

'Todo está bien, chévere': Stevie Wonder in the House in Houston—Michael's Rock and Roll Posse, March 21, 2015

In an astonishing stretch of four years, between 1965 and 1968, The Beatles published *Beatles VI* (1965), *Help!* (1965), *Rubber Soul* (1965), *Yesterday and Today* (1966), *Revolver* (1966), *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), *Magical Mystery Tour* (1968), and *The Beatles* (a/k/a *The White Album*) (1968). These towering achievements, both artistic and commercial, are to rock and roll what 1905 was to Einstein's major published work.

In my view, while The Beatles will likely never be equaled, Stevie Wonder's best four years are surely near the top of any list of musical genius and output bursting forth in a short period of time: *Talking Book* (1972), *Innervisions* (1973), *Fulfillingness' First Finale* (1974), and *Songs in the Key of Life* (1976). Early Dylan, Cat Stevens, The Rolling Stones, Bruce, and Paul Simon are the closest analogs with concentrated bursts of classic albums, and one can only think of the mind-blowing work Kurt Cobain would have finished. Whatever.

Stevie Wonder played the Houston Toyota Center last night, and I listened to his works all day yesterday in preparation and all day today in remembrance (113 songs, according to my computer data base). It is almost a grail experience to hear him sing these glorious songs, especially his entire reprise of *Songs in the Key of Life*, which I always identify with my own near-death-experience of writing my 1977 dissertation, as I played it over and over those monastic and singular nights and early mornings, in Columbus, Ohio. It was only during a recent household move that I lost that worn LP and several others. Let me just cut to the chase: Stevie's album and songs have held up much better than has my dissertation, "A

Legal History of the Establishment of the Ohio Board of Regents.” (Remember, everyone who earns a PhD has to have a dissertation subject. But I own that topic.) The last time Tina and I saw him was about 5 years ago in the same sold-out venue (both times, probably 10,000-12,000 in attendance), and he thanked God (as he does, regularly, in song and in his concert patter) for his voice and for never having had a cold or having missed a concert due to health. (Take that, Aretha—I love you as no one else does, but you have stood me up at least 4 times in the last 10 years. *See also, Elvin Associates v. Franklin*, 680 F. Supp. 121 (S. D. N. Y., 1988) (failure to appear in Broadway production, in breach of contract))

For the first half of the show, he played the entire *Key of Life* in the same order as the original, and then he sampled from his deep, deep closet of songs, virtually all of them pitch-perfect. It was as good as it gets in such a huge venue, which he still commands because of his popularity and his relatively-rare tours, so that all of us line up again each time he comes to town. I also belong to his fan-club listserv, so get advance notice of tours and other interesting information. Three things stand out last night, as I pass on this lore to my Posse. First, his is an expensive enterprise. At one point, he had more than 30 musicians and singers on stage, including a group of orchestral Houston string musicians (8), seven horn players (who are so tight and funky that they are in the James Brown-circle-of-funkiness), five or six backup singers at any time (including his daughter Aisha Morris (“Isn’t She Lovely?”)), the always-sublime Judith Hill, Lanesha Baca, and others I did not recall—he did not introduce them all), several percussionists, guitarists, pianists/organists, etc. I thought he did not need the strings, as his music is not as orchestral as that of others, and he was playing music mostly from his funkier groove period—think *Master Blaster*, *Sir Duke*, etc. Second, he was almost an hour late, uncharacteristically, and when he did come out, he took about 15

minutes to pray for a back up singer member who had collapsed in his hotel room and had been found hanging on to life. (I did not catch the singer's name, but Keith John has been a longtime Wonder backup singer, and I did not see him sing.) I was angry at rushing to get there in time, only to wait for an hour with no word; he is rarely late, and we had no opening act, so people sat and drank. Of course, the show must go on, and this was surely a tragic turn of events. Third, it was not as sharply produced as I would have expected, given the massive road production. The bass (played by veteran Nathan Watts) was annoyingly fuzzing all night, Stevie's microphone cut in and out all evening (and not just because he was reaching to get his mouth harps and hand-helds), and the overall production was not crisp. In fact, at times, it was plain bad and out of focus. This was disappointing, even if his voice was strong, and his staccato breathiness was as recognizable and beautiful as ever. I first saw him open for the Stones in 1972 in Columbus, and I recall to this day what an affecting sight it is to see him weaving and bobbing to his music. And what music it still is, 40 years later, with those wonderful songs and voice. The memories of the half dozen times I have seen him perform are still with me, undiminished.

Ironically, as with any of these iconic singers, they could play all night and not satisfy you, as there are always favorites they just do not get to. The one I have always truly loved was his call and shout on "Don't You Worry 'Bout A Thing" from "Innervisions" (1973), where he tries to woo a young woman by playing as if he is suave and cosmopolitan. I was looking for the braggadocio: "'Cause like I been to, ya' know, Paris, Beirut, ya' know, I mean, uh, Iraq, Iran, Eurasia . . . ya' know I speak very, very, fluent Spanish: 'Todo está bien, chévere.' Ya got that?" The locations have changed since he first sang the song, and his mangled Spanish is always funny, because that is exactly his point. Who can say it better? All IS

well and awesome. Join with me in this great and clever song:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOz3p6k5O2g> .

Yocel and Lazaro, thanks for the great tickets, and Nicole and Rueben Casarez, thanks for the great Kim Son dinner beforehand. And Tina, as always, thanks for acting as if you enjoy this as much as I do. There is no one I would rather share this music [and life](#) with. We even got back to the car just before the skies opened, at midnight. Spring break is almost over, but was a great way to end it. Van has a new duets album coming any day, and I heard him teaming with Joss Stone. Here is a great review: <http://patrickmaginty.blogspot.co.uk/> .

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P.S: Here is a recent op-ed on the *Elonis* trial: Freedom of speech includes rap lyrics: <http://www.chron.com/opinion/outlook/article/Freedom-of-speech-includes-rap-lyrics-6133137.php?cmpid=email-mobile> . My hate mail is improving.

P.P.S: (photo attached, below)

