

Concert preview: Neil Diamond percussionist King Errisson 'just having a good time'

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Concert preview » Ahead of gig in Salt Lake, percussionist says fans can expect to get all the feels.

Neil Diamond just rolled out his 50 Year Anniversary World Tour 2017.

King Errisson has been in Diamond's band for 40 of those, so the percussionist knows a little bit about the Rock and Roll Hall of Famer, Grammy winner and Kennedy Center honoree responsible for such hits as "Sweet Caroline," "America" and "Cherry, Cherry."

What most stands out to him, though, is the near-spiritual way fans react to Diamond at shows, and he expects more of the same this Sunday at Salt Lake City's Vivint Smart Home Arena.

"I look at him as a messiah, and I notice the way the audience cries. I think they're seeing the same thing that I'm feeling — this guy has a message. He makes people feel, he makes people think. He writes such meaningful material. I can imagine people hearing him sing 'I Am ... I Said' or 'Sweet Caroline' and putting themselves into his pocket," Errisson said in a phone interview. "They keep coming back, and now they're bringing their grandkids and great-grandkids. And the same folks, 70, 80, 90 years old, are filling arenas coming to see Neil. There has to be a message that he's delivering that makes these people keep coming back for more."

Errisson certainly felt compelled to return to the fold after what he believed would be a one-off recording session.

The Bahamian-born percussionist was working in Los Angeles, playing on "90 or 95 percent of the Motown sessions" after the label moved its operations to California. Diamond was looking for someone unique to contribute to the 1972 track "Soolaiman," and session arranger Ben Barrett recommended Errisson.

"I did all the percussion for that piece of music, and I guess Neil took a liking to me," Errisson recalled.

Diamond's then-drummer and bandleader, Dennis St. John (who died of cancer in 2012), suggested Errisson be added as a conga player for upcoming shows, including the famed August 24, 1972, performance at L.A.'s Greek Theatre that would yield the "Hot August Night" live double-album. Errisson declined, saying he was booked.

Several years went by, with Errisson continuing to do studio work for the likes of Marvin Gaye, Diana Ross and the Jackson 5, as well as recording albums under his name and with other projects such as the Incredible Bongo Band.

But when Diamond reached out once more, Errisson knew better than to turn him down a second time.

"When they came to me again, I said, 'I'm not missing this chance!' I always liked Neil from when I was a youngster growing up in Nassau. His music was big-time over there," he said. "So, given that second chance, I took it. And he's very kind, loyal and appreciative of his men. And there was nothing better to do in this country or musically than to be with Neil Diamond! He wrote the best music there is, and there's always something new and challenging to do, so I always liked that."

Errisson "started playing cans and buckets and cardboard boxes and bottles and whatever I could beat on at my father's grocery store when I was 5," but wanted to be an actor rather than a musician.

He came to the U.S. to pursue his dream, but became disillusioned almost as soon as he landed in Florida.

"When I was 22 years old, I was in Miami Beach and I went into a restaurant to get something to eat, because I'm fresh from the Bahamas, and no holds barred where I was growing up. ... So I walk into the restaurant and I ask for a hamburger and a Coca-Cola. And back in those days, I had a very heavy accent, I hadn't really mastered the English language that well yet, and when I asked for a burger and a Coca-Cola, the server says, 'We don't serve n---ers here.' And I says, 'I didn't ask for a n---er, I asked for a hamburger and a Coca-Cola,'" he recalled. "So needless to say, they called the manager, the manager came and talked to me, and the manager says, 'Yeah, give him what he wants, but you can't eat it in here.' I said, 'I don't care where I eat it, I just want some food!'"

Errisson went back to the Bahamas, where, ironically, he landed his first acting gig when Sean Connery walked into the Conch Shell club where he was playing and hand-picked him for a scene in the James Bond film "Thunderball."

He wound up moving to L.A. to try acting again and earned parts (including on the Abe Vigoda TV series "Fish"), only to have too many producers inevitably ask him, "What am I gonna do about my accent?"

His fallback option - his music - eventually persuaded him not to put up with such scenarios anymore.

"I couldn't make it in Hollywood as an actor 'cause I was too good a drummer to take foolishness from anybody," Errisson noted. "I don't know that it was something I really wanted to do. It's just something that took control over me after a while."

'Thunderball' - https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=35&v=vqTHZhNqOAc