

Spark #1.05 - Welcome Back My Friends

- Henry Warwick

- 07/16/2000

I've had the pleasure of attending many concerts. From the time I was a young adolescent, to the present day, seeing live music has always been one of my favorite pastimes. Even pre-occupied by a three-year-old tax deduction and an extortionate mortgage, I still find occasions see live-in-a-concert-hall music. Why? There is something magical, something completely marvelous about the uncertainty of a concert. You just never know what is going to happen.

What was my first concert?

Slade with Blue Oyster Cult as the opening act, and all I can remember was that it was Really Loud. Really Really Loud. The show wasn't so bad, but it wasn't very good, either.

This has me thinking - what makes for a lousy concert? There are basically several directions one must account for in assessing a concert. First and foremost, there is what is coming from the stage. Is the ensemble playing well? Is there an excitement in their work? Do they want to be there? The second direction is from the audience to the performer- are they being polite? Are they engaged? Are they actively listening? There is a third axis, and that is the environment. The environment, at its best, can enhance the goodness of a good show, or enhance the lameness of a bad show. It can also determine whether or not a show even happens. I remember one such show where all of the above came into play.

(swirling colors, my hair grows back and gets very long, I sprout a pair of flared trousers and a T-Shirt stained with bong water ...and suddenly I am transported to a concert in the mid 1970s...)

Emerson Lake and Palmer at Roosevelt Stadium, in Jersey City, New Jersey, in the summer of 1974.

First off- I don't want to hear you cringing because I said Emerson, Lake, and Palmer.

Frankly, they played brilliantly, so get over it.

The story of the show actually started two weeks before the band took the stage. ELP was scheduled to play that day, but the concert was rained out. It wasn't just a rain out- it was, well, almost indescribable...

We arrived at Roosevelt Stadium, and the dark sky loomed overhead. We stood in line for several hours, smoking copious amounts of pot, waiting for the doors to open. It started drizzling, and the staff, taking pity on us, let us into the stadium. We all went back into the weather, straight across the field to the stage, and stood there in the warm rain. The ground softened beneath us, and soon we were ankle deep in mud. Nearby, some nutjob who ate too much LSD was running around on his knees in the mud screaming "WHO'S GOT PINK SOCKS?!?!?!? BWAHAHAHAHAHA!!!!" He started eating the mud, and rolling around in it and laughing about pink socks. We stood him up and told him, "Hey man- the

cops are after ya- you gotta go THAT WAY!" and we pointed at the far entrance to the stadium, which was in the opposite direction of the police and medical team that was slowly slogging its way through the crowd to collect him. When we said "Police" a flash of fear went through his mud spattered face and his wildly dilated pupils shrank just a bit. He ran madly toward the Portal of Freedom. He got about 20 yards when my buddy, Mark, shouted "YO!!! PINK SOCKS!!!" which made him bust up laughing again, and flop face first into the mud, wallowing around in it like a skinny stoner hippy hippo, screaming like a banshee with ulcers in his funny bone.

The rain came hammering down. It came down in grey steel sheets, pounding on our heads, and making a puddled mess of the stage. The PA system was clearly a total loss, so the roadies tore the plastic tarpaulins off, and tossed it down to blanket the audience, so we might stand and hold on to its frayed edges and form some meager shelter against the downpour. The wind picked up, the lightning SPARKed up, and cut brilliant laser like beams against the blackish greenish sky. When the lightning started striking the stadium, the dreary beauty of the moment was lost: people panicked. Blasting the outfield light towers, the thunder splattered through the air, shattering our confidence that the show would ever take place that day. The wind grew ever faster and stronger- it swept into the curved bleachers and never left, and formed a funnel cloud before the pitcher's mound and quickly made its way toward the stage in center field as stray bits of hail fell from the sickly greenish black sky.

As it passed over us, the whirlwind yanked the plastic right out of our hands, instantly drenching us in mud and driving murky rain, spiking the disaster with stinging bits of hail. In moments this wobbling twister sucked up all the plastic, mud soaked trash, soda cups, empty beer cans, and assorted light trash in its path, plowing its way through a terrified crowd to the stage. It was a dust devil of epic and muddy proportions, a wet and messy microtornado.

The stage was set up like a circus- a large red and white striped tent in the center over the acres of Carl Palmer's drum kits. To the left was Keith Emerson's towering Moog synthesizers, Hammond organs, and other keyboard instruments. And center stage was covered with Greg Lake's fancy imported Persian Rugs. The whirlwind hit center stage, instantly collapsing the front of the tent, and knocking over much of Palmer's trap kit onto the carpets. It then veered immediately toward Emerson's set up and threw his gigantic Moog Series III over face first, and instantly filled it with mud and water. At that point, my legs finally stopped quaking and found some power - I ran as fast as I could for safety under the stands. I remember hearing people scream "RUN FOR YOUR LIFE!!!" as I ran with one hand covering my face against the driving rain and hail, the other in front of me so I might have some contact with a wall, a pole, or a person, before I ran headlong into it. I ran for my life.

With its dastardly deed well done, the whirlwind disappeared, dumping plastic tarps, mud and garbage all over the stage it had vandalized. I didn't care. I just wanted to go home. As quickly as it hit, it was over- and replaced with a dreary gray summer rain. We waded through the water, now hip deep, in the parking lot to the busses up the street. We'd have to come back the next day to get the car — it was up to its door handles in water.

Keith Emerson remembers this event well- he named it as his worst show in Keyboard Magazine some years ago. According to him, the Moog was immediately shipped off to Moog Experts in Connecticut where it was carefully dried by hand with hair dryers for days until the components were back in working order. As a testament to the robustness of analogue 1970s era technology, once dry, the synth worked like new. Do THAT to you Korg Triton and see how far you get...

Two weeks later, we all assembled at Roosevelt Stadium. It was a hot, dry, clear day- perfect weather for an outdoor concert that evening. The opening act was a group called SNAFU. Suffice to say, they were terrible. They were like the worst parts of Uriah Heep and Humble Pie glued together in a weak, derivative, excuse of a "rock" band. Why, after the trauma of the rain out, they were even booked to open for ELP is a mystery to this day.

The crowd hated them, which came as no surprise. After the horror of the terror two weeks earlier, the crowd was primed for ELP, not this gang. A chant went up- "ELP! ELP! ELP! ELP! ELP!" to no avail. SNAFU pressed on with their dreary derivative blather. People started booing them. The lead singer put his fingers above his head in the V for Victory / Hippy Peace Sign, and said to the crowd " Peace People! Let's have fun and party!!!" This was his ill-considered gambit for the crowd's affection.

The only thing the audience wanted from them was for them was to go away. Now.

50,000 stoned out and / or tripping Merry Little Moogsters also raised their fingers above their heads- Flipping him the Bird, and repeating, in rough drunken unison, an extremely vulgar two-word chant at the tops of their lungs.

SNAFU went into another song. This Was Not A Good Idea.

The crowd began ripping up the already mangled turf, and hurling dirt clods at the stage. At the end of the song, the singer said "HEY PEOPLE — LET'S BE HAPPY AND PARTEEEEEEE!" and he ran backstage and came out with a Very Large Baggie of Pot. Once again, he implored the audience to have fun, and merrily tossed the baggie into the audience, hoping this might cool them down a bit. As if throwing a few ounces of dope into a seething pit of 50,000 tripped out drunken prog-rocking rejects was going to do anything but piss them off.

The audience roared in anger, and threw the dope back.

Again, the Wild and Vulgar Chant was taken up, and SNAFU went into YET ANOTHER horrible song. This Was Clearly A Bad Idea.

At that point anything that wasn't of personal value was hurled at the stage with great vigor. The drummer was beaned with an aluminum foil ball, and was nearly hit with a bottle. He immediately walked off the stage. The rest of



the band soon followed under a hail of dirt clods and the singer lingered long enough to drop his pants and moon the audience (**actual photo on the right...**).

This afforded a fine, if pale and pimply, target as he waggled his butt in the cool evening air. Instantly, dirt clods, bottles, cans, and any other trash that hadn't already been tossed at the stage was sent aloft and describing ballistic tumbling arcs in their stage long flight through the smoky atmosphere of vulgar insults and violent slander of his mother's virtue. In moments, he was also gone. I sometimes wonder just what the hell SNAFU did for the rest of the evening. Have dinner in Hoboken?

About an hour later, ELP came out and played their set. They played well, and the fireworks at the end were very nice. It was the terrifying competence of their set that threw the whole two-week extravaganza into some ugly, if understandable, relief.

It was a psychedelic potlatch. It was a cross between an opium den and a Three Minute Hate. It was a corrupted celebration of man's electro-pyrrhic victory over nature, and a case study in Mob Rule. It was a prime example of why the 1970s were such a glorious and wonderful disaster. It was a bad audience on drugs. It was a lousy opening act. It was a mini-tornado. It was mud. It was a mess.

ELP's performance was as incidental as it was necessary. They played very well, and were deeply appreciated by an audience still reeling in the post-trauma of the rain out. They could have played anything- Christmas Carols — it wouldn't have mattered - it would have been gleefully lapped up by the audience on that beautiful evening. In that sense, it was incidental. But their personal integrity and professionalism pushed them to play a magnificent performance. Perhaps, they too felt some odd victory over the elements that had conspired so strongly against the show a fortnight earlier, and thus shared a common sensibility with the long suffering audience that evening. In that way, their performance, a good performance, was necessary.

The concert, as an experience, all seems especially odd and poignant as I consider SNAFU- those poor bastards — they were the wrong band at the wrong time, for the wrong concert in front of the wrong audience. I wonder what their memories of the disaster are. I wonder what it all meant to them.