

Everything's up to par except star

By Robin Gaines
special writer

The mood was right for an evening of cool, funky sounds: the hot humid weather, a rain-soaked lawn, the smell of fried chicken and the crack of sears being pulled off ice cold beer. Unfortunately, Lou Rawls' uninspired performance didn't blend with the spirited atmosphere of the evening.

Rawls' short 55-minute set Friday night at Meadow Brook Music Festival's Baldwin Pavilion on the Oakland University campus near Rochester was jam-packed with hits lackluster in their delivery.

Backed by a nine-piece orchestra, Rawls raced through "Lady Love," "You'll Never Find" and "You're Gonna Miss My Lovin'."

During "Love Is a Hurting Thing," his rich bass voice was barely audible over the excessively loud orchestra. Only after a member of the audience yelled to Rawls that she couldn't hear him sing did the orchestra take the hint and tone it down.

review

THINKING RAWLS was humoring them when he crooned the opening lines of the Budweiser beer theme song, the audiences' chuckles were quickly halted when Rawls explained that Budweiser (or specifically Anheuser-Busch) underwrites production costs for the Lou Rawls Parade of Stars to Benefit the United Negro College Fund.

Perhaps the most poignant moment of the set was when Rawls' two female backup vocalists took center stage with him to sing a combined version of "I Got a Right to Sing the Blues" and "Stormy Weather." With their crisp harmonies laced with the blues, the five-minute song was a breath of fresh air during the overall stale performance by Rawls.

For his encore, Rawls performed the

'60s pop hit "Groovy People" while most of people in the capacity crowd at Meadow Brook leaped for their cars.

Rawls, who was born and raised in Chicago, first started singing in a gospel choir as a young boy. He has been performing for three decades.

If Rawls' performance was a disappointment to the Meadow Brook audience, Ramsey Lewis' opening set was some salvage toward the price of admission.

Pianist Lewis, along with a drummer and bass player, struggled with a poor sound system and a limited audience attention span but showed professional composure and even a sense of humor during the 45-minute set.

THE TALL, lanky Lewis displayed his exceptional ability on piano on Alex North's "Love Theme" from "Spartacus." And during the lengthy "The In Crowd," Lewis and band hummed it up and had the audience snapping fingers to the swinging beat.

Lewis led his band through an impromptu jazz stomp that featured fine

solo performances by each member, but toward the end of Lewis' daring bit of bravado on piano, the drummer and bass player had difficulty jumping back into the song.

During his career, which started in 1955 in Chicago, Lewis' music has been labeled everything from commercial funk to cool, cerebral jazz. Not concerned with how his music is labeled, Lewis puts his best effort into each tune he plays.

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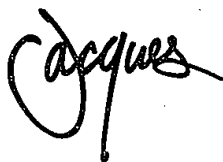
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