

Better late than never

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By Keith Spera

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By all criteria other than punctuality, the 2009 Essence Music Festival ranked as one of the most successful in the fest's 15-year run. Main stage performances were consistently strong, and what was reportedly the largest crowd in Essence history sold out the Superdome on Friday.

Observations from three epic nights at the Dome:

Most impressive set: Beyonce. Even without the full complement of bells and whistles from her "I Am . . . Tour," she fronted a jaw-dropping spectacle. Her choreography was crisp and clean. She wrapped herself in Sarah McLachlan's lovely "Angel" and absolutely tore up "Ave Maria" with clarion sustained notes and passion to burn.

In the guise of alter-ego Sasha Fierce, she wore an armored leather bustier and mirrored aviator shades, grabbed her crotch on "If I Were a Boy" and wailed Alanis Morissette's "You Oughta Know." When she broke character, she came across as personable and genuine. Compared to mere mortals -- and most of her pop world peers -- she inhabits an entirely different plane of existence. God bless Britney Spears, but she cannot hold a candle to Beyonce Knowles.

Most beloved set: Lionel Richie. The consummate professional, his act is so polished that it almost comes across as spontaneous (though it might be time to retire his oft-told joke about the various pronunciations of his name). He and his equally sharp band intermingled Commodores cuts and Richie's hits: "Lady," "Still," "Stuck on You," "Sail On," "Three Times a Lady."

As a bonus, he brought out former Commodores guitarist Thomas McClary and bassist Ronald LaPreau for what amounted to three-fifths of a Commodores reunion. They reprised "Slippery When Wet" and "Too Hot ta Trot" with Richie's solo band; McClary handled the signature guitar solo on "Easy." A Commodores medley included "Fancy Dancer" and "Just to Be Close to You." The audience erupted at "Zoom."

Unsung hero: Stage designer Stefan Beese. An architect by trade who now works for Essence producer Rehage Entertainment, Beese dreamed up a sleek, contemporary stage with massive LED screens and lines of light that flowed across the entire set.



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