

Napa Valley Register

Musicians honor firefighters, first responders at Wine Country Strong concert

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The Los Angeles-based band Ozomatli headlined Sunday's main concert at the Lincoln Theater in Yountville during Wine Country Strong, a musical event and chef's picnic organized by Festival Napa Valley in tribute to first responders who protected Napa County during the October wildfires.

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YOUNTVILLE — The Napa Valley is nearing one month since wildfires destroyed hundreds of homes and killed more than 40 people in the North Bay. But on Sunday, residents' feelings of thanks to those who protected them appeared as potent as ever – and a team of musicians helped give voice to that gratitude.

Hundreds packed Yountville's Lincoln Theater for Wine Country Strong, the concert and picnic staged by Festival Napa Valley to honor firefighters and first responders who joined the battle against three major wildfires that broke out Oct. 8.

“It started taking shape when the fires were still burning,” said Sonia Tolbert, chief operating officer of Festival Napa Valley, the annual summertime series of Upvalley concerts, banquets and winery events. “As a board, we felt strongly that we needed to do something for the community. We decided on having an event to let people to connect around music, and to thank the first responders who saved so many lives.”

Working with the vintner Jean-Charles Boisset, Festival Napa Valley assembled a slate of musicians to appear at Wine Country Strong, as well as a team of chefs and restaurants for an after-concert picnic outside the theater. While both events were free, organizers took donations for the Napa Valley Community Foundation’s Disaster Relief Fund and the Sonoma County Community Foundation Resilience Fund, as well as a drive by Go Fund a Hero to support firefighters who lost their homes to the North Bay disaster.

For their concert headliner, organizers placed a call to Los Angeles, the home city of Ozomatli – a Latin-rock-hop fusion band familiar to locals who have attended the BottleRock festival and other Napa Valley concerts.

“When they reached out to us, we were glad to be available, to be a part of it,” said guitarist-vocalist Raul Pacheco of Ozomatli, which performed on the Lincoln Theater’s main stage on a bill with the Silverado Pickups and Vintage High School’s a cappella ensemble. “This is an event where you hope to thank as many people as possible. These first responders, we know how important they are to all the people up here,” he said before the performance.

The thumping backbeats, crunching chords and constant cheering produced an atmosphere of ease and festiveness that gave little clue to the anxiety that had suffused the Lincoln Theater’s surroundings just weeks earlier, when the Nuns Fire approached Yountville from the west and the Veterans Home of California moved more than 100 infirm residents off the campus, out of Napa County and away from the choking smoke.

Ozomatli's six members urged their audience into rhythmic clapping, but it may have been the Napa Valley-based members of the Silverado Pickups who took their message, their songs, most forcefully into spectators' hearts.

"This is my community, and I am indebted to our first responders for saving my community," keyboardist Paul Hoffman said in one of the band's several paeans to several public safety workers in the audience.

With that, Hoffman and his bandmates launched into a new twist on a rock classic by Lynyrd Skynyrd, transplanted from north Florida to the wine country: