

Essence '08 highlighted by new stage, familiar acts

Published: Tuesday, July 08, 2008, 5:00 AM Updated: Thursday, April 09, 2009, 8:03 PM



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A dazzling stage worthy of Times Square announced the Essence Music Festival's new era Friday in the Superdome. Gone were the old Essence logo, curtain and gauzy decor, replaced by flashing vertical and horizontal LED screens and local DJ Soul Sister spinning old-school vinyl between acts.



Michael Democker/
The Times-Picayune

One highlight of the Essence Music Festival's revamped main stage was local DJ Soul Sister spinning old-school vinyl between acts.

The main stage face-lift was the most obvious change instituted by the new regime at Essence Communications led by president Michelle Ebanks and a new festival producer, Rehage Entertainment. Elsewhere, Essence felt very much like Essence, from the rainbow hue of fabrics worn by the sharply dressed crowd to the smell of deep-fried soul food in the superlounges.

Notes from Essence '08:

Rap is infinitely more compelling onstage when it involves a live band. Kanye West's set with a deejay at the 2005 Essence underwhelmed. But this year, backed by a black- and helmet-clad band, he was absolutely electric.

The constraints of festival logistics meant he couldn't deploy the spaceship from his current "Glow in the Dark" tour. It wasn't necessary. For more than an hour, he stalked the stage in a fighter's crouch, working hard from the opening "Good Morning."

He crammed an inordinate amount of words into the dramatic "Diamonds from Sierra Leone" and toyed with a remix of Lil Wayne's "Lollipop." Synthesizers invested "Can't Tell Me Nothing" with menace. "Gold Digger" rocked. Massive, kabuki-style drums thundered in the martial stomp of "Jesus Walks" and powered an audience call-and-response in "Good Life."

Under a single spotlight, he slowed down briefly to sing "Hey Mama," a song that has assumed additional poignancy since



his mother's unexpected passing. "No one can say I don't do my job on this ... stage," West declared at his set's conclusion. No argument there.

Rihanna didn't let a short dress and the 3-inch stiletto heels on her boots slow her down. She cavorted gamely with her dancers -- including a troupe of Robocop-style rub-board players from the future -- during a short, spunky set. "Don't Stop the Music" percolated with a disco pulse worthy of latter-day Madonna. Her smash "Umbrella" was an obvious crowd-pleaser.

If Chris Brown doesn't have a sponsorship deal with Japanese clothing company A Bathing Ape -- abbreviated in hip-hop circles as BAPE -- he should. He sported a shiny silver belt buckle reading "BAPE" -- which, at first glance, could be mistaken for "RAPE" -- then changed into a BAPE T-shirt.

In addition to advertising, he showcased the thousand-watt grin -- boyish yet mischievous -- the earnest, agreeable, ultimately harmless mid-tempo mini-passion plays ("Yo, Excuse Me Miss," "Say Good-bye"), and the sharp steps that have earned him the moniker "the prince of R&B."

Still, he did not seem fully on his game. Momentum stalled during a too-long, fireworks-free "competition" among his troupe of 10 full-size dancers and two shorties. And he was reduced to mugging his way through a DJ set as the audience reveled in snippets from Prince and LL Cool J. On an Essence night noticeably devoid of old-school acts, Brown's deejay filled the gap.



John McCusker / The Times-Picayune

Chris Brown sang, danced and smiled his way through his Essence set.

Chris Rock noted that the NAACP had staged a symbolic "funeral" for the infamous n-word. "Well," he said with typical gusto, "today is Easter."

Rock not only resurrected the n-word, but the p-word, the d-word, the f-word (in all its variations) and that other f-word, the one that got actor Isaiah Washington tossed from the cast of "Grey's Anatomy." That was the last time Washington would ever appear in so prestigious a role as surgeon, Rock noted. "Next time you see him he'll be a crackhead on 'The Wire.'"

And so it went for 65 minutes as Rock gleefully ignored decorum via his trademark mix of brutal reality and raunch.

Years ago, Essence producers pulled the plug on R&B singer R. Kelly when his show became too sexually explicit. One wonders if eyebrows were raised or hands wrung backstage as Rock riffed on the late Anna Nicole Smith's breasts, the politics of sex and interracial dating, or the joys of one particular oral sex act.

It wasn't all X-rated. In a lengthy political section, he skewered candidates equally: John McCain for his age ("I don't need a president with a bucket list"), Hillary Clinton for not knowing when to go home gracefully (comparing her to a desperate woman still stalking a nightclub after the lights are turned on).

President Bush has performed so poorly, Rock said, "that he's made it hard for a white man to run for president. Black man, white woman, a giraffe, a zebra ... anything but another white man."

Obama's "blackness," he noted, "doesn't sneak up on you," given his name. "When you hear 'Barack Obama' you expect to see a brother with a spear standing over a dead lion."

Emphasizing the point, Rock declared that "Barack Obama" "sounds like the bass player from the Commodores."

He marveled at Obama's caucus victory in Iowa, a state with few black residents. "They only sold five copies of 'Thriller' in Iowa -- and three got returned." He dismissed the notion that black voters will only vote for Obama because of his race. "He's black and qualified. It ain't like we're voting for Flavor Flav."



John McCusker / The Times-Picayune

Kanye West minus his elaborate stage still managed to dazzle fans at Essence.

Given all that has transpired since Rock last appeared at Essence in 1997, the host city would appear ripe for satire. But he made only a fleeting reference early on, positing that "New Orleans wasn't the safest place in the world before Katrina," then veering off on O.J. Simpson.

The animated cadence of his delivery interspersed with clever observations enable Rock to tread where few comedians can. Still, shock value occasionally smothered the humor. But more often than not, he conjured lines that are worth repeating -- if only amongst very close, adult friends.

In a white pant-suit and knee-high snakeskin boots with high heels, Mary J. Blige threw down with typical vigor and strength, vocal and otherwise. Her musical exorcisms are as therapeutic for her as anyone else, as she decried the "self-loathing" that can afflict women. During "I'm Goin' Down," the audience took over for a massive singalong. She thanked local rap superstar Lil Wayne for contributing to the hit remix of "Just Fine." The piano melody from "The Young and the Restless" theme haunted "No More Drama," the theme to her life.



Jennifer Zdon / The Times-Picayune

Comedian Chris Rock gave Essence attendees 65 minutes of adult entertainment, gleefully ignoring decorum via his mix of reality and raunch.



Jennifer Zdon / The Times-Picayune

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Keyshia Cole expressed surprise that her reality show, "Keyshia Cole: The Way It Is," is a hit on Black Entertainment Television. "I never would have thought that people cared enough about my life. Thank you Jesus." Fortunately she has the chops to back up the reality show. In a highlight of her set, she teased out a chunk of Prince's "When Doves Cry," joined her dancers for a "Stomp"-like breakdown, then wound up with her hit "Let It Go."

At an event presented by Essence, a magazine for women, bathroom inequality is especially unfortunate. Between acts, as many as 40 women waited outside the bathroom under the bleachers near the Dome's main entrance, while customers walked in and out of the nearby men's room without delay. There's a problem worth fixing for Essence's upcoming 15th anniversary.

Between the Mary J. Blige and Maze sets on Sunday, Michelle Ebanks announced that Beyonce is already booked for the 15th Essence, scheduled for July 3-5 in the Dome. Beyonce's 2007 show ranked among the very best in the festival's history.

What other surprises might be in store for 2009? Early fan suggestions include a reunited Commodores, a rehabbed Whitney Houston, Sade and/or Tina Turner. All would be welcome on Essence's sparkling new stage.

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