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Loads and heaps, gobs and oodles of love

By Victoria Looseleaf, Special to The Times
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Luther not only lives, he croons, grooves and shakes major booty. But most of all, he loves, loves, loves. And did we say he's possessed with rockin' retro fashion cred? This was the scene at the Wilshire Theatre on Saturday night when a slew of terrific singers, dancers and musicians got together for "Here and Now: The Legacy of Luther Vandross."

A tribute to the late Grammy-winning singer-songwriter, the two-plus hour evening was, in effect, a huge love-in. Leading the festivities in heavy Luther mode was vocalist Terry Steele, former frontman for jazz band Hiroshima and co-writer of one of Vandross' biggest hits, "Here and Now."

Backed by vocalists DeVere Duckette, Melinda Jameison and Hiroshima's Kimaya Seward, Steele, with his mellow, heart-soaring voice, tossed off a cavalcade of Vandross' top tunes, including "So Amazing," "Never Too Much" and "Power of Love." Under the musical direction of Monty Seward and Cornelius Mims, not one but two bands cooked, helping bring the wildly popular make-out songs home.

Adding icing to this sweet cake was a quintet of luscious dancers from locally based JazzAntiqua, whose artistic director, Pat Taylor, provided sex, soul and style to choreography that not only dazzled but also embodied the music with primal ooze.

To the sounds of "Any Love," the male duo Alvon Reed and Jeremiah Tatum got down with undulating torsos and muscleman posturing, while Tatum and Collette Williams burned and slithered to "Superstar," a 1970s hit first recorded by the Carpenters. Tatum's methedrine-like turns melted into high-kicking lunges, his steroidal jumps and outstretched arms a picture of grace.

Whether hip-swiveling, faux-jitterbugging or landing in awesome split jumps, these movers and shakers, including Keisha Clark-Booth and Nicole LaCour, added another dimension to the Vandross legend. Particularly stunning was the glittery finale, "Shine," with singers and dancers all in blinding whites, including wigs, miniskirts, go-go boots and more lounge attire.

Working the room, Steele also poured his heart out to a long-married couple he plucked from the audience with an up-close-and-personal rendition of "Here and Now."

With so much romance -- or schmaltz, depending on how one feels about "The Impossible Dream," a number Steele stretched to breaking -- the treacle factor could have been seismic. To the contrary: This ready-for-Vegas show not only brings Luther back to life but also offers unabashed love, which is something we can all use these days.

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