



McCartney Stage Show is Pleasant Surprise

Saturday, October 01, 2005

By Roger Friedman

[Paul McCartney](#)

The first of **Paul McCartney's** four shows at Madison Square Garden turned out to be an unexpected hit, and one of the best solo shows of his career.

It was unexpected because, thanks to McCartney's publicist, it was a hard show to get into. Special VIP forms offered a chance to buy \$300 tickets. Hello! Concentrated foraging on eBay finally produced excellent seats at less than half that price. And there seem to be many more for each show.

Ticket dilemma aside, another McCartney show reeked of ambivalence. Even though his new album is excellent, would McCartney live be anything more than a way to top previous fireworks displays in "Live and Let Die"? You see what I mean.

So what a surprise when McCartney's show quickly became an interesting mix of intimate actual solo performances by the forever-**Beatle** and robust rock and roll turns of some of his best known work. He also introduced several songs he'd never performed before in concert. (If he has, my apologies to the die-hard fans.) But it was a pleasure to hear "Too Many People" from Ram, "I'll Get You" from The Beatles' Second Album, "Til There Was You" from With the Beatles and "I've Got a Feeling" from Let it Be." He even smartly rescued the group's earliest recording, "In Spite of All the Danger." Still no sign of "Another Day," his mini-soap opera masterpiece, but the others made up for it.

After playing an unnecessary promotional film (it seemed like something you'd find at a corporate dinner), McCartney, unbelievably 63 years old, took the stage with his band and rocked through "Flaming Pie," "Jet," "Drive My Car," and a couple more standards with aplomb. Right away though it was easy to see this would be different than the Rolling Stones' show earlier this month. McCartney's show was stage directed, organized, really, and thought through. It wasn't just, please help us pay for help in Mustique. There was something else at work here.

For a good chunk of this show, McCartney either sits at the piano by himself or strums a guitar. The result was that over-played anthems that in the past have felt forced or turgid—"Maybe I'm Amazed," "Let it Be," "Eleanor Rigby"—got a new life last night.

Melodic gems from the **Lennon-McCartney** songbook, like "For No One," "Fixing a Hole," and the magnificent, underrated "I Will," were showcased to their greatest value. Played by McCartney just on acoustic guitar with a loping stride, the latter shone especially in the lines "And when at last I find you/ Your song will fill the air."

Every performer has good nights and bad, and McCartney's had all of them. Even last night his voice cracked occasionally, and he missed a few notes on the guitar. Toward the end of a very soulful reading of "Let it Be," he seemed to forget the lyrics and dropped a couple of words. It didn't matter. Overall, it was one of those nights when even the mistakes were okay because the achievements were so brilliant.

He talked a lot, too (and so did the band—a little too much.) That led to the intimacy, especially when he reminisced about his father and the punch line pretty much had meaning just for him. For McCartney, the richest performer in the world, it was one of many pleasant, disarming moments. There was also a nice moment dedicated to the memories of John Lennon and

George Harrison, And McCartney revealed something you never hear from rock stars: that those signs fans hold up can be distracting because he reads them and forgets what he's doing. Who knew?

Still, the real pleasure of the night was McCartney the musician. He does not move like the unreal Mick Jagger, and, no matter what, cannot rock like **The Who**. But listening to him play boogie woogie piano riffs—as he did quite a lot—and all those rolling solo's was absolutely gigantic. **Little Richard** and **Fats Domino** can take a lot of pride in their "student" by absentia. McCartney's contribution to the Beatles is often derogated in light of Lennon's caustic wit or Harrison's guitar technique. But McCartney was the engine that drove those songs, and he's not about to give up now.

One quibble, though: hire a horn section, Paul. Even the Fab Faux, the famous Beatle tribute band, has one. "Penny Lane" and "For No One" need woodwinds. "Eleanor Rigby" requires violins. The artificial sweetening is bad for your health.