

Neil Diamond at the Greek

"We will do things for you that you will not forget for a while..." - ND 1972



By Robert Hilburn
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One of the persistent absurdities of our show business world is the performer (and there are dozens of examples) who stands on a stage and proudly, dramatically sings 'My Way'-a sort of entertainer's declaration of independence -when in fact he isn't doing it his way at all.

Not only is the performer in our example appearing in a format that bristles from its sameness - an opening act that has little relationship to the singer's music, the obligatory intermission at concerts and a line-up of songs that doesn't vary for months but he ends up singing the same song of independence (ie.'My Way') that everyone is singing.

Well, Neil Diamond, I'm pleased to say, did do it his way Friday night at the Greek Theatre and the result was more of a triumph, in every measurable way, than his stunning show last summer at the Greek.

Louder Than Words

Shunning the usual concert 'musts' (from the traditional opening act to the ever-present intermission), Diamond's performance was a virtual model for an entertainer who wants to make a personal, distinctive musical statement. Needless to say, he didn't sing 'My Way.' Actions, we see once again, still speak louder than words.

Most of all Diamond gave of himself. All too often major pop music figures seem to approach a concert as if they are going on stage only to take bows for what they've already done on record. The concert is to them, it seems, just a way to pick up a little (actually a lot of) change or to perhaps accommodate the fans who want to see them in person. Diamond, however, wisely thinks of a concert in a different, more productive light. From the care in production (including quadraphonic sound and elaborate, lighting/stage effects) to the intensity of his own performance. Diamond takes advantage of the live encounter with the audience to prove he is even better than you thought he was.

Back and Forth

Opening with 'Crunchy Granola Suite,' Diamond went back and forth from his early songs (such as 'Cherry Cherry' and 'Solitary Man') to recent ones ('Song Sung Blue', 'Play Me'), from up tempo ones ('Cracklin' Rosie') to softer ones ('Sweet Caroline') in a concert that was part of a final series of appearances before the singer-songwriter takes a one to two year "sabbatical" from live appearances.

When he returns to the stage it will be with all new material. "This tour", he said before his already sold out, 10-day Greek Theater engagement "may be the last time I sing those songs on stage."

Thus, the Greek shows, which are being recorded for an album, represent the farewell to a period in Diamond's artistic life. But, significantly, he didn't let the importance of the evening Friday lock him into a rigid format. Instead, he remained in control of the evening sticking close enough to business to give the evening a sharp sense of pace and dramatics, but he remained loose enough – he interrupted his planned sequence at least three times to meet audience requests - to give a human, spontaneous quality to it.

Significantly, Diamond seemed to approach each song with a sense of purpose, a determination to prove its value. Because some songs lend themselves to more vigorous serious treatment, there were moments of special effectiveness, among them 'Holy Holly' which drew the first of the evening's three standing ovations, and the closing 'Soolaimon'/'Brother Love's Travelling Salvation Show' coupling.

Except for Randy Newman's 'I Think It's Going to Rain Today' and Bob Russell/Bobby Scott's 'He Ain't Heavy', He's My Brother.' Diamond used only his own material on Friday.

As always, there is a dazzling variety to his music. Based on rock, gospel and Latin influences, it combines a series of dramatic tempo changes, enormously accessible melodies and crisp, uncluttered lyrics. Backed by his regular seven-piece rhythm section, Diamond avoided the trap of instrumental overkill. Rather than use them all on every tune, he did several songs with just the rhythm section and some songs with just a soft guitar support. Lee Holdridge, who did the arrangement on Diamond's Moods album, was musical director. Diamond's sold-out engagement runs through Sunday.

"Hot August Night was the big turning point. That magnetism that people think of with Neil Diamond was born on that night. He knocked them dead. Neil came through a cloud of smoke and the audience just exploded. It was the first time I saw him confident on stage..... That was chemistry." – Lee Holdridge, Composer & Conductor