

ORANGE COUNTY

Kahrs Puts Mettle to the Pedal During Joy Ride

POP MUSIC REVIEW

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SANTA ANA—The low-key atmosphere of Orange County's coffeehouses is at the opposite end of the spectrum from the high-energy ambience of the Crazy Horse Steak House, but Till Kahrs made the transition with ease Monday night.

In his 70-minute, 15-song set, the local cafe favorite proved that his music loses none of its appeal when plugged into a full six-piece country band.

Starting with his good-natured honky-tonk anthem "Heartache Band-Aid," Kahrs and his Heartache Band ran through most of the

material on his new CD, "Playing for Keeps." The set was Kahrs' last stand locally before he tours Europe, where the CD's title track is a radio hit. (His European popularity brings Kahrs' life full circle: Although he grew up in Placentia, he was born in Germany.)

He was a little stiff during his first couple of numbers but soon warmed to the supportive crowd.

"Yeah! The Crazy Horse! This is cool," he said after the second song, as though it suddenly had hit him that he was standing on a stage regularly occupied by such legends as Waylon Jennings, Johnny Cash and Ray Price.

He settled down, told a few jokes and even got the crowd to help him sing "Happy Birthday" to his mother, who was in the audience. Throughout the evening, he connected to his fans with his easygoing charm. As much fun to watch

as he was to listen to, he moved around the stage punctuating his music with energy that seemed to flow naturally.

His greatest asset was his winning baritone, which added expressive dimension to his songs. During "Kickin' Back," which is about withdrawing from the stressful 9-to-5 working life, he emphasized the line "the doctor told me to slow down/or I might be working underground" by descending to the bottom of his register. On "Rekindle the Flame," an infectious romantic ballad, he dueted with keyboard player Tricia Flannick, and their harmonies soared through the refrain.

As a songwriter, Kahrs is a master of hooks; his best numbers, such as "Rekindle the Flame," "Playin' for Keeps" and "The Joke's on Me," are peppered with catchy

phrases.

His band allowed his voice and lyrics to dominate. Lead guitarist Robert Dahms played with taste and restraint while steel guitarist/dobro player John Calazavara lent a gentle flavor to the light country tunes.

The set included one of Flannick's original songs, "If This Picture Could Talk," and a killer version of the Travis Tritt ballad "Anymore." There was a nice balance between ballads, like the sentimental story song "Billy and the Bible," and such humorous numbers as "Just Lookin'," which makes fun of people who can't stand to see a friend over 30 stay unmarried.

The songs might have been better sequenced, though. His strongest songs came early in the set, making the second half something of a letdown.



KEVIN P. CASEY / Los Angeles Times

Till Kahrs had an energy and a charm that flowed naturally.