

PORTRAIT OF MADONNA AS AN ARTIST

written by Alan Bennett Ilagan

Sitting in Seat 4 - Row 4 in Section LOGE10 of Boston's Fleetcenter, I am awaiting the entrance of the world's most famous woman ~ the one-name wonder who is going to make my life-long dream come true ~ Madonna. A curious phenomenon occurs a few moments before she is set to take the stage: the janitors, cooks, cleaning staff, and behind-the-scenes folk of the facility have all come out of the woodwork and assembled on the floor to witness the arrival of a married mother of two ~ such is the effect of a living icon, and proof of her enduring ability to fascinate and enthrall almost everyone.

The greatest works of art are those that inspire and challenge, leaving the viewer or listener forever altered or changed, and somehow better for it. On her sold-out Drowned World Tour 2001, which winds up this month in Los Angeles, Madonna accomplishes just that. Our reigning Queen Mother of Pop, Mrs. Ritchie has enjoyed mainstream success while never bothering to stoop to mediocre mainstream muck. Ever on the cutting edge, she is one of the only superstars to maintain an avant-garde sensibility, and that is evidenced in her current tour.

Casual listeners may be put off by the lack of familiar hits ~ the set list is made up mostly of songs culled from her last two albums, *Ray of Light* and *Music*. It's a typically gutsy Madonna move; this is one woman who has never looked back. To do so would induce boredom, stagnation, or, worst of all, drowning. In her tour book she quotes George Ohsawa: "The individual who no longer has a rigid mind has found freedom. Life can be so easy. Refuse to let go and you are a person drowning; the more you struggle, the faster you sink."

Madonna's own journey has been based precisely on such open-minded freedom, particularly freedom of artistic expression. In this case she finds freedom from the past, most meaningfully from her earlier, material-obsessed personae. Since 1998's *Ray of Light* album, Madonna has made a spiritual transformation, and such a change could not help but parlay its way into her art. Her career has always been a mix of style and substance, shock and seriousness, entertainment and enlightenment, but with her *Drowned World* Tour she offers up a live performance that transcends the current state of pop music, proving her well-seasoned worth and artistic ambition.

Within the show she traverses the globe, drawing upon the punky club scene of London, the gorgeous geisha period of Japan, a country cowgirl bit of bull-riding Americana, the Spanish-laced tango of Argentina, and a ghetto-fabulous pimp-mommy ode to NYC. Such a patch-work mix may not blend easily on paper, but Madonna sews it all together with unifying themes of self-empowerment and independence.

For the opening number, "Drowned World/ Substitute for Love", Madonna appears alone on stage singing about celebrity and love, and as she looks out into the audience it is a moment fraught with import ~ Madonna's longest-lasting relationship has always been with her fame. Parental figures and lovers have come and gone, but Madonna's celebrity has been her one constant companion. Not that it's always been a peaceful ride; as the last notes of the opener fade away, they are replaced with the throbbing beats of "Impressive Instant", signifying the insane other-worldliness of a life lived in the spotlight. A punk-scene emerges, replete with dancers in mohawks, torn shirts, and gas masks, who attack her from every direction; Madonna is lost in a whirlwind of action, lights, smoke, and dancing - all the while remaining the absolute focus. In one of the most arresting sights of the evening, Madonna straps on an electric guitar for "Candy Perfume

Girl” and rips off some pretty decent licks, snarling her way through the acid-tinged song and attacking the strings in a Hendrix-inspired moment.

She closes the punk section with a rousing rendition of “Ray of Light”, and as she’s maniacally thrashing about on stage, it suddenly dawns on me that this is a 43-year-old mother of two ~ dancing and singing and playing a pretty mean guitar ~ and \$125 somehow doesn’t seem like such a high price for a ticket.

The second part begins with a blood-red sky background and finds Madonna materializing in a dramatic 52-foot-long kimono, spanning the entire length of the stage. Antagonizing samurai figures menace her every move as she sings about unrequited love in “Frozen”. After being berated, threatened, and finally having her ponytail cut off by one of the male figures, Madonna attacks back with some “Crouching Tiger” martial arts flying moves, some of which lift her twenty feet off the ground. At such moments the visual threatens to overcome the music ~ in this case the otherwise majestic “Sky Fits Heaven” melody ~ but Madonna reigns it in with a touching rendering of the plaintive “Mer Girl”, a song that references the death of her mother.

Concluding the deceptively submissive geisha episode, Madonna, looking weary and war-torn, grabs a rifle and shoots the final taunting male figure in a gesture both disturbing and ridiculous, depending on how it is taken. What to make of such violence is anyone’s guess, and widely-varied personal-interpretation has always been a hallmark of Madonna’s career. In this instance she raises the violence question ~ right or wrong? pointless or justified? ~ and follows it up with a brief tongue-in-cheek interlude of animated porn, further confusing issues and leaving all judgment up to the viewer.

The Country-Western dude ranch bit is next, with Madonna continuing her wayward nod to the Wild West which began on the cover of her 2000 Music album. As she rises on the right side of the stage, it is still slightly jarring to see Madonna gently strumming an acoustic guitar to “I Deserve It”, an ode to her husband. In her D2-designed fashion chaps, stars-and-stripes tank top and cowboy hat, she does a convincing country line dance to “Don’t Tell Me”, rides a slow-motion mechanical bull to “Human Nature”, and, in the show’s only misstep, sings the humorless “Funny Song”, all the while donning a strained Southern hillbilly accent.

She recovers splendidly to deliver the inspiring “Secret” and the magnificent “You’ll See”, the latter leaving Madonna alone on stage again and turning in an emotional execution of her best ballad since “Live To Tell”. In a show rich with state-of-the-art sets and lighting, eye-popping costumes, grandiose special effects, and high-tech video screens, the most powerful moments are when Madonna holds center stage all by herself, singing solo and unadorned by pyrotechnics or distracting dancers, as she does when she croons “You’ll See”.

Returning as a Spanish Senorita, she sings the Spanish-language version of “What It Feels Like For A Girl” (“Lo Que Siente La Mujer”). Still gender-bending after all these years, Madonna wears a half-dress ~ front only, backed by an intricate set of straps and a pair of trousers. She dances a decent tango with a group of guys, only these men are actually women dressed in undershirts, suspenders, and pants. Strapping on a guitar one last time for her 1987 hit “La Isla Bonita”, Madonna and company perform an extended version featuring flamenco dancing and an acoustic percussive finale that sees her oddly at ease pounding out a syncopated beat on the guitar.

The final section features Madonna and her two faithful back-up singers doing a straight-forward reading of her first hit single, 1983’s “Holiday”. It is the moment the crowd has been waiting for, and it does not disappoint.

With only the three women on stage performing, it is powerful in its simplicity and staggering in sheer entertainment value. Closing the show with "Music", her latest #1 single, Madonna returns to where she first conquered the world ~ joyously and exuberantly belting out a now-classic pop song, singing and dancing, challenging and inspiring.

After all this pomp and spectacle the big question remains ~ how was her voice? Being as this was the first concert following her bout with laryngitis (which forced her to cancel one performance), all ears were on the lady's singing, and even the most hardened of critics would have trouble denying what a beautiful, strong, expressive instrument her voice has become. Throughout the entire evening it remained clear and constant ~ no hint of laryngitis or vocal strain whatsoever. Every note was dead-on, held to its completion, even with all the dancing and flying. Most impressive was the outright absence of any lip-synching. The silly headset trend which she pioneered with 1990's Blonde Ambition tour has been replaced by a hand-held microphone ~ no faking allowed.

"You can do whatever you want to do, and don't ever let anybody tell you different," she states with surprisingly poignant conviction, and this is a woman who should know. Such a supreme message of self-empowerment is the key to her endurance and wide-spread appeal. It is a plucky confidence, at once disarming and seducing, and always fun to watch. After almost two decades of fame and infamy, she remains a vital force in pop culture.

In her tour book she credits her husband for "giving me a guitar and daring me to learn how to play it", and it dawns on me that this is a woman who has finally reconciled her public/performer persona with her personal/private life ~ and as such deserves recognition for her work as an artist. Most of her critical reviews have been for her behavior as a human being ~ her hair color, her boyfriends, her sexual antics ~ but rarely for her work. She is an entertainer ~ one of the best ~ adept at creating music, images, and performances, but even as a whole they do not represent the entire Madonna ~ she is not merely the sum of her artistic parts, but rather a complex, open-minded individual intent on developing self-knowledge through her work. The Drowned World Tour is proof of this. She's not really a punk-rocker or a painted geisha ~ she's a wife and a mother. This tour is her work ~ designed to entertain and perhaps enlighten ~ but it is not her life. Performing is simply her job, and nobody does it better.

It took her almost twenty years, but Madonna has finally come into her own as a talented, courageous artist. As the world swirls wildly around her, trying to pull her down and suffocate with criticism, Madonna has always risen above it all ~ floating and flying and unbelievably untouchable in her determination for self-discovery. It's a trait often mistaken for narcissism, vanity, or excessive ego ~ and unfairly so at that. What Madonna does best, and what has kept her so successful for so many years, is to make her personal growth and transformations relatable to everyone. It's the essence of exceptional art ~ to take the intensely personal experience and translate it into something uniquely universal ~ through music, performance, dancing, painting, writing, photography, etc.

As the show ends and the lights come up, I have a big stupid smile on my face, one that will remain for the next week. My friend Suzie, never quite a Madonna fan in her own right, says the show made her feel "liberated and inspired". It's the same feeling elicited by witnessing a masterpiece painting or reading a classic book or seeing a fantastic movie ~ in other words, it's the purpose of art. And no matter how many times Madonna has managed to inspire the feeling in the past, she still has power to make it feel like the very first time.

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