



# Strait

## Music

By ALYSON HURT  
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Accept no imitations: George Strait is *the* king of country music.

Strait kicked off the second George Strait Country Music Festival in style Saturday, heading up a star-studded roster of performers, including Tim McGraw, the Dixie Chicks, Kenny Chesney and JoDee Messina.

Austin-based Asleep at the Wheel got things rolling at 1 p.m., delivering a half-hour performance that included a mix of classic songs and trademark hits.

The band's efforts showed some threads, though, with its rendition of "Big Ball's in Cowtown," a number it performed in 1995 with Strait on his *Strait out of the Box* collection. Asleep at the Wheel's live version of the song paled in comparison to the punch and polish of the album version — or Strait's own rendition of it later that night.

Relative newcomer Mark Wills came onstage at 2 p.m. to the sounds of his first hit, "Jacob's Ladder." He followed it up with another hit, "Places I've Never Been," and new song "Don't Think I Won't" — all the while waving to fans in the crowd who scurried up the aisles to take pictures and try to catch Wills' attention.

Wills' smiling and waving to the audience, while refreshing, really distracted from the tragic heartbreak of his latest hit, "Wish You Were Here," a song about a couple broken apart when one of them dies in a plane crash.

Messina kicked off a high-energy, 40-minute performance soon afterwards. With her blue crop top, tight black pants and constant bouncing across the stage, she came across as much an aerobics instructor as an energetic stage presence.

One of her most memorable numbers was a brassy Caribbean-style medley of "Turn the Beat Around and the opening saxophone notes of Paul Simon's "You Can Call Me Al." The latter number was fun to watch, especially with Messina's boisterous energy in dashing to and fro across the stage, but the background vocals lacked the vigor of the original on the chorus of "Turn the Beat Around."

Kenny Chesney's show was a bit more uneven.

He opened up the show with the only-in-country-music song "She Thinks My Tractor's Sexy," a song featured on his new album, followed by hits "Fall in Love" and "Me and You." He followed it up with another new song called "Life is Good," which featured some fairly silly lyrics like "Love is good/The grass is green/The good Lord's smilin' over you and me." Huh?

He made a fast recovery, though, with his impassioned performance of "When I Close My Eyes" — his first No. 1 song — and with his tribute to country group Alabama and singer George Jones with "Dixieland Delight" and the extra-twangy "The Race is On."

As the roadies prepared the stage for the next act, the hot pink feather boas tied to the microphone stands left little doubt that the Dixie Chicks were up next.

The three gals from Dallas, Texas — lead singer Natalie Maines, banjo picker Emily Erwin and fiddler Martie Seidel — came onstage singing "The Heartache's on Me" wearing their trademarked decidedly anti-Nashville duds. Their start was shaky, with Erwin and Seidel's harmonies warbling over Maines' lead vocals and Seidel's fiddle sounding just slightly out of tune.

Everything was running beautifully by the third song, though, when all the sound problems had been balanced out by technicians. Or maybe Maines' bubbly exuberance somehow made up for everything.

Maines hopped, bopped and headbanged around the stage throughout the bouncier numbers of the act. And she showed she could downshift from frantic energy to tragic longing in a heartbeat, going between the hyperactive "Let 'er Rip" to the sorrowful "If I Could Hold You Now" without batting an eye.

Vocal talents aside, though, the Chicks' most impressive performance was on the instrumental "Roanoake."

Sisters Seidel and Erwin ripped through the fiddle- and banjo-heavy "duet," electrifying the stage and crowd.

Maines' running commentary carried the

group through its set. Talking about Strait and McGraw, she said, "If y'all think their music's good ... Let me tell you, the best part's when they're walkin' away from you. It's true."

McGraw himself came onstage next, and fans got to test Maines' assertion, cheering even when McGraw untucked his shirt.

His set was one of the best of the night, capably mixing familiar fan-favorite songs with new releases. He led the crowd in singing the choruses to both "Where the Green Grass Grows" and "Just to See Her Smile," then turning the lights and the microphones toward the audience during the line in "Everywhere" where Arizona is mentioned.

McGraw drove fans into a frenzy during his encore, when he came onstage with wife Faith Hill to sing "It's Your Love." He followed that one up with closer "I Like It, I Love It" — a song about being "whipped" in a relationship — and pulled Dixie Chicks Seidel and Erwin, Chesney, Hill and daughter Gracie onstage.

And then there was Strait.

There's a quiet class, an unchanging grace, that sets Strait apart from most modern country acts.

He's not a showman — you won't see him bounding across the stage like Garth Brooks. But Strait *is* a musician, and his uncanny ability to infuse heartbreak, good-natured sensibilities and cowboy lore into his music is what keeps people coming back to hear his music.

Strait's not one of the "new" cowboys who wrangle fans and guitars instead of horses and cattle. He's the real thing.

Playing a full 31-song set, Strait alternated between familiar favorites and new songs — and even stuck in the occasional tune from the '50s and '60s.

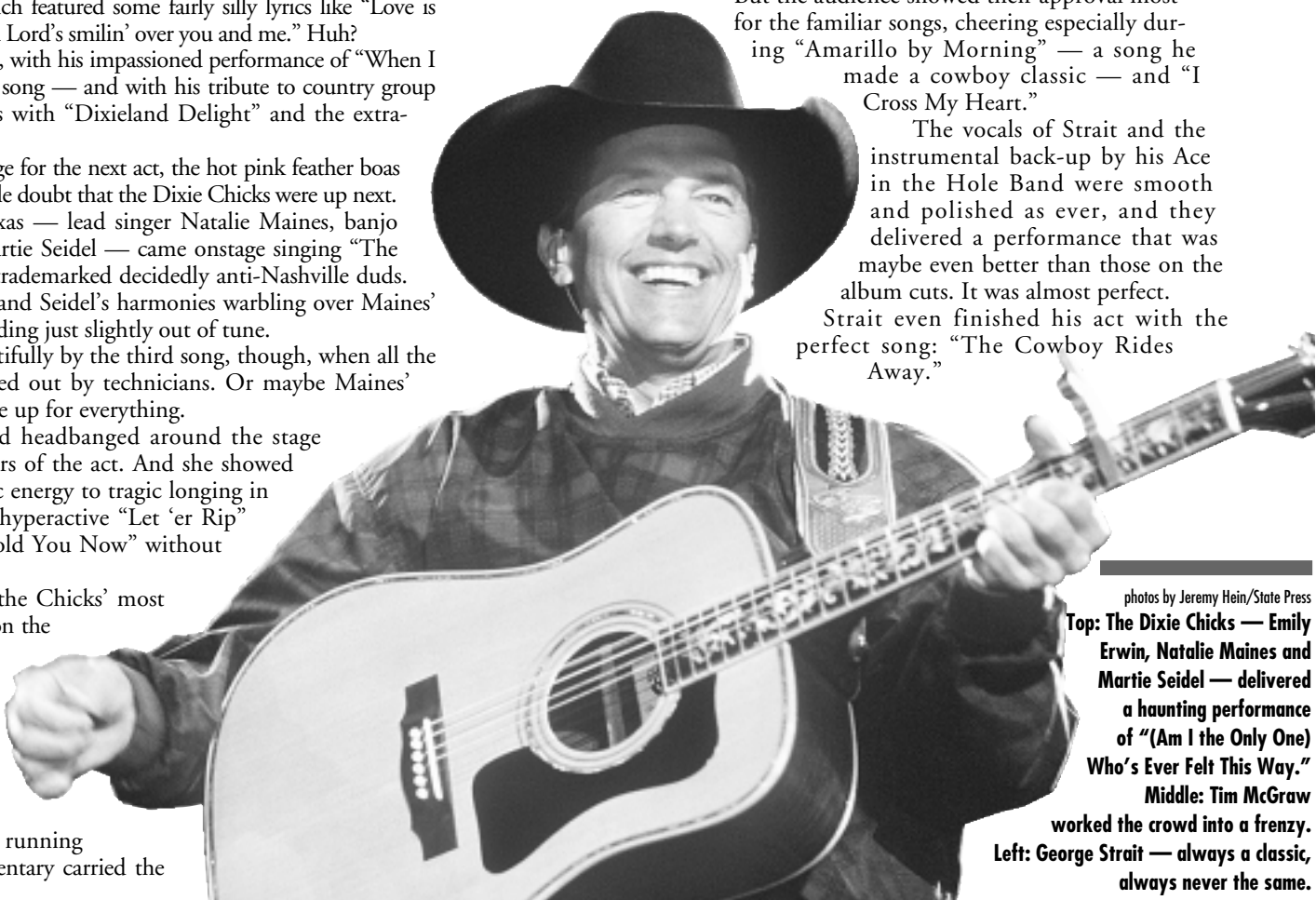
He opened up with the cheerful "Blue Clear Sky," about falling in love when you least expected it, then followed it with the childhood-sweetheart song "Check Yes or No" and the marital heartbreak of "When Did You Stop Loving Me." Then he sang about country music with "Heartland" and closed his eyes as he crooned "Carried Away."

Strait has a way with music that makes even the old songs sound new. And fans still cheered as he sang the 1960s Merle Haggard song "Mamma's Right" and classics like "There Stands the Glass" and "Milk Cow Blues."

But the audience showed their approval most for the familiar songs, cheering especially during "Amarillo by Morning" — a song he made a cowboy classic — and "I Cross My Heart."

The vocals of Strait and the instrumental back-up by his Ace in the Hole Band were smooth and polished as ever, and they delivered a performance that was maybe even better than those on the album cuts. It was almost perfect.

Strait even finished his act with the perfect song: "The Cowboy Rides Away."



photos by Jeremy Hein/State Press

**Top: The Dixie Chicks — Emily Erwin, Natalie Maines and Martie Seidel — delivered a haunting performance of "(Am I the Only One) Who's Ever Felt This Way."**

**Middle: Tim McGraw**

**worked the crowd into a frenzy.**

**Left: George Strait — always a classic, always never the same.**

**George Strait Country Music Festival**  
☆☆☆☆

(of 5)  
featured George Strait, Tim McGraw, the Dixie Chicks, Kenny Chesney, JoDee Messina, Mark Wills and Asleep at the Wheel. held March 6 at Sun Devil Stadium.