

George Strait's joyous ACL Live show raises \$1.3 million for Bahamas hurricane relief

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By

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George Strait playing a venue that holds about 2,500 people? There must have been something unusual about Monday night's concert featuring the legendary Texas country singer, whose usual Austin gigs are sold-out affairs at the Erwin Center.

Indeed, this was a special case. Billed as the Abaco Relief Benefit Concert, the show raised \$1.3 million to help those on the Abaco Islands in the Bahamas in the wake of Hurricane Dorian, the August storm that was the worst natural disaster in that nation's history.

Major donors bought 10-seat round tables on the venue's floor, and more fans packed out the mezzanine and upper balcony on a night that no doubt will be seared in the memory of Strait fans fortunate enough to be there. Backed by his 11-piece Ace in the Hole Band, Strait plowed through a nearly two-hour set loaded with chart-topping hits and spiked with a few revelatory classics from bygone icons.

Though Strait went on a [high-profile farewell tour in 2014](#), he said at the time that he'd still play occasional shows for special occasions. [One was last year, when he revisited the Erwin Center](#) to help the University of Texas arena celebrate its 40th anniversary. Monday's concert came together

when Strait, who's visited the Bahamas many times, teamed with the Discovery Land Company Foundation and the company's soon-to-open Driftwood Golf & Ranch Club to raise money for hurricane victims.

When you have a catalog of Strait's caliber, picking the songs for a two-hour performance is no easy task. Monday's set list was fairly close to those for shows he played over the weekend in Fort Worth to help inaugurate that city's new Dickies Arena, from the opening "Deep in the Heart of Texas" instrumental followed by Rodney Crowell's "Stars on the Water" to the poignantly sentimental encore finale "The Cowboy Rides Away."

Strait dug into [his 2019 release "Honky Tonk Time Machine"](#) for four tracks, including the uptempo boot-scooter "Every Little Honky Tonk Bar" and the tender "Old Violin." And he reached back for many old favorites that got most of the crowd singing along, from his breakthrough hit "Amarillo By Morning" to the title track of his 1986 album "Ocean Front Property." The latter tune's title inspired the T-shirt Strait wore onstage with the phrase "Ocean Front Recovery"; the shirts were on sale in the lobby [and are also available online](#) for those not able to attend but want to support the ongoing hurricane relief efforts.

Most illuminating were the nods Strait made to some of his heroes. A [terrific version of Townes Van Zandt's "Pancho & Lefty,"](#) based on the chart-topping Willie Nelson & Merle Haggard arrangement, led into Haggard's reflective ballad "My Life's Been Grand." A little later, Strait pulled out the Waylon Jennings nugget "Waymore's Blues." The real firecracker came in the encore [with "You Wreck Me,"](#) a Tom Petty song he'd played at a Grammy MusiCares tribute a couple of years ago and has kept in the set ever since.

Careful to keep his eyes on the prize, Strait thanked everyone near the end of the set for contributing to the Abaco relief cause. He assured them that on this evening, "I'm just the entertainment. Y'all are the stars of the show tonight."

A half-hour acoustic opening set from Austin singer-songwriter Patty Griffin, accompanied by guitarist David Pulkingham and drummer/bassist Conrad Choucroun, was well-intentioned but not an ideal fit for a talkative crowd that was there mostly to party with George Strait. Still, Griffin was clearly appreciative of the chance to share a bill with a fellow artist she greatly admired. "If he only knew the miles I've driven singing along to his music, I think he'd probably be a little bit afraid of me," she joked.



George Strait performs with his Ace in the Hole Band during the Abaco Relief Benefit Concert at ACL Live on Monday, Nov. 25, 2019. [Contributed/Jill Trunnell]

George Strait set list:

1. Deep in the Heart of Texas (instrumental)
 2. Stars on the Water
 3. I Can Still Make Cheyenne
 4. I Saw God Today
 5. Here for a Good Time
 6. She'll Leave You With a Smile
 7. Check Yes or No
 8. Pancho & Lefty
 9. My Life's Been Grand
 10. Cold Beer Conversation
 11. Waymore's Blues
 12. Arkansas Dave
 13. Give It Away
 14. Every Little Honky Tonk Bar
 15. Ocean Front Property
 16. The Weight of the Badge
 - 17.Codigo
 18. Old Violin
 19. Amarillo By Morning
 20. The Chair
 21. The Fireman
 22. Run
 23. I'll Always Remember You
 24. Troubadour
 25. Unwound
- Encore**
26. All My Exes Live in Texas
 27. Heartland
 28. You Wreck Me
 29. The Cowboy Rides Away