

Leslie Odom Jr. blends jazz, R&B, and Broadway with The Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom



Leslie Odom Jr. performs onstage during the 2024 TIME100 Summit at Jazz at Lincoln Center on April 24, 2024 in New York City. (Photo by Jemal Countess/Getty Images for TIME) Getty Images for TIME

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CUYAHOGA FALLS, Ohio — When Leslie Odom Jr. emerged at Blossom Music Center midway through “Fly Me To The Moon,” which he had started offstage, the ensuing medley immediately set the tone for the evening. Preferring to let his vocals do all the talking, on Sunday, July 21, the singer’s

concert with The Cleveland Orchestra was two almost-nonstop hours of musical delight.

Odom may be best-known for his Broadway pursuits, particularly for originating the role of Aaron Burr in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s smash-hit *Hamilton*. But he’s a true, multi-hyphenated artist who has made forays into Hollywood, television, and solo recordings. His Blossom setlist attested to his versatility, bringing together arrangements of jazz standards, pop hits, and his original material.

Backed by his band members on piano, drums, bass, and guitar, Odom easily merged the intimate feeling of the jazz combo with the grandeur of The Cleveland Orchestra. His smooth, velvety voice is fit for a crooner, as he showed early on in a multilingual version of Nat King Cole’s “L-O-V-E.” Later, Cole’s “Unforgettable” lived up to its name, while “Smile” found Odom truly in his element.

But Odom’s voice is no one-trick pony. All night, he easily moved between stripped-back tunes like Eddie Jefferson’s “Moody’s Mood For Love” and gigantic arrangements like The Smashing Pumpkins’ “Tonight, Tonight.”

Conductor Edwin Outwater calmly juggled all these elements, keeping his movements small and his focus on coordination. While the Orchestra mostly provided a lush

accompaniment to those at the front of the stage, a few welcome solo moments emerged, including the trumpet spotlight in George Michael's "Jesus to a Child."

Broadway may not have played a huge role in the evening's performance, but never fear, *Hamilton* fans — Odom did perform a thrilling, brass-heavy rendition of one of his most popular songs, "Wait For It." And the audience became ecstatic when he surprised them with an abbreviated version of the show's opener as his first encore.

Odom also paid homage to another defining role, his portrayal of "King of Soul" Sam Cooke in the 2020 film *One Night in Miami...* His stirring rendition of Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come" allowed him to flex his belting chops.

But the greatest audience reaction came after intermission when Odom performed his original material, mostly from his 2023 album *When a Crooner Dies*. Before that, the singer hadn't addressed the audience much, only playfully ribbing some latecomers and briefly musing about fame. But now he spoke earnestly about the inspirations behind his latest songs, including parenthood, loving one's life partner, and grappling with self-doubt.

"Loved" and "Holding On To Us" were equally heartfelt and moving, while the comforting "Foggy" (from his 2019 album *Mr*) created a perfect balance between singer and instrumentalists. "The Morning," gave the orchestra a bit more to do, including a lovely electric guitar solo from Steven Walker. Here and throughout the night, Walker served as Odom's closest partner, providing captivating solos while also coordinating timing among the rest of the band.

Odom's charming sincerity towards his originals lingered throughout the rest of his set. As he bid the audience goodbye with his final encore, Sam Cooke's "I Wish You Love," you could tell that he meant every word.

Stephanie Manning trained as a bassoonist before becoming a correspondent for [ClevelandClassical.com](https://www.clevelandclassical.com). As a freelancer, her writing has also appeared in The Montreal Gazette, CBC Montreal, and Early Music America.