

## Madonna at Live 8: July 2005

### A Queen Reclaims Her Rightful Throne By Alan Bennett Ilagan

Even the most ardent and dedicated of Madonna fans have had it rough of late. Those of us who loved her for the ballsy, devil-may-care courage and rebellious defiance she peddled in the 80's and 90's have had our patience tested since she got all Kabbalistic and matronly. I could forgive the cow-tow to Britney and Christina at the MTV Movie Awards ~ she still managed to steal the show. I could forgive the bland and lackluster Versace ads ~ she still looked damn good, over-airbrushed or not. I could even forgive all of the Kabbalah crap ~ she still proved her trendiness as celebrity after celebrity got on the K-bandwagon and tied on their red wrist strings.

What pushed me over the edge was her output of children's books. Everyone has the right to their own artistic expression, and I would never put a damper on anything Madonna wanted to do. For someone with two kids, these books are not such a stretch. But this is Madonna, the woman who had us salivating over her kinky endeavors and the salacious *Sex* book, the woman who kissed a black saint in front of burning crosses, and the woman who mimed masturbation on her *Blonde Ambition* tour (in front of her father no less). It was this Madonna that I knew and loved, not the prim and proper author on the cover of *Ladies Home Journal*.

After the final kiddie book was published I thought that things might be all right, that we could move beyond this tragic detour into children's literature, but then I heard that she was planning a sequel to her first book, along with a possible television show based on the English Muffins, or the English Roses, or whatever the damn things were called. This was too much. My role as a Madonna-worshiper was being sorely tested, and the religious fervor I felt for her and her music was being rocked. When I heard about her upcoming appearance at the Live 8 Concert, I sighed with the resignation that perhaps the Queen had lost her crown and the Empress was no longer so gleefully naked. Had she lost her power to thrill? I cringed as the line-up of musical stars was announced. While few had the twenty-plus years of experience or background that Madonna could claim, most looked like they could deliver more punch than a forty-something mother-of-two who now wrote children's books for a living. In my lowest moment as a fan, I doubted the Diva.

As Bob Geldof introduced her as the "Queen of Rock", she took to the stage dressed immaculately in white. Hugging the young woman whose emaciated face personified poverty twenty years ago, Madonna appeared both humbled and touched. She was human after all, and for all the superficial hoopla that has surrounded her career she seemed, for perhaps the first time, very much real.

How could this small woman muster the magic she once held over the world? Twenty years ago she stood on the Live Aid stage, bravely strutting her stuff in brocade pants, jangling jewelry, and the ultimate in 80's eyeshadow. No one would have predicted that she would be one of the only artists to maintain such a momentous career in the ensuing two decades. Now it looked as if she might be ready to give up her reign and bow gracefully out of the rock-star limelight. However, I had forgotten the golden rule regarding Madonna: never count her out.

As the opening notes of *Like A Prayer* sounded from a gospel choir, Madonna-the-star zoomed right back to her zenith. Her voice was strong and steady, her body was lithe and limber, her energy was boundless, and her performance was perfection. Transcending the stage and a pulsating crowd of 200,000 people, Madonna was back. Reasserting her prominence in a cramped constellation of musical stars (who paused in their own preparations in order to watch her), she was the highlight of the entire concert.

Taking off her jacket, she caused one of the only controversies of the day as she shouted, "Are you fucking ready?!" (A wry, and perhaps unintended, echo of her virgin Live Aid show when she shouted "I ain't taking shit off today!") Yes, our lady had returned in fine don't-fuck-with-me form, and none too soon. *Ray of Light* pounded, Madonna pummeled, and the rest of the Live 8 performers were rendered supporting players. By the time she brought every single person to a hand-clapping climax for *Music*, Madonna had done it. She brought the people together, and the world was once again watching her every move. Some of us had never stopped, but it was good to be in widespread company once more. How could I have ever doubted her?

Once the dust of the ten-hour concert settled, one tiny woman from Michigan stood tall as the stand-out performance of the day. Newspaper reviews around the world rushed to pay proper homage and reverence to the re-anointed Queen, and I was reminded of what made her so special in the first place.

When assessing Madonna, there's always the likelihood of a fantastic re-invention, and as she proved at Live 8, she looks to astound all over again. Taking into account her upcoming projects – a new dance album, a new documentary, and a possible new tour – Madonna is far from over, and considering her extraordinary talent as a performer, she may never be.