

Lady Gaga brings spectacle, self-expression to Tahoe



Lady Gaga in one of her less elaborate outfits.
Photos/Kim Wyatt

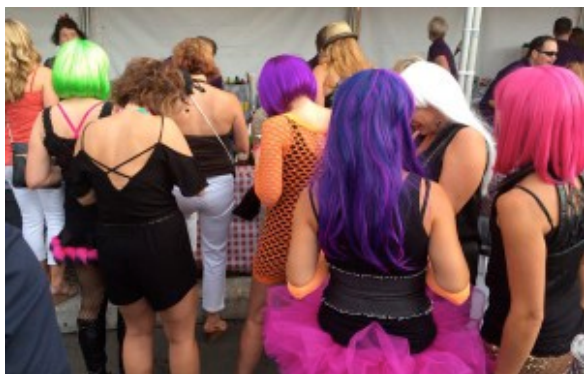
By Kim Wyatt

STATELINE – Entering the Lake Tahoe Outdoor Arena at Harveys on Aug. 2, I was greeted by statuesque geishas, wigs in every color of the rainbow, and a phalanx of tutus, tails and spiked brassieres—clearly this wasn't a Creedence concert. At Lady Gaga's Tahoe debut, a diverse gender-bending crowd posed and pranced for 3½ hours, the aisles between the rows acting as catwalks, with audacious self-expression at every turn.

"Who needs opening acts with a pre-concert show like this?" said my friend Jan.

Lady Gaga's "ArtRave: The Artpop Ball" is her latest tour for her third album "Artpop," released last year. Although most of

Gaga's set was from "ArtPop," songs from her previous releases like "Born This Way," added gravitas to the evening. Fourteen dancers added a charged, racy element, and her five-piece band provided solid musicianship – the sum was a visual and sound explosion.



Self-expression was the story of the night Aug. 2 at Harveys.

Was it art? Not sure. But it was a lot of fun.

Prior to the show, rumors circulated about Gaga's appearance poolside earlier in the day, ticket prices reaching hundreds of dollars and the enormous number of freight trucks that transport her stage. Some compared set lists, and even noted that opening band Babymetal had changed the order of their set – these were Gaga's hardcore fans, coined "Little Monsters," but there were plenty of others feeling the love.

Babymetal kicked off the show, priming the crowd. Although I didn't understand a word they were singing, the ponytailed Japanese girl group was adorably raucous while making a hash of their songs. With manga and kabuki stylings, the cheerful metal band was feast for the eyes if not the ears.

DJ Lady Starlight leveled out the vibe with a techno beat, which went on a little too long, long enough to make me feel as though I had two competing hearts, or had possibly turned into a puma. Wearing a loose Laura Ashley-style dress,

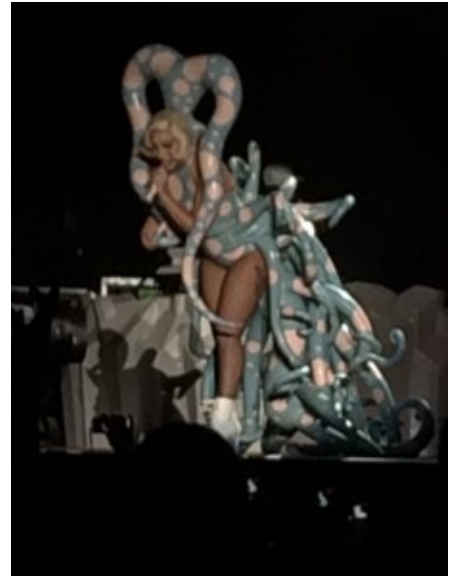
Starlight too defied expectations – you can be anything you want to be at a Lady Gaga concert, even a middle-aged lady in a grandma dress.

Finally, Lady Gaga took the stage in a gold-sequined butterfly leotard anchored by a huge Jeff Koons blue gazing ball on her chest, and held our attention for just more than 90 minutes. Seven costume changes and 20 songs later, the show ended abruptly with the lovely final track from ArtPop “Gypsy.”

In turns cool, frenetic or psychedelic, the cave-like set looked like the bar from Star Wars if it were made from a Frosty ice cream machine, just slightly hallucinatory, and Gaga occasionally played a piano tucked in what looked like a giant bed of crystals.

Costume changes set the tone for the songs to follow, with Gaga going from high fashion to Harajuku. Hardly anyone sat during the first third of the set. Songs mostly from “ArtPop,” and the Barbarella-esque swagger during “Venus” blew the roof off. Those dancing in the audience stopped to watch the spectacle of Gaga strapping a Gibson Flying V over her clamshell bra and little else. Here, her voice first rose above the spectacle, clear and strong and true. This was followed by “Partynauseous”– the back-up dancers in Dr. Seussian spaceship getups – and Gaga sauntering out in an enormous polka-dotted squid bustle to play a seahorse-shaped keytar. (Have I seen that before? No.)

Although an extremely polished and clearly expensive show – the lighting and video was fantastic – there was a disconnect after Gaga took the piano with the chanteusey “Dope,” leading into her hit “Born This Way.”



Lady Gaga did not disappoint with her multiple costume changes.

“Stay with me little monsters,” Gaga said, as if she knew.

Until then, the crowd was on its feet. The solemnity of Gaga’s speech about social justice turned into a request to help fund the Born This Way Foundation, “to foster a more accepting society, where differences are embraced and individuality is celebrated.” Many stopped to text donations, and then paused for Gaga’s extended piano play. The concert lost steam again after that. Soon after came, ironically, the most lackluster number of the evening, “Sexxx Dreams,” a rehash of tired sex tropes, in latex, no less.

The finale “Gypsy,” showcased Gaga’s vocals, piano, and songwriting skills. Although we had just witnessed a spectacle, here she stripped it down and her Little Monsters fist pumped until the end

Despite a few glitches, one thing was clear: People are desperate to be their true selves, and Gaga has created a family. There was a sincerity to this crowd that is sweet and surprising. They aren’t just dressing up; they are laying it all on the line. But here, everyone agrees you look fabulous.

In the end, Lady Gaga's legacy will be not only her songwriting and catchy tunes – it will be those who have found sanctuary in her words, and under her sequined wing. And about “ArtRave: The Artpop Ball” – is it an attempt to merge high and low, art and pop? Is the tour just an expensive rave? Or freedom of expression that's a bargain at any price?

Who cares? Let's dance!