

## MADONNA - STICKY & SWEET TOUR – PERFORMANCE REVIEW

MADISON SQUARE GARDEN: OCTOBER 6, 2008

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There was a time when Madonna could do no wrong in my eyes. When the world turned against her following her *Sex* book in 1992, I applauded her pluck and stuck with her through the make-up years leading to *Evita*. When she turned to the Kabbalah and sang Sanskrit on 1998's *Ray of Light*, I admired her ability to better herself and share what worked for her with others. Even when she started writing children's books, I weathered the rather-dull proceedings, because in the midst of all the kid crap she could still put out a thumping dance album like *Confessions on a Dance Floor*.

Friends and foes have periodically challenged her merit, questioning how I could enjoy *Swept Away* (I didn't really) or the brooding *American Life* album (I really did), but after all of that I knew I had my ace in the hole. After seeing her last three tours, there is one thing that no one could dispute: she puts on a killer live performance. Even at such star-studded events as Live 8 and Live Earth, she unabashedly stole the show. She is, simply put, the world's greatest solo performer of her time. What she may lack in vocal prowess and guitar-playing precision, she makes up for in spunk and spirit. Her sheer will has always been her way, and no one has ever made more of it. So it was with great-but-always-previously-met expectations that I anticipated her 'Sticky & Sweet' Tour, but as 'Game Over' flashed across the screens and the lights went up after the show, for the very first time I found myself feeling decidedly underwhelmed.

Objectively speaking, there are a few weak spots in the show itself. Madonna still has a propensity for showcasing some of her lesser songs. Opening with 'Candy Shop', arguably the weakest song on *Hard Candy*, does not make for a grand entrance, and she spends the majority of the first act making up for this. Performing the unlistenable 'Human Nature' on the electric guitar with a background video from Britney Spears does nothing to help matters, but she rebounds on a mash-up of the trumpet blasts from '4 Minutes' and her classic 'Vogue'.

For the second segment, Madonna revisits her early 80's hey-day in New York City, in a joyous double-dutch jump-rope routine to 'Into the Groove', backed by colorful Keith Haring artwork – a fittingly exuberant ode to a slightly-more-innocent time.

Things turn slightly disturbing on 'She's Not Me', an otherwise-fun and cheeky bitch-slap to her competition. The stage version, however, finds her battling her former selves as

her various guises through the years flash across the screens behind her. On the catwalk, four dancers occupy the corners of a square, each representing a past version of herself. There's the wedding-dress-clad vixen from 'Like A Virgin', the Marilyn Monroe homage from 'Material Girl', the pastie-laden peep-show performer from 'Open Your Heart', and the cone-bra-and-trousers glamazon from 'Express Yourself' – each one represents a milestone moment in her career and, just as often, in our own lives.

It's true, she's not those women anymore, but she once was, and many of us fell in love with her then. It's understandable that she might want to say goodbye to the former vestiges of a woman to whom she can no longer relate. As she slaps her four iconic incarnations around, dismissing them all with a few snarled "Bitch" calls, it's hard not to feel that while it's a slap in the face to herself (and her selves), it's also a stinging rebuke to her fans. It could be argued that this is simply Madonna not wanting to look back, or perhaps that these are just a group of wannabe's, but in the midst of the very section devoted to her distant past, that's not entirely convincing.

Even so, we will forgive her much if she is able to command the stage and dance and sing along to a re-worked hit like 'Music'. With a heavy influence of Fedde le Grande ('Put Your Hands Up 4 Detroit'), it closes the second part of the show quite, well, grandly. With moves straight out of any number of 80's dance group videos, it's a fun wink at the past with a cutting-edge musical twist – a prime example of what Madonna does best.

She rises atop a piano for the third act, hidden in a billowing black hooded cloak, as she sings to the strains of the haunting 'Devil Wouldn't Recognize You'. It's a vocal and theatrical high-point of the evening – just Madonna and her piano player moodily evoking a bittersweet treatise on a troubled relationship. As she doffs the cloak and descends from the piano, the last chords of 'Devil' dying away, she stares into the crowd, searching and imploring, just for a moment, then it's back into the groove with 'Spanish Lesson', a bit of filler from *Hard Candy* that she uses to launch the Latin-gypsy section of the show.

On paper it sounds a bit strained, but as she successfully morphed into a geisha and an Indian goddess in previous performances, her turn as a gypsy is surprisingly effective. She transforms the over-performed 'La Isla Bonita' into a show-stopping kaleidoscope of cultures, a fully-realized version of her stomping Live Earth performance with Gogol Bordello. Their influence is all over the re-imagined track from twenty years ago, and Madonna gives their stand-ins the spotlight for 'Doli Doli' as she sips a few shots and watches from the audience's standpoint.

She slips on an acoustic guitar for 'You Must Love Me', perches herself on a stool in the middle of her band, and delivers the most touching (and vocally adept) ballad of the

night. Basking in the adoration of everyone assembled, she is all smiles as she makes a genuine connection to the crowd and the title shifts from a demand to a sweet realization.

From here on out, it's a fight to the finish, as the quasi-controversial 'Get Stupid' video montage flashes on the screen. Much has been made of Madonna's juxtaposition of John McCain with dictators of the past, but in the end she lets the audience come to its own conclusion. (For the record, McCain and George Bush drew big boos, while Barack Obama received thunderous cheers from the crowd.)

After the rumbling intro to '4 Minutes', Madonna returns in woman-warrior mode, suited up in football shoulder pads studded with Swarovski crystals and a questionable clip-on crop of choppy bangs. As a duet with Justin Timberlake, the song is striking (and when Mr. Timberlake joined her for a promo show at Roseland earlier in the year, it worked in person). Here, all by herself, Madonna might have done better to leave it out altogether, having to make do with a facsimile of Timberlake cribbed directly from the music video. (She could have at least shot new footage of him for the number if going the video route, as she more successfully accomplished with Pharrell Williams, Kanye West, and even Ms. Spears.) As her latest hit though, it almost has to be here. What almost didn't make the cut was her next song, widely considered one of her best, 'Like A Prayer'. (Originally 'Impressive Instant' from 2000's *Music* album was in its place.)

Amid an apocalyptic atmosphere of ski-masked dancers, she loses the shoulder pads to reveal a silver-plated bodice, and proceeds to soar on the gospel-tinged 'Prayer', finding new meaning and reaching towards salvation as it comes to a hand-clapping climax. As such, everything that follows is slightly anti-climactic, particularly the straight-forward re-hash of 'Ray of Light', performed far more excitingly on her last *Confessions* tour. A guitar-driven version of 'Hung Up' works slightly better here than it did on the promo tour, and it follows her by-now-standard rant against Sarah Palin and a brief sing-a-long to snippets of a requested oldie (on this evening it was 'Lucky Star').

Finishing off the show is Madonna's latest single, 'Give It 2 Me', given an extended remix that allows Madonna a few minutes to get the crowd involved, but it all seems a bit too little and a bit too late. As she executes some fancy troop-style footwork, biceps blazing and bangs thrashing, she departs without a good-bye.

It was impressive, but not altogether enthralling, and if we demand a bit more from Madonna than from other artists, it's because we've come to expect as much. She's set the bar so high that anything less than spectacular seems to fall short. Unfair, yes, but it's a sweet problem to have, if at times a little sticky. At this point her only competition is herself, and if she needs to coast on her laurels for a bit, she still puts on the best show out there.