

ACL review: Robert Plant and Alison Krauss

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It's hard to imagine a more understated opening for a more rabidly anticipated performance: the musicians, stock-still, silhouetted against the proscenium backdrop; the two headliners, emerging simultaneously from opposite wings of the stage, making their way to the pair of microphones waiting under the hot, white spotlight.

That sense of economy and understated elegance permeated the entirety of Robert Plant and Alison Krauss' headline set Saturday night. The improbable pair — leather-lunged Brit superstar meets demure bluegrass songbird — has been touring behind their duet album, 'Raising Sand.'

Now, it's easy to imagine in some precincts that Plant would be the 500-lb. gorilla on the bill, with Alison Who? lending a little distaff charm to the ticket. But at ACL, Krauss' musical credentials (if not her rock star charisma) easily put her on a par with her more famous duet-mate.

It was a carefully-crafted performance, built upon the foundation of a crackerjack band under the direction of T-Bone Burnett. And though Burnett laid back, his musicians, especially guitarist Buddy Miller and Stuart Duncan, tore the joint up.

The set mixed material from the album, some traditional mountain music and a handful of Led Zeppelin classics chopped, channeled and stripped down to their roots. "Black Dog," for instance, started out in as an almost unrecognizable, hallucinatory arrangement, and you could sense the excitement ripple through the crowd as the familiar melody finally asserted itself.

It must have represented a dream come true for Plant — his Led Zeppelin tunes reimagined as part of the timeless fabric of the folk and traditional music he grew up loving in England.

Though she's a fiddle virtuoso, Krauss hardly availed herself of the instrument during the show. But she sang like a bird, her crystalline tones providing a silvery counterpoint to Plant's weathered blues moan. For his part, Plant kept the rock-god histrionics tamped down. It wasn't until the ninth song of the set, "Black Country Woman," that he finally let his powerhouse, cock-of-the-walk yowl off its leash.

Other highlights included an extended workout on "In the Mood" (no, not the Glen Miller classic) that saw Krauss dropping a chorus of the folk classic "Matty Grove" into the mix, a dreamy, druggy take on Benny Spellman's "Fortune Teller," a luminously beautiful Krauss vocal solo on "Through the Morning, Through the Night," with Plant taking a back seat to echo her vocals, and the bouncy, upbeat rockabilly set-closer, a cover of the Everly Brothers' "Gone, Gone, Gone."

"(John) Fogerty was a concert; this was a *show*," enthused one spectator, summing it all up.