

The Atlantic

The Day the Live Concert Returns

I don't know when it will be safe to sing arm in arm at the top of our lungs. But we will do it again, because we have to.



Story by Dave Grohl

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| UNCHARTED

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Editor's Note: This article is part of Uncharted, a series about the world we're leaving behind, and the one being remade by the pandemic.

HERE WERE YOU PLANNING TO BE on the Fourth of July this year? Backyard barbecue with your crankiest relatives, fighting over who gets to light the illegal fireworks that your derelict cousin smuggled in from South Carolina? Or maybe out on the Chesapeake Bay, arguing about the amount of mayonnaise in the crab cakes while drinking warm National Bohemian beer? Better yet, tubing down the Shenandoah with a soggy hot dog while blasting Grand Funk Railroad's "We're an American Band"?

I know exactly where I was supposed to be: FedExField, outside Washington, D.C., with my band Foo Fighters and roughly 80,000 of our closest friends. We were going to be celebrating the 25th anniversary of our debut album. A red, white, and blue keg party for the ages, it was primed to be an explosive affair shared by throngs of my sunburned hometown brothers and sisters, singing along to more than a quarter century of Foo.

Well, things have changed.

[*Read: Dave Grohl's pandemic playlist*]

Unfortunately, the coronavirus pandemic has reduced today's live music to unflattering little windows that look like doorbell security footage and sound like Neil Armstrong's distorted transmissions from the moon, so stuttered and compressed. It's enough to make Max Headroom seem lifelike. Don't get me wrong, I can deal with the monotony and limited cuisine of quarantine (my lasagna game is on point!), and I know that those of us who don't have to work in hospitals or deliver packages are the lucky ones, but still, I'm hungry for a big old plate of sweaty, ear-shredding, *live* rock and roll, ASAP. The kind that makes your heart race, your body move, and your soul stir with passion.

Dave Grohl and Jeffrey Goldberg discuss the irreplaceable thrill of the rock show, live at 4 p.m. ET today. Register for The Big Story EventCast [here](#).

There is nothing like the energy and atmosphere of live music. It is the most life-affirming experience, to see your favorite performer onstage, in the flesh, rather than as a one-dimensional image glowing in your lap as you spiral down a midnight YouTube wormhole. Even our most beloved superheroes become

human in person. Imagine being at Wembley Stadium in 1985 as Freddie Mercury walked onstage for the Live Aid benefit concert. Forever regarded as one of the most triumphant live performances of all time (clocking in at a mere 22 minutes) Freddie and Queen somehow managed to remind us that behind every rock god is someone who puts on their studded arm bracelet, absurdly tight white tank, and stonewashed jeans one pant leg at a time just like the rest of us. But, it wasn't necessarily Queen's musical magic that made history that day. It was Freddie's connection with the audience that transformed that dilapidated soccer stadium into a sonic cathedral. In broad daylight, he majestically made 72,000 people his instrument, joining them in harmonious unison.

Left: Rolling Stones fans get excited during a concert on the group's 1975 Tour of the Americas. (Christopher Simon Sykes/Hulton Archive/Getty); Right: Freddie Mercury performing at the Live Aid concert at Wembley Stadium. Duncan Raban / Popperfoto via Getty)

As a lifelong concertgoer, I know this feeling well. I myself have been pressed against the cold front rail of an arena rock show. I have air-drummed along to my favorite songs in the rafters, and been crushed in the crowd, dancing to dangerous decibel levels while lost in the rhythm. I've been lifted and carried to the stage by total strangers for a glorious swan dive back into their sweaty embrace. Arm in arm, I have sung at the top of my lungs with people I may

never see again. All to celebrate and share the tangible, communal power of music.

[Read: People are remembering what music is really for]

When you take away the pyrotechnics and confetti of an arena rock concert, what are you left with? Just ... people? I will never forget the night I witnessed U2 perform at what used to be called the MCI Center in D.C. This was their 2001 Elevation Tour, a massive production. I waited for the lights to go out so that I could lose myself in a magnificent, state-of-the-art rock show. To my surprise, the band walked onstage without any introduction, house lights fully illuminated, and kicked into the first song beneath their harsh, fluorescent glow, without the usual barrage of lasers and LED screens we've all become accustomed to. The brilliant move stunned the audience and began an unforgettable concert on a very raw, personal note. This was no accident, mind you. It was a lesson in intimacy. Without all the strobes and lasers, the room shrank to the size of a dirty nightclub at last call, every blemish in plain view. And with that simple gesture, we were reminded that we are all indeed just people. People that need to connect with one another.

One night, before a Foo Fighters show in Vancouver, my tour manager alerted me that the "Boss" himself, Bruce Springsteen, was in attendance (cue paralyzing nerves). Frozen with fear, I wondered how I could possibly perform in front of this legendary showman, famous for his epic concerts that span four hours. I surely could never live up to his lofty expectations! It turns out he was there to see the opening band (cue devastating humiliation), so I was off the hook. But we chatted briefly before the gig, and I was again reminded of not only the human being behind every superhero, but also the reason millions of people identify with him: He is real. Three hours later, as I sat on a locker-room bench recovering from the show, drenched in my own sweat, there was a knock at the door. Bruce wanted to say hello. Having actually stayed for our set (cue jaw crashing to the floor), he very generously thanked us and commented on our performance, specifically the rapport we seem to have with our audience. Something he obviously understood very well. When asked where he watched the show from, he said that he'd stood in the crowd, just like everyone else. Of course he did. He was searching for that connection too.

A few days later, I received a letter from Bruce, handwritten on hotel stationery, that explained this very clearly. “When you look out at the audience,” he wrote, “you should see yourself in them, just as they should see themselves in you.”

Not to brag, but I think I’ve had the best seat in the house for 25 years. Because I *do* see you. I see you pressed against the cold front rails. I see you air-drumming along to your favorite songs in the distant rafters. I see you lifted above the crowd and carried to the stage for a glorious swan dive back into its sweaty embrace. I see your homemade signs and your vintage T-shirts. I hear your laughter and your screams and I see your tears. I have seen you yawn (yeah, *you*), and I’ve watched you pass out drunk in your seat. I’ve seen you in hurricane-force winds, in 100-degree heat, in subzero temperatures. I have even seen some of you grow older and become parents, now with your children’s Day-Glo protective headphones bouncing on your shoulders. And each night when I tell our lighting engineer to “Light ’em up!,” I do so because I need that room to shrink, and to join with you as one under the harsh, fluorescent glow.

[*Read: Pop music’s version of life doesn’t exist anymore*]

In today’s world of fear and unease and social distancing, it’s hard to imagine sharing experiences like these ever again. I don’t know when it will be safe to return to singing arm in arm at the top of our lungs, hearts racing, bodies moving, souls bursting with life. But I do know that we will do it again, because we have to. It’s not a choice. We’re human. We need moments that reassure us that we are not alone. That we are understood. That we are imperfect. And, most important, that we need each other. I have shared my music, my words, my life with the people who come to our shows. And they have shared their voices with me. Without that audience—that screaming, sweating audience—my songs would only be sound. But together, we are instruments in a sonic cathedral, one that we build together night after night. And one that we will surely build again.

Metallica fans screaming in the audience at the heavy metal Sonisphere Festival in 2009 in Nijmegen, Netherlands. (Paul Bergen / Redferns)