Singer)

David Byrne, Nov. 5 at The Egg – “We woke up this morning [after the presidential

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election] and it was not the same America as yesterday,” mused David Byrne before a 75-minute set. In generous encores, he sang “Everything That Happens Will Happen Today,” title track of his new album with Brian Eno, a gorgeous rock masterpiece about change and permanence — as was this whole thrilling, funky and beautiful show. With four players, three singers and three dancers behind him — all in white from shoes to watches — Byrne delivered an efficient, disciplined show whose highest points were well-loved Talking Heads tunes. Nothing ever stays new, and it took great energy and precision to replace the freshness of the Heads’ higher-education approach to punk and omnivorous funk and world music. (Hochanadel)

Honorable mention

- Neko Case on Jan. 31 at The Egg
- John Hiatt and Lyle Lovett on Feb. 16 at The Egg
- Nellie McKay on March 10 at The Egg
- They Might Be Giants on April 19 at The Egg
- Adrian Belew Power Trio on June 8 at Revolution Hall, Troy
- Cowboy Junkies on July 8 at the Plaza Music Fest in Empire State Plaza
- Robyn Hitchcock on July 10 at WAMC
- Terrance Simien on July 24 at Alive at Five
- Zappa Plays Zappa on Aug. 5 at The Egg
- The American Music Festival on Aug. 17 at Saratoga Performing Arts Center featuring Bob Dylan, Levon Helm, the Swell Season, Conor Oberst. Steve Earle & Allison Moorer, Gillian Welch & David Rawlings, and Raul Malo
- Rodney Crowell on Oct. 23 at The Egg
- Richard Thompson on Oct. 24 at The Egg
- Joe Jackson on Oct. 30 at the Troy Savings Bank Music Hall
- Bela Fleck & the Flecktones on Dec. 9 at The Egg

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