

Over and under the 'Rainbows' : Radiohead's Bowl show easily event of the season

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To call the Radiohead concert at the Santa Barbara Bowl on Thursday the pop show of the year would be a gross understatement.

In a real way, it was the cultural event of the season, regardless of medium. Here we had one of the indisputably great bands in rock at present, hot on the heels of a new album, "In Rainbows," its seventh and one as strong as any to date. It garnered widespread press attention, not only for its considerable artistic virtues, but also for its revolutionary new model of distribution, with a "pay what you want" policy and other non-conformist business methods, demonstrating this band's innovative spirit on many levels.

Charged up by its previous visits to the Bowl, back in 2001, the lads from Oxford opted to end their U.S. tour in our relatively tiny venue, by far the smallest spot on their current tour. They also decided to do a live Web cast of the concert, and bassist Colin Greenwood wrote on the band's Web site the Bowl was "one of our favorite places to play. It's not too big, in fact it's very intimate, a small arena with a dirt floor, set in pretty countryside. It should be a special night, for lots of reasons ... "

And that it was. As Angus Andrew, lead singer of the opening band, Liars, told the crowd, "all you people are very special guests, because it's the smallest crowd we've ever played to."

Liars proved to be the ideal warm-up act, by turns moody, punkishly goofy, primal and artistic. In tuxedo pants and a Radiohead T-shirt, Mr. Andrew was a lubed raconteur, full of teetering charisma, while the band pumped out intricate rhythms and noisy, Sonic Youth-like guitar textures.

Despite the huge hubbub about the local Radiohead landing, though, it almost seemed like an event so large on the Santa Barbara cultural landscape, we couldn't grasp the thing -- like a vast lawn rather than a singular, identifiable plant form. The show sold out in a blink or two, of course, and an at-the-gate ticket-reselling frenzy drew prices exceeding \$1,000. This has many seeking tickets crying foul, especially given Radiohead's decidedly anti-corporate ideology. On craigslist.com and other Internet sites, fans lashed out at price-gougers as "immoral evildoers," figuratively reporting them to the "Karma Police" (to quote the Radiohead song).



Radiohead's return to the Santa Barbara Bowl on Thursday, on the heels of its great new album "In Rainbows," was not only the pop show of the year, but the cultural event of the season. The band Liars, below, opened the set.



MICHAEL MORIATIS/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

Back story and buzz aside, the focus was intensely on this amazing band, with the first gripping blast of its new tune, "Reckoner," from the new album. Kooky lead singer Thom Yorke, with spiky hair and dressed in red pants, seized the spotlight with his crazily kinetic dance steps. He still can look like a punkish thug, but he actually is an Oxford-studied artist with an uncanny knack for stirring visceral power with intellectual music. Mr. Yorke makes beautiful, haunting music with his old pals, the Greenwood brothers -- Johnny and Colin -- guitarist Ed O'Brien and drummer Phil Selway.

Another memorable aspect of the band's Bowl show was the sensory exhilaration of the band's stage set and light show. With a forest of pillars onstage, reflecting all manner of lights and motion, the sight-sound effect often was stunning, in ways technological and organic. Reportedly, thanks to the structural attributes of the Bowl's new pavilion, the band was able to use more of its set than was possible at its Hollywood Bowl show last week.

Part of the band's genius has to do with its rare feat of balancing romantic and experimental sensibilities, more than any other major band on the planet -- maybe past or present. It has consistently evolved and reconfigured its sound during its 15 years, moving beyond the old-fashioned guitar-driven format of its early albums, but the band never has forsaken an abiding, anchoring emotionality in its musical enterprise, however far it drifts from convention.

Understandably, much of the public and press attention go to co-writers Mr. Yorke and Johnny Greenwood (who also distinguished himself in the past year by supplying a fascinating film score to "There Will be Blood"). But Radiohead is a remarkably democratic and ensemble-oriented band in some ways, never given to noodly guitar solos or other old-school spotlight-hogging tactics familiar in rock 'n' roll.

Drummer Mr. Selway, for one, is an underrated anchor of the band's ever-shifting rhythmic strategies. He cleverly subverts rock drumming clichés, as with the delayed gratification of snare hits on the song "There There" or the crafty incorporation of a stick-clicking count-off in the actual groove of "Weird Fishes/Arpeggi," its driving rhythmic sections interspersed with floating sensations.

Much of Thursday's two-hour set leaned toward material from the new album, including such memorable moments as the lovely "Nude." Another new one, "15 Step," in a semi-techno but also Brazilian-tinged 5/4 rhythm, is a wonder in a different, exotic direction and "Bodysnatchers" is one of the new album's most sternum-pounding rock anthems, sounding extra vivid in the live context. In the middle of the show, Mr. Yorke and Johnny Greenwood stripped down to acoustic guitars for the sweet new "Faust Arp," like a chip off the British folk-rock tradition of Pentangle.

While this band plunges into offbeat and surprisingly sophisticated musical terrain, especially by rock's conservative standards, it also can tug heartstrings with the best of 'em. "No Surprises," from "OK Computer," was a tender melodic jewel.

"Optimistic," a grand-feeling tune from Radiohead's ground-breaking 2000 album "Kid A," typifies the kind of guilt-free rock epic the band has come to master. Also from that great album, we heard "Everything in Its Right Place."

Radiohead's ascendancy to the top of the rock heap is all the more remarkable because the band has been fueled by the power of the people, and not the radio. At the Bowl, the band steered away from old favorites, such as "Creep" and "Fake Plastic Trees," and played "Karma Police," the infectious tune from "OK Computer," instead, and also its classic pocket-sized epic "Paranoid Android."

Ending eight encore songs with the catchy warmth of "Lucky" and the chilling electro-flavored hypnosis of "Idioteque," the band exited stage left, in a glow of glory.

All told, Radiohead's deliriously fine return to the Bowl was an epiphany on delivery, as promised. True believers, and there are many -- inside and outside the Bowl -- no doubt sensed this was the best Bowl show since, well, the last time the band played here. May it return soon.