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Bonnaroo: Team #Cocoroo Celebrates Conan O'Brien

By BEN SISARIO

Ben Sisario Conan O'Brien at Bonnaroo

MANCHESTER, Tenn. — Conan O'Brien was swarmed with love on Friday afternoon at Bonnaroo, where he performed as part of his “Legally Prohibited From Being Funny on Television” tour.

His fans had started lining up outside the Comedy Tent at 5 a.m., and they hooted with joy when he took the stage eight hours later. They greeted Andy Richter like a long-lost Hacky Sack buddy and dutifully booed at the mention of NBC, which, of course, had booted Mr. O'Brien from “The Tonight Show” in January. The fans exploded at the arrival of the big lever that cued ridiculous “Walker, Texas Ranger” clips, and they laughed knowingly when Mr. O'Brien explained that, for legal reasons (hi, NBC), this device would not be called the “Walker, Texas Ranger” Lever, but rather the Chuck Norris Rural Policeman Handle.

It was a crowd tailor made for Mr. O'Brien, and he knew it. These were the same Web-as-second-nature fans who expressed their “Team Coco” spirit on Facebook and Twitter during the Leno-NBC affair. They might also have been the ones who, as much as they love Mr. O'Brien, contributed to his 49 percent ratings slide by watching clips online and on their TiVos instead of the old-fashioned way.

In some ways this is a big audience: there are at least 75,000 people at Bonnaroo, and the smell of sweat and tanning lotion was overwhelming in the Comedy Tent. “In six months I went from hosting ‘The Tonight Show’ to performing at a refugee camp,” Mr. O'Brien said near the beginning of his 90-minute show.

But like the Bonnaroo audience itself, the Team Coco crowd is still marginal. (Or, to put a nicer name on it, “alternative.”) These are the fans who make bands into “under the radar” Internet phenomena, who gather by tens of thousands at festivals that don't enjoy Bonnaroo's national media attention. (Heard of Camp Bisco? **The Gathering of the Vibes**? They're huge.) But they don't make Lady Gagas or Susan Boyles or Taylor Swifts, and their attention doesn't tip the ratings scales for the big television networks. Bonnaroo represents one of the larger swatches of a fragmented pop-music audience, and in his fall from network television — in November he starts a show on the cable channel TBS — Mr. O'Brien fell right into it.

As he had at other shows on his tour, Mr. O'Brien donned a Nashville-glam pink jacket and a paisley-covered jumpsuit he said had been worn by Eddie Murphy in his “Raw” era, and he played self-deprecatingly rewritten versions of songs like “On the Road Again.” And in the encore, in a tribute to the Bonnaroo vibe, he played a reverential cover of the Band's song “The Weight,” and took a stride out into the crowd to meet his fans, who had been directed by signs outside to use the hash tag #Cocoroo if writing about the show on Twitter.

When he got back up onstage and took his final bow, somebody threw a little plastic tube, and he picked it up: “Sunscreen!” he said, smiling gratefully.

An earlier version of this blog post misstated how long some fans were waiting for Conan O'Brien's appearance. It was eight hours, not six.