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« Previous Post (http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/music_blog/2011/08/jim-ward-talks-new-solo-record-the-bar-business-and-reviving-sparta.html) | Pop & Hiss Home (<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/posts/>) | Next Post » (http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/music_blog/2011/08/oliver-wang-on-rock-the-bells-hip-hop-and-nostalgia.html)



Live review: Sade at the Staples Center

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The swagger that often accompanies natural beauty is something to behold, as evidenced by the Friday night sold-out performance of singer Helen Folasade Adu, better known to anyone who's ever made love after midnight as Sade.

Purveyor of some of the smoothest, most romantic songs of the last three decades, the Nigerian-born, British-raised pop vocalist and her excellent band appeared for the first of three consecutive nights at Staples Center as part of her Soldier of Love tour.

They were Sade's first L.A. performances in a decade, and she brought with her an essential intimacy, one that exuded confidence. Over the course of two hours, four costume changes, countless set transformations and 22 songs, the ageless singer offered highlights from throughout her and the band's career. Versatile vocalist, songwriter and bandleader John Legend opened.



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Whereas someone like Bruce Springsteen or Lady Gaga drives their way into the hearts of large crowds with overwhelming energy and volume, Sade on Friday controlled her environment with restraint and allure, drawing us in rather than forcing herself upon us. The only hint of bombast: images of the singer frolicking through a meadow projected onto a huge screen above the stage.

She began with “Soldier of Love,” the striking title track from her most recent album. “I’ve lost the use of my heart, but I’m still alive,” she sang, introducing pain and grace in the same breath, saluting the crowd like a soldier as guitarist Stuart Matthewman delivered quick bursts of tense, distorted strum and bassist Paul S. Denman roamed below with dubby bottom-end support.

Sade's singular obsession is the heart in the broadest sense: the universal beating thing that contains not only romance but also charity, compassion, tenderness and peace — one she described on “Kiss of Life” as having “tons of love inside.” Sex is the least of the singer's lyrical concerns; she focuses more on the moments pre- and post-coital: the anticipation and idealized hope of emotional connection and the snuggle and all-enveloping warmth that follows.

On Friday, Sade was better at conveying mood and delivering melody than she was at carrying her songs with voice alone, but her strength has never been her vocal range. Her talent, best expressed on “Your Love Is King” and “Love Is Stronger Than Pride,” is in her ability to adeptly convey the emotion of her lyrics, which approach matters of the heart without slipping into melodrama — save a few near misses.

At her best, as on “The Sweetest Taboo,” her voice not only sang but also hummed and whispered as though she were telling us an urgent secret: that true love and endless passion are possible. The aspirational sentiment at the song's center — “Every day is Christmas, and every night is New Year's Eve” — may be unrealistic, but her gift lies in her confidence in expressing both the simplicity and complexity of love.

A well-imagined stage set enveloped Sade. Silken and velvet curtains rose as if out of nowhere and then cascaded down onto the floor with each passing song. Images of the seasons projected onto white fabric surrounded her, making her look like a Vogue spread come to life. Close-up photos of her freckled face and sparkling eyes, a tender smile on her face, eclipsed the presence of the singer herself onstage. Indeed, she may be the most graceful, elegant megalomaniac in pop music (with apologies to Cher).

But she's certainly not selfish. Her charity felt absolutely genuine, and it extended from the crowd to her band, roughly the same core lineup as when they released their debut album in 1984. She offered wide open space for solos (guitarist Matthewman doubled as the band's saxophonist and worked hard during the show), which she punctuated with loving smiles at each conclusion.

This bond among singer, band and crowd was best illustrated near the end of the show, after a delicate version of “By Your Side.” Onstage, the members mingled and hugged one another as the crowd applauded, and it felt like a gathering of people who'd just shared a few hours of idealized love together, an experience, like a summer meadow, beautiful but ephemeral.

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-- Randall Roberts

Photos: Sade performs at Staples Center in Los Angeles on Aug. 19, 2011. Credit: Genaro Molina/Los Angeles Times.

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