

Bright Eyes Play Intimate Rooftop Pool Concert Above the Lights of Las Vegas

Conor Oberst owns the stage at city's hottest new venue



Las Vegas' rock and roll scene is best known for residence shows from Santana, Elton John and other veteran acts playing for a largely tourist market. But a number of festivals and projects are giving Sin City a more current spin; earlier this year, Vegas' newest mega-property, the Cosmopolitan, signed a deal with promoter C3 (Lollapalooza, Austin City Limits) and established a concert schedule that included headliners like the Flaming Lips and Deadmou5. They also launched a free, ticketless residency program bringing bands like Foster the People and Young the Giant

into the sports book on the casino floor and created one of the coolest new venues in the country. Converting their rooftop pool into a mixed-use concert venue (swimming pools, cabanas, bars, overlooks and a concert stage), the Boulevard is fast becoming a desert oasis for rock. Intimate yet posh, it's the type of place the artists are psyched to play, and on Saturday night, indie rock stars Bright Eyes made the most of it.

In this strange and strangely neon setting, Kurt Vile took the stage with his decidedly laid-back underground rock that would've been in danger of being out of place had he not been so casually confident, evoking both Lou Reed and the more immediate desert environs.

Backstage after his set (and overlooking the Strip's big city lights from above), Vile told *Rolling Stone* he was looking forward to reenacting his own version of Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas* later on in the night. "Although, maybe the PG-13 version instead of the R rated one," he admitted, taking calculated drags from his Camel Light. When asked how touring with Bright Eyes has been treating him, Conor Oberst happened to walk by and chimed in, "It's been great." (By all accounts, the two bands have become BFFs this tour.)

On stage, the lo-fi extravaganza continued with Warpaint's reverb-drenched female harmonies on top of melodious distortion, before Bright Eyes took the stage intent on owning Vegas while simultaneously being weary of its trappings.

In introducing "No One Would Riot For Less," Oberst told the crowd that the song was about the end of the world – "Which," he joked, "I can't help but to think about every time I visit Vegas." That said, Oberst repeatedly gave it up for the unbelievable landscaping at the Cosmopolitan. "I like all the surrealist painters and I feel like if they were to design a city, it'd look like this."

In fact, as a venue the Boulevard Pool presented an interesting trade-off for Bright Eyes. On its minimal staging in the midst of lush palm trees and wading pools, the band wasn't able to make use of their light show or typical stage set. On the other hand, they had the million neon lights of Vegas to light their way.

Before launching into "We Are Nowhere and It's Now Here," Oberst told the audience, "This next one is for anyone who's maybe a little bit lost." After a dramatic pause, he added, "I was lost in this hotel. There are a lot of secret passageways and hidden paths. It was very difficult to find our way to the pool where the show was, but eventually we made it through the labyrinth... It's a beautiful setting."

As Bright Eyes have been doing all tour, they balanced the sensitive with the sensational, jamming out in every pocket they could find and toying with the dichotomy between acoustic ballads ("The Ladder Song") and all-out rockers ("Jeune Stars"). Oberst even granted an anniversary couple their request ("First Day of My Life,") although he tried to qualify it by saying that he's not even sure if he, personally, likes the song anymore. He then proceeded to put as much heart as vinegar into its bittersweet melody.

Oberst has always been a conflicted artist in many ways, struggling to contain a punk rock kid inside a broken boy shouldering the burden of woe. In Vegas, he let both demons out.