

STEVIE WONDER
SLEEPTRAIN PAVILION
JULY 8, 2008

Temps reached 110 degrees in Concord this past July 8 and the fire crews cursed their luck in countless blazing ravines, but at the Sleeptrain Pavilion, an icon of American culture drove up the temperature to muy caliente for a sold out adoring crowd come to witness the first visit in twenty years. Unlike the previous show across the Bay on Sunday, Stevie Wonder opened out in top form, well on time, and presented an invigorating and well appreciated show with zest, with humor and with style.



Stevie Wonder was born Stevland Hardaway Judkins on May 13, 1950, in Saginaw, Michigan. A premature birth is blamed on his blindness. His family later moved to Detroit, where he established himself as a child prodigy, learning piano at 7 and mastering it completely by 9. He also taught himself to play the harmonica and the drums, and had mastered both by age ten. By age 11, he had picked up bass. Shortly after that, Motown founder Berry Gordy signed him on.

His first records, collections of jazz instrumentals under a jokey pseudonym, failed to garner attention, although copies are extremely valuable collectors items today.

Under his new showname he racked up a series of major hits, including My Cherie Amour (1969) and Signed, Sealed, Delivered (1970). From then on, there was no stopping the man who went on to record more than thirty top ten hits, win 26 Grammy Awards (a record for a solo artist), plus one for lifetime achievement, won an Academy Award for Best Song and been inducted into both the Rock and Roll and Songwriters Halls of Fame.

There is not a single popular musician or vocalist in America living today who does not pay some kind of tribute to his genius.

So what have you been doing in your spare time?

Around 1987 Mr. Wonder ceased touring as extensively after his magnum opus Songs in the Key of Life (1976), which makes his return to the Bay Area a very welcome return. A brief series of concerts in 1999 were panned by critics and fans due to overlong opening act warmups and generally lackluster performances.

Tuesday night, however, the master was in top form, with thousands of people under the pavilion and packed onto the lawn cheering, singing along and dancing.

Setlist resembled previous shows in Chicago and Sunday night here, with a cameo by his now adult and very lovely daughter preceding "Isn't she Lovely".

1. As If You Read My Mind
2. Master Blaster
3. Did I Hear You Say You Love Me
4. All I Do
5. Knocks Me Off My Feet
6. Higher Ground
7. Spain
8. Don't You Worry 'Bout a Thing
9. Visions
10. Livin' for the City
11. Golden Lady
12. Creeping
13. Keep Fooling Yourself, Baby Girl
14. Stevie's daughter, Aisha Morris sings I'm Gonna Laugh You Right Out of My Life
15. Isn't She Lovely / Ribbon in the Sky
16. Overjoyed
17. My Cheri Amour
18. Signed, Sealed, Delivered
19. Sir Duke
20. I Wish
21. Do I Do
22. I Just Called to Say I Love You
23. For Once in My Life
24. Uptight
25. Superstition

The band, typically top-notch jazz musicians, consisted of, besides Stevie's own double rack of keyboards plus piano, another two people on synth, two full drumsets plus a percussionist, two lead and rhythm guitars, dual horn section and fat man on five-string bass.

The sound was full and complex, never muddy, few stage buzzes and entirely professional. Vocals sounded energetic and cut clearly through the instrumentation. Kudos to the female drummer set as centerpiece.

Stevie himself remained ultra-smooth, collected, enthused and full of his human warmth and self-deprecating style that makes the man stand out among a galaxy of pretenders.

According to some critics his current material, or at least the opening stuff from more recent albums, lacks some of the pizzazz from his earlier Motown stuff, but we look forward to the two projects he announced now in the works, a memorial to his mother and *Eyes of Wonder*, songs about living with blindness, one of which he performed Tuesday (*Creeping*).