



Carrie Underwood show is a slam dunk

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Three albums and three tours in, it's become clear that Carrie Underwood has taken this whole American Idol concept quite literally.

The country sweetheart is up to 14 million albums sold and five Grammys won, and with her Play On Tour she's upped the ante on her live production.

Thursday night at the Petersen Events Center, she seemed downright obsessed with heights, of the vocal and physical kind. You may recall that Pink Floyd had a flying pig. The band didn't actually fly on it, though. Carrie Underwood flew on her neon blue pickup truck, above the crowd, while she sang a cover of the downhome "Country Roads."

For "Just a Dream," that tearjerker about a widowed bride, she swung back and forth on a rope swing, rising up in the air and rearing back to scale the high note of the climax. At other times, she stood center stage, in her stiletto heels, elevating on the riser while she belted out the song.

The Play On Tour spared no expense, with hi-def screens, dazzling effects and rapid-fire costume changes, from the black tux to the Oklahoma denim to the satin dress, and everything between. Having risen to fame on the flashiest of TV shows, she must think that her audience demands it.

And yet, what separates her from so many other touring acts with high-tech production is that she doesn't need it. She's as strong a singer as we have in the pop, country, or pop-country market.

Early in the set, soaring through "Wasted" and hitting the gorgeous falsetto on "I Know You Won't," she was singing like it was finals night and she hadn't won a thing yet. You quickly realize she's one of those rare singers who sounds even better live. Numerous times throughout the set, her vocals drew gasps and screams from the packed house.

It happened on "Temporary Home," her weepy new single, and on her lovely segue into "How Great Thou Art" from "Jesus Take the Wheel."

Ms. Underwood was all business, running through her many singles, dashing off for another costume change and another cue. If there's one fault it's that she pours emotion into the emotional songs, while not radiating much warmth as a performer. There's minimal chit-chat with the audience and the only time she really laughed was glimpsing a sign during "Country Roads."

The show was also a little short on intimacy. We got a gown that turned into laserium for "Change" and a full-throttle duet with opener Sons of Sylvia on "What Can I Say." But we could have used even a brief acoustic set to reveal a more raw and tender side hinted at on "Mama's Song."

So, there was bang-bang quality to the 24-song set, building to the climax of Aerosmith's "Living on the Edge," chosen online by a fan vote, and "Last Name," during which the fuse went off on her vocal fireworks.

Trust me that no one left the Pete questioning her game. She sang about a Louisville Slugger, she's engaged to a hockey player and Thursday night she did a slam dunk in the Pitt gym.

Craig Morgan may or may not have been a familiar face to fans before the show, but he certainly won them over. He doesn't do too much to distinguish himself from the Nashville pack -- other than, say, not wearing a cowboy hat. But he proved to be a likable and unpretentious opener with a rangy baritone, heartfelt ballads like "This Ain't Nothin'" and rowdy country rockers like "Bonfire" and "International Harvester."

Wearing a wrinkled white biker shirt, he wandered through the crowd to get to the stage and mixed it up with them again later during the party tune "Redneck Yacht."

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Critics Andrew Druckenbrod and Scott Mervis talk about music on "The Beat," available exclusively at PG+, a members-only web site of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Our [introduction to PG+](#) gives you all the details.



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