

Al Green evokes spirit from audience

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There's a certain sense of irony in going to a gambling outpost to see a preacher, but it all made perfect sense Thursday at the Chumash Casino Resort. As one of the great southern soul singers, the Rev. Al Green's performance transformed the concert hall into a bona fide sanctuary.

No, there would be no preaching — just a joyous musical journey led by a man steeped in holy energy. It was downright humbling to witness a musician so clearly feeling the grace of God in every note. Backed by his fiery 13-piece band, the good reverend solidified his sensual reputation with a passionate set of love-fueled classics.

Kicking off the evening in style was

local wunderkind Crosby Loggins, with his band the Leadbirds. Playing guitar on a stool amid his sextet, the singer carried the assertiveness of a blues titan. Closing their brief set with the infectious "Got Me Down," the Leadbirds flaunted their Americana sound with great gusto. Violinist Paul Cartwright drew an early roar from the crowd with a searing solo. After what had to be the shortest set break of all time, the reverend took the stage.

Al Green is one of those people who lights up an entire room. Looking dapper in a tux and grinning ear to ear, he launched into "I Can't Stop," the title track from his 2003 album. This would be one of only a couple songs from his modern era as he fed the

crowd's hunger for the oldies.

"Let's Get Married" opened the book from his quintessential 1975 "Al Green's Greatest Hits" compilation.

Picking a rose out of a bushel sitting on the piano, he ventured into the audience to make some lucky lady's day. He would immerse himself in his congregation throughout the night.

The evening's only true gospel moment was a sparkling rendition of "Amazing Grace," with the Rev. Green evoking tears of joy like a sermon might back at his home church in Memphis, Tenn. The two female backup singers (one of whom is his daughter) complemented everything perfectly, as did the rest of the band.

Guitarist Clarence Benjámín was a

standout, and so was the slamming three-piece horn section. Every member onstage seemed almost as enamored with their bandleader as the audience. Two male dancers rounded out the show nicely, busting out well-choreographed moves and a couple of costume changes.

The Rev. Green's constant humor and effortless delivery couldn't downplay his remarkable range, which only seems to get better over time. The one-two punch of his biggest hits, "Tired of Being Alone" and "Let's Stay Together," unleashed waves of boisterous rejoicing from the crowd.

Before ending the night with an extended version of "Love and Happiness," he pointed out the obvious: "I feel at home here at the Chumash Casino."

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IN CONCERT