

ACL review: Gillian Welch

John T. Davis

Austin-American Statesman, September 28, 2008

Gillian Welch forgot to put goop on her hair. It was a fact that caused her much chagrin as she stood on the breezy expanse of the AMD stage. “I didn’t want to eat my hair while I was trying to sing,” she explained.

Actually, the wind-tousled look suited Welch, who — though she was born in Manhattan and grew up in L.A. — always looks like she just stepped out of a Depression-era Dorothea Lange photograph (and whose music sounds as though she were providing the soundtrack for James Agee’s “Let Us Now Praise Famous Men”).

Welch and her longtime partner, David Rawlings, delivered an unplugged set that mixed material from her four albums with songs from a forthcoming project. And the performances were fine; it was the venue that rankled.

This marks the third time this weekend that this listener has seen a small-bore acoustic act presented in the cavernous expanse of one of the festival’s main stages. Performances that should breath intimacy and beckon listeners closer are swallowed up by the brobdingnagian scale of the stage. Surely, one of the smaller stages would be more appropriate for Welch’s understated musical portraits.

And so much for that. Welch and Rawlings have such an intuitive and finely honed sense of the sound and (more important) the feel of classic American acoustic music that more than once a song this listener thought must have come from a Library of Congress field recording (like “Sweet Tooth”) turned out to be a Welch/Rawlings original.

Other songs, like “Knuckleball Catcher” and “The Way We Will Be” (two more new ones) had a more contemporary feel without seeming trendy, but Welch classics like “Orphan Girl” and “Red Clay Halo” retain a timeless sound.

Certainly, from the fans’ point of view, the big treat of the set came when Alison Krauss (enjoying a busman’s holiday after her show with Robert Plant last night) joined Welch and Rawlings for a reprise of “Didn’t Leave Nobody But the Baby,” the song they recorded for “O Brother, Where Art Thou” (Rawlings got to sing Emmylou Harris’ part). As moments of pure, unadulterated musical magic go, it was hard to top.