

Farm Aid 2021: Concert Review

Okee dokee folks...Last week I was fortunate to attend the 2021 edition of Farm Aid. For those of you who don't know about Farm Aid it's a fundraising and awareness raising concert/organization dedicated to helping family farmers and promoting good food.



Farm Aid was started by Willie Nelson in 1985 and was inspired by an off the cuff remark made by Bob Dylan at Live Aid that maybe some of the money raised could be used to help family farmers. Nelson inducted the help of Neil Young and John "Cougar" Mellencamp and they presented the first Farm Aid concert in September of 1985. That massive, all star line-up included Alabama, The Beach Boys, Bon Jovi, Jimmy Buffett, Glen Campbell, Johnny Cash, Charlie Daniels, John Denver, Bob Dylan, John Fogerty, Foreigner, Vince Gill, Merle Haggard, Sammy Hagar, Daryl Hall, Don Henley, Waylon Jennings, Billy Joel, Rickie Lee Jones, B.B. King, Carole King, Kris Kristofferson, Lorreta Lynn, John Mellencamp, Joni Mitchell, Willie Nelson and Family, Randy Newman, Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, Roy Orbison, Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers, Bonnie Raitt, Lou Reed, Kenny Rogers, Brian Setzer, Eddie VanHalen, Neil Young with The International Harvesters and still many more. I watched the entire thing live on MTV back when they still actually featured music.

Since its inception Farm Aid has raised many, many millions of dollars to help farmers and has presented 35 annual live festivals. Last year's event was virtual due to the pandemic. The show at Xfinity Center was back to a live, in person event. The concert sold out in just days. Unfortunately soon

after, Neil Young bowed out of the concert over Covid concerns. Still the main board members/performers: Nelson, Mellencamp, Dave Matthews and newest member, Margo Price remained part of the show as were a host of other performers-Tyler Childers, Nataniel Rateliff & the Night Sweats, Bettye LaVette, Jamey Johnson, Lukas Nelson & Promise of the Real, Allison Russell, Particle Kid, Ian Mellencamp, and the Wisdom Indian Dancers. Sturgill Simpson canceled a few days before the event due to laryngitis.

The show kicked off with a performance and blessing from the Native American group, Wisdom Indian Dancers. Organizer offspring performances by Ian Mellencamp and Particle Kid (Micah Nelson) followed. Nelson gave a nod to the absent Neil Young with a raw rendition of "After The Gold Rush". Johnson, Lukas Nelson w/POTR, Russell, LaVette, and Childers followed. Ratecliff's set included a rendition of The Band's "The Shape I'm In" that had Lukas Nelson joining in.

Between sets videos from farmers played to alert the audience to the plight of their way of life. There was an emphasis on Black, female, and Native American farmers as well as nutritional and sustainable ways of growing. A Native American, woman farmer in one video commented, "It doesn't matter who's to blame, it matters who's going to show up and fix it!"

The set of the day belonged to new Farm Aid board member, Margo Price. Price and her band, which includes her husband Jeremy Ivey, performed a very satisfying set which included another nod to Neil when she played "Homegrown" with a little help from Micah and Lukas Nelson. Dave Matthews and Tim Reynolds strummed and picked through energetic, acoustic renditions of Matthews music. "Today we will raise a little money and a little awareness for the people who grow our good food" exclaimed Matthews when he addressed the audience. John Mellencamp, puffing on a cigarette, took the stage next with a very stripped down band of accordion, guitar, and backing vocals. He spoke of how in 1985 he received a cold call from Nelson asking him to join in on the Farm Aid cause. While playing his signature, "Jack & Diane" he razzed the crowd for messing up the song despite having "40 years to learn it". Mellencamp's set included the poignant song "Rain on the Scarecrow" which was surely part of the reason he aligned himself with Farm Aid. Willie Nelson closed out the night with his family band that included his two sons, Micah and Lukas.

Farm Aid is about more than just the music. The music and performers attract the attention but there is so much more to a Farm Aid concert. There is the Homegrown Village. Here there are countless informational booths where you can learn about farms, farming techniques, food, alternative approaches to food production, and just about anything about food and farming you could imagine. You can talk one on one with local experts in the field. In addition there were panel discussions on many farming related issues. These discussions included performers Ratecliff, Price and Russell. Many of the food concessions were stocked from local and organic sources. The issues of Farm Aid and what they do does not just happen one day a year in September, it is a year round cause. The festival is just the tip of the iceberg; it just emphasizes the cause.

Unfortunately the most outspoken person at a Farm Aid concert, Neil Young, was not present. Young tends to drive the point home during the pre-show press conference and at many points during his set, sometimes to overkill. Unfortunately there was not a pre-show press conference this year. During the 2018 edition he constantly instructed the audience to shop at farmer's markets by calling out to the crowd, "What are you going to do when you pass a farmer's market?". "Stop in" is the response he looked for over and over.

As much as the between set videos were informative I wonder how much attention was paid to them? Were they mainly for the internet viewers or the in-person attendees? I did catch a lot of info from the video segments but I feel that more talk about the cause by performers on the big stage would have gotten the message across better and reminded folks what the event is really for.

Ever since the very first Farm Aid in '85 I have been interested in the cause. Attending the concert made me feel like a small a part of the solution. I can relay the points of the Farm Aid cause here and hopefully turn others onto the message and the music as well. Even small things like purchasing a t-shirt helps out. This can still be done online. Though the \$45 price tag for a shirt may seem hefty it is helping out the cause financially and with the message. Every little bit does help.

I spent my day at Farm Aid photographing the performances and Homegrown Village activities. You can view the full album

here: <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?vanity=motifri&set=a.4396235650455790>

Farm Aid is a year round campaign. If you want to learn more, donate, watch performance highlights, or just buy some of the great merch that they have available, then plow on over to: FarmAid.org

That's it for now, thanks for reading. www.JohnFuzek.com