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BACKSTREET BOYS PACK NEW VENUE, THRILL FANS

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The Boys are back, and so are A-scale concerts at a smaller, theatrical setting, thanks to the grand re-opening Sunday night of the newly named **Roberts Orpheum** Theater and the sold-out Backstreet Boys concert.

Those with fond memories of the venue -- known for decades as the American Theatre -- couldn't have asked for a more exciting return than the full house for the Backstreet Boys.

But the screaming young fans who snapped up all tickets weeks before the show were likely oblivious to the venue's history and its significance to St. Louis. For them, it was all about Nick Carter, A.J. McLean, Brian Littrell, Kevin Richardson and Howie Dorough being back on the scene.

Backstreet Boys were for a time the biggest thing possible in music. That's no longer the case, but the group shouldn't be counted out. One of the first steps in Backstreet Boys' comeback attempt is its current theater tour, a testing of the waters to see whether the group still has it -- and how much. The answer is a good deal, apparently.

The Boys' live show had typically been overblown arena spectacles that pulled out all the stops. They were surrounded by so many trappings, it was impossible to determine who had real talent. But the guys are stripped of all that on this theater trek and are forced to rely on their natural selves in an up-close setting. They had to find fun elsewhere, such as when a couple of the guys ventured out into the crowd to interact with fans -- though the chunky Carter's attempt to climb atop a speaker tower failed when it was clear it wouldn't support his weight.

During the 90-minute-plus show, Backstreet Boys appeared perfectly in sync, perhaps too much so at first with their matching white jackets, fedoras and overly synchronized dance moves that remain so corny that husk practically sprouted from their shoes. And necessary evils such as "Shape of My Heart," "Larger Than Life," "Show Me the Meaning of Being Lonely" and "Quit Playing Games (With My Heart)" are the same as they ever were: They don't sound any better a scant few years since they were at the top of the charts.

But there were improvements. For the first time in a long time, it seemed as if the group paid attention to the live vocals, which were questionable before -- if, indeed they were even live. Littrell in particular came off the strongest.

Much of the new music previewed Sunday was loads better than their classic material, with an added rock splash to the group's pop sounds on songs such as "Climbing the Walls" (featuring Carter on acoustic guitar), "Weird World" and "Poster Girl." The latter is about an ultimate party girl, and during the song's intro, Carter was asked whether he knew any girls like that -- a knowing wink to Carter's ex, Paris Hilton. Only the new single "Incomplete" faltered among the material from the group's upcoming "Never Gone" CD, scheduled for June.

The group showed some real creativity in updating earlier songs such as "As Long as You Love Me" and "Everybody (Backstreet's Back)." The former incorporated the Spinners' "I'll Be Around" as a soulful backdrop. The latter used the Ying Yang Twins' rap hit "Wait (the Whisper Song)." It was a mess, but a truly inspired mess.

Littrell was the night's best performer overall, while Carter might've been the sloppiest. McLean, who announced his continued sobriety, was the best dancer. Richardson looked to be taking it all too seriously, and Dorrough remains undefined.

As for the venue, it was mostly all good, but not everything was in order. The risers on the floor seating area weren't installed as scheduled, which meant the rows weren't elevated, creating some troublesome sightlines. And the temperature seemed sauna-like for most of the concert. But the **Roberts Orpheum** really didn't need that to guarantee a hot night out.