

ROCKSUBCULTURE

John Mellencamp at Ironstone Amphitheatre | Murphys, California | 6/17/2017 (Concert Review + Photos)

JUNE 19, 2017 BY JASON DEBORD



"Now this next song, I must have been about 25 when I wrote this song... I don't even know why I play it anymore other than I know you guys want to hear it, right?" John Mellencamp on stage at Ironstone Amphitheatre at Ironstone Vineyards Saturday night, talking about writing his hit song from the 80s, "Jack and Diane". The venue was packed with fans turning out to see their blue collar hero from decades past, though it is a strange kind of incongruity with what inspires the fans still today seems to be more of a thorn in the side of the man who captured their imagination with these songs for which he does not seemingly share the same sentiment himself today. Regardless, he delivered an impressive set and supporting artists Carlene Carter and Emmylou Harris did the same.

What: Sad Clowns & Hillbillies Tour

Who: John Mellencamp

Supporting: Emmylou Harris

Supporting: Carlene Carter

Supporting: Lily & Madeleine

Venue: Ironstone Amphitheatre at Ironstone Vineyards

Where: Murphys, California

Promoter: Richter Entertainment Group

When: June 17, 2017

Seating: (house photographer)

Richter Entertainment Group's Summer Concert Season at Ironstone Amphitheatre in Murphys is happening now, taking place in June, July, August and September.

The full line-up boasts Toby Keith, Boston, Joan Jett & The Blackhearts, John Mellencamp, The Moody Blues, Jason Mraz, Lindsey Buckingham and Christine McVie, matchbox twenty, Counting Crows, Steve Miller Band, Peter Frampton, Willie Nelson, Kenny G, George Benson and others.

As I mention in each of my reviews with this series of shows, Ironstone Amphitheatre is one of my all-time favorite venues.

Richter Entertainment Group assembles an eclectic mix of musical artists, styles and genres every year, all benefiting from the state-of-the-art concert facility with top quality sound and lighting to placed each artist in the spotlight to showcase their music.

The amphitheatre features traditional assigned seating in the section directly in front of the stage, with a vast area behind that is designated general admission and allows patrons to bring their own lawn chairs and blankets with an opportunity to find the best spot from which to enjoy the show.

The greater setting of Ironstone Vineyards is stunning a beautiful – one of the rare concert venues where you can show up hours early and just take in the scenery, do some wine tasting, as well as have a stellar meal.

Learn all the details about this year's concert line-up and where to buy tickets on the official REG website at www.richtergroup.net.

- Fri 06/09/2017 – Toby Keith with Grass Roots Revival
- Sat 06/10/2017 – Boston with Joan Jett & The Blackhearts
- Sat 06/17/2017 – John Mellencamp with Emmylou Harris, Carlene Carter, Lily & Madeleine
- Sun 06/18/2017 – The Moody Blues
- Sun 06/25/2017 – Jason Mraz & His Superband
- Fri 07/21/2017 – Lindsey Buckingham and Christine McVie with The Wallflowers
- Mon 07/24/2017 – matchbox twenty and Counting Crows with Rivers & Rust
- Fri 08/11/2017 – Jake Owen with Drew Baldridge
- Sun 08/13/2017 – Steve Miller Band with Peter Frampton
- Fri 08/18/2017 – Willie Nelson & Family with Kacey Musgraves
- Sat 09/09/2017 – Kenny G and George Benson

This was the third show of the season. There were very long lines of fans eager to get in for hours leading up to doors opening.

Carlene Carter with Lily & Madeleine

Carlene Carter is a country singer songwriter from Nashville who has been on the scene since the 70s, releasing 12 studio albums to date.

Her earliest released solo recording, "Friendly Gates", was on her stepfather Johnny Cash's 1974 album *The Junkie and the Juicehead Minus Me*.

In addition to her solo career, in the late 80s she performed with her mom and her sisters as The Carter Sisters.

Her 1990 album *I Fell in Love* proved very successful on country album and singles charts.

She collaborated with John Mellencamp on his new album, *Sad Clows & Hillbillies*, with her vocals on five of his songs as well as songwriting credits on "Damascus Road" and "Indigo Sunset".

A bit into her set, she was joined onstage by Lily & Madeleine, a folk pop duo from Indianapolis who have released three studio albums since 2012, most recently *Keep It Together*, which came out last year.

They had humble beginnings, recording cover songs and uploading them to YouTube when they were in high school.

A big break was with John Mellencamp asking them to contribute vocals to his soundtrack for his musical, *Ghost Brothers of Darkland County*.

Below are some photos of Carlene Carter with Lily & Madeleine performing on stage (click any image to open a virtual lightroom with higher resolution versions of each photo):



Emmylou Harris

Emmylou Harris is an incredibly accomplished country and folk singer songwriter, who has won 13 Grammy Awards and she was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2008.

In addition to her work as a solo artist, she has collaborated with John Denver, Bob Dylan, Gram Parsons, Dolly Parton, Linda Sonstadt, Roy Orbison, Willie Nelson, Neil Young and many, many others.

Gliding Bird was her first solo album, released in 1969.

She obviously does her own headlining tours, so it is quite a bonus to have her perform on the same bill as John Mellencamp. The fans in the audience seemed quite moved by her performance.

Below are some photos of Emmylou Harris performing on stage (click any image to open a virtual lightroom with higher resolution versions of each photo):



John Mellencamp

- John Mellencamp (vocals, guitar)
- Mike Wanchic (guitar, backing vocals)
- Andy York (guitar, backing vocals)
- Miriam Sturm (violin)
- Dane Clark (drums, backing vocals)
- John Gunnell (bass)
- Troye Kinnett (keyboards, accordion, backing vocals)

John Mellencamp is one of the artists most associated with "Heartland Rock", which is infused with a more blue-collar perspective and carries with it an ideal that music can transcend mere entertainment and have some social impact and purpose as well.

Along with other artists such as Tom Petty, Bob Seger and particularly Bruce Springsteen, it really came into it's own and was more defined by this group by their works in the 80s. It also stood in contrast to music that was embracing the use of synthesizers and electric guitars and drum machines and such during that era.

Mellencamp has been active since the 70s, and he had a number of big hits that have endured the test of time, such as "Jack & Diane", "Hurts So Good", "Small Town", "Pink Houses", "Crumblin' Down", "Lonely Ol' Night", "R.O.C.K. in the U.S.A.", "Paper in Fire", and "Cherry Bomb".

Mellencamp is a Grammy Award winning artists and was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2008.

He performed under the stage names Johnny Cougar and John Cougar in the 70s and early 80s, as his management company felt "Mellencamp" was too hard to market, even though he objected to the stage name.

His 1980 album, *Nothin' Matters and What If It Did* had two Top 40 hits in "This Time" and "Ain't Even Done With the Night". Mellencamp did not like this pop style of record.

It was in 1982 that he found a different sort of success with his landmark album, *American Fool*, which featured some of the hits that helped to define his sound such as "Jack & Diane" and "Hurts So Good", the latter earning him a Grammy Award for Best Male Rock Vocal Performance.

With his newfound success, he was able to add "Mellencamp" to his name, releasing *Uh-Huh* in 1983 as John Cougar Mellencamp, which had hits in "Pink Houses", "Crumbly'n' Down" and "Authority Song".

Throughout the 80s, Mellencamp continued to build on his success and audience with more records.

By the time he released *Whatever We Wanted* in 1991, he finally became (simply) John Mellencamp, and continued to create Top 40 hits.

Mellencamp has been an incredibly prolific artist over the decades, constantly finding new things to say in unique and authentic songs.

His latest, *Sad Clowns & Hillbillies*, had its origins as a duets album with Carlene Carter, and came out earlier this year to critical acclaim.

With his appearance at Ironstone on Saturday night, things seemed a little different upon arrival but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Finally I figured out that all of the signage on the various tents set up around the venue were missing... so "Food", "Drinks", etc that have always been in place on the various tents spread along the far back of the venue were now gone. As were many of the American flags usually mounted on these small concession stands.

I asked about this, and I was told that "the artist" requested that all signs and flags be removed. Very odd, in my opinion. To be preoccupied with something so innocuous. Most of these tents for concessions are 100 yards and more from the stage (the venue holds upwards of 7500 patrons – it's massive and they are lined up along the far sides and back). They also represent many mom and pop entrepreneurs who are trying to create small businesses as well as support our "small town" music industry. So forcing down the signage actually hurts "the little guy" in this small town of Murphys, and made things confusing for patrons attending the concert to know where to go for different kinds of concessions that are offered at this venue.

In any event, this and a few other things made me curious about what John Mellencamp is like today, so after the show I came across [an interview by David Masciotra with Salon.com](#) that

was actually published on the same day as this concert, so you can't get more current than that.

It's a beautifully written piece, and it does a nice job providing a glimpse into Mellencamp's world today. He does come across in this feature as introspective but also a bit angry and combative, with the feature opening with Mellencamp talking about not getting along with other artists (getting *"into fights with other musicians"*).

" Mellencamp's cantankerous character has earned him a reputation. Once he admitted that he has two moods: "OK and pissed off."

Coupled with the anger referenced in the article is also bitterness, and a challenge in coming to terms with how he and his works will be regarded and remembered when he is gone:

" "I think we've gone through a cultural change," Mellencamp observed. "What I do, and especially guys and gals around my age — we like to think it has some importance, but it probably does not. Rock music and folk music no longer seem to have much value or influence. That's why I laugh when I hear musicians talk about playing for their legacy. What the fuck are you talking about? There's no legacy. None of us will be remembered. Maybe people will remember Frank Sinatra, Elvis, Chuck Berry, maybe even Dylan. That's about it."

Yet further into the interview...

" "I don't even think about it any longer," Mellencamp said. "Unless someone like you asks me a question, it doesn't even occur to me. It doesn't concern me how I'll be remembered, because I'll be dead."

Is he saying that because he believes it, or because it's what he wants to believe? The fact that this is a running theme in this particular interview would seem to suggest it weighs heavy on his mind.

But internal conflict permeates the discussion:

" "That's why in the '90s," Mellencamp continued, "I began working less. I found myself becoming the guy I always despised. I was competitive, and driven by the wrong ideas — 'Did we sell 30,000 tickets?' 'Why isn't my new single charting

higher?' — I had to break out of that mindset, even though it is a really American mindset."

The conversation also steers into politics, and I'm always a bit perplexed when artists make sweeping statements about people who support a platform that they disagree with, which in many cases accounts for half of their fan base.

Mellencamp goes even further with an assessment of people who enjoy the work upon which he built his career:

"When you start dealing with the general public, you really have to dumb it down," Mellencamp told me. "That's why my songs like 'Hurts So Good' were such big hits. There was nothing to think about."

Which circles back around to my quote at the top of this article; his preface to playing "Jack & Diane"... that he's playing it merely because people want to hear it. And then going back to this interview, that internal conflict between the man today and his younger self at different intervals in his career, particularly the earlier years:

"He starts to laugh. "Don't get me wrong, I was on the top of my game at the time."

But maybe Mellencamp is just one of those tragic figures that creates these great works and has the ability to perform live and inspire his fans, but sadly he cannot partake in the joy that he creates, or even recognize in his own works the joy found by others?

In any event, these rambling observations and my general state of wonderment about 'what makes John Mellencamp tick?' does not really pertain to the performance on Saturday night (apart from the removal of the small business signs and American flags). I just found myself curious about this artist today in contrast to his early music and how all of this intersects between himself, his music, and his fans.

He did put on a really impressive show at Ironstone and the fans enjoyed his music, old and new.

Set List:

- Lawless Times
- John Cockers

- Minutes to Memories
- Small Town
- Stones in My Passway (Robert Johnson cover)
- Pop Singer
- Check It Out
- Jack and Diane (solo acoustic)
- Grandview (with Carlene Carter)
- My Soul's Got Wings (with Carlene Carter & Emmylou Harris)
- Easy Target
- Overture
- Rain on the Scarecrow
- Paper in Fire
- Crumblin' Down
- Authority Song
- Pink Houses (with Carlene Carter)
- Cherry Bomb

Below are some photos of John Mellencamp performing on stage (click any image to open a virtual lightroom with higher resolution versions of each photo); apologies for the poor quality – I was set to shoot from behind the soundboard, which is quite far from the stage, and the lighting was very dim.







Jason DeBord

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