

Review: Iron man of Mayfest

by: MATT ELLIOTT World Scene Writer

Monday, May 21, 2007

5/21/2007 8:50:08 AM

Despite cancer's toll, Tisdale brings power to stage

Give Wayman Tisdale some credit: He's recovering from chemotherapy and needs to use crutches, but he still found strength to put on an hour-long Mayfest show Saturday.

Although he had to play while sitting, it wasn't as if he went in and out in 30 minutes. The jazz bassist from Tulsa joked and laughed with the crowd throughout the night, playing with an energy that hung in the air long after he hobbled off the stage to a standing ovation.

He then hobbled back onto the stage for an encore, and even stuck around to sign autographs later.

The crowd had mobbed the area of the stage off Third Street and Boston Avenue by 10 p.m. -- the time Tisdale was scheduled to perform.

Parents brought their kids. Folding chairs in the plaza were taken up, so many people had to stand out under the stars in the cool night. Others climbed onto the 10-foot ledge along the Crowne Plaza Tulsa's east wall, above some vendors, while Tisdale's white-suited bandmates set up.

About 15 minutes later, an announcer introduced Tisdale to the crowd's adulation. The man himself could be seen at the back of the open stage, rushing as quickly as he could carry his towering frame to a tall chair behind a microphone.

His band funk'd it up and Tisdale, clad in a white dress shirt, sweater vest, jeans and a cap pulled low, took his seat with help from a roadie. Someone else handed him a bass.

"How we doin'?" he asked the crowd, smiling widely. He fiddled with the knobs of his bass, then turned around and looked at his band.

At that signal, the band cut out -- and Tisdale played his first notes of the night, slapping out his quirky, warm bass style that makes his instrument of choice sound more like a guitar in his hands than its thicker cousin.

His Mayfest concert, for which Eldredge Jackson and Jeff Shadley opened, was the only show that the former NBA great didn't cancel after his February cancer diagnosis. A doctor discovered a tumor after Tisdale broke his right leg in February in a fall at his Los Angeles home.

Chemotherapy has left him weary, Tisdale has said, but that didn't show Saturday.

"Can we play some music for y'all tonight? Can we play all night long with y'all?" he said.

His mostly instrumental performance was culled from material from all of his seven albums, although his band hadn't played since January.

He wailed away at "Get Down on It" and other material from last year's "Way Up!," which hit No. 1 on Billboard's Top Contemporary Jazz list.

His six-piece band put on a heck of a show, improvising with the bassist's happy funk/jazz style.

It shone during an inventive medley around nursery rhymes and TV show theme songs including "Mary Had a Little Lamb," "Starlight, Star Bright" and the theme from "The Andy Griffith Show."

Tisdale, who worships the Gap Band, couldn't make it through the night without doing at least one song by Tulsa's funk gods, thumping out "I Don't Believe You Want to Get Up and Dance (Oops, Up Side Your Head)."

If that got the crowd dancing, his version of Smokey Robinson's "Cruisin' " brought Robinson's sweet soul harmonies to a new funky life that got it swaying.

The night took a tender turn when Tisdale played "Gabrielle," the song he wrote for his daughter on his first album, "Power Forward."

"I hope y'all can have us back next year," Tisdale said, at one point during the show. "We can call this thing 'Wayfest' if that's all right with y'all."