

... and the party has now begun

Country legend relishes packed Devaney crowd

BY DAVID WILSON
Music Critic

On the night he was named the Country Music Association's Entertainer of the Year, Garth Brooks was in the middle of a stage in Lincoln doing what he does best: Touching his fans' hearts.

In the first of five sold-out performances at the Bob Devaney Sports Center Wednesday night, Brooks sprinted across the stage singing his hits until he was drenched in sweat and out of breath.

"The people always come first," Brooks said.

Brooks, who performed 21 songs in 2 hours and 20 minutes, announced he had won the award after returning to the stage for a second encore.

"If I knew we were going to win, I'd still have come here tonight," Brooks said.

From the moment he emerged from the bowels of his stage, which covered half the Devaney Center floor, Brooks attempted to reach out to every fan by waving, winking, blowing kisses and pointing.

And the crowd responded.

"It's our job to play the music," Brooks said at a press conference prior to Wednesday's show. "How wild it gets is all up to the crowd. If they want to go, we're ready."

The last time Brooks played in Lincoln, in August 1993, he proclaimed it was the "wildest time" he ever had. Before Wednesday's show, Brooks said he hoped to have that same night in Lincoln five times over again.

If the first night was any indication, Brooks will have his way.

He returned for two encores, adding five songs to his show — including his finale, Don McLean's "American Pie."

Brooks and his seven-piece band have been on a world tour since March 1996, but Brooks said he had yet to get tired of playing live shows.

"I'm probably happier now than I have ever been in my whole career," he said. "That actual two hours on stage cannot get here quick enough."

During "Friends In Low Places," Brooks encouraged the crowd to sing the "mysterious" third verse for a live album being recorded during the tour. He also said he would release another album, "Sevens."

Through all the hype, Brooks remains focused on the people who made him who he is today: his fans. Though he drew more than 600,000 fans at his August show in New York's Central Park, small-venue shows are still his favorite.

"This is our baby," Brooks said. "New York wasn't our show. Would I much rather you guys see this show than Central Park?"

"You betcha."



Thanks to Garth some lucky fans move to front

BY TED TAYLOR
Assignment Reporter

There were 96 extremely lucky fans at Garth Brooks' opening night performance Wednesday.

Lucky because they walked into the Bob Devaney Sports Center with tickets in the nosebleed section, but walked out after watching the show from the front row.

"This guy just came up to us and asked if we wanted to sit down front," said Kim Norrie, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln freshman advertising major.

"I was like, what the hell are you talking about? I thought he was a scalper," Norrie said. "This is a major rush."

The anonymous person wasn't a scalper, he was a member of Brooks' road crew. And he was just doing what the road crew and band members do before every Brooks concert — find the people with the worst seats and give them tickets to the best seats.

Nicole Baehr, a freshman at the University of Nebraska at Omaha said her surprising seat change turned a good night into a great night.

"It was going to be fun," she said moments before the show began. "Now it's going to be the best."

But those lucky enough to find themselves in the front weren't the only ones who had a shit-kickin'



good time at Brooks first Lincoln concert since 1993.

And when tank tops and sandals were as common as cowboy hats and boots, Brooks catered to everyone.

"It doesn't matter what walk of life you're from," Danny Brennenstuhl said. "The more people who like his music, the better."

But what exactly brought so many people together Wednesday night?

"It's just Garth," Brennenstuhl said. "He's a whole lot of country and a little bit rock, and that appeals to everyone."

Photos by
Matt Miller / DN