

What More in the Name of Love? U2 at NRG Stadium—Michael's Rock and Roll Posse

Among the hundreds of concerts I have attended since I was a kid, none have been football-field sized. I have attended many, many in large basketball arenas, configured to seat 15,000 or so in venues such as the old Summit in Houston (which evangelist Joel Osteen bought and reconfigured) or the Toyota Center, but have never been to a huge festival or a football stadium for a concert. That dry streak ended on Wednesday when Tina and I went to the NRG behemoth to see U2, and it was a mixed bag of experiences. I talked to an NRG official yesterday (more on this later), and he said that there had been 8,000 or 9,000 people on the floor (the football field where the NFL Texans play, covered by boarding the grass over), and over 60,000 overall in attendance. The stadium seats 72,000 for a game, and the concert record is 80,000 by George Strait. (The last NFL Super Bowl was held there.) The amazing thing is that any musical group can tour and fill such venues night after night, and do so consistently; a corollary is that most things usually go right, despite the many moving parts. U2 has over a dozen large 18-wheelers just to transport their lighting, sound, and video gear, so it is a massive production and technical undertaking each night.

Indeed, as wonderful as the music is, it is entertainment writ large, with a scrim/screen over 100 yards long set across what looks like the goal line. The photos I have attached depict it when the floor was just beginning to fill up, and then during the show, there were the humungous videos to accompany the music—exquisite desert landscape sets from California's Joshua Tree National Park and a variety of other images. The evocative imagery of the Joshua tree was morphed through bright colors and shifting views, keeping the album's focus on the American West. It was like a John Ford movie on steroids, and the backdrop almost dwarfed the band: the tremendous lead singer Bono, guitarist-in-chief The Edge (also on organ), Adam Clayton on bass, and drummer Larry Mullen. (Extremely unusual for rock bands of longstanding is that there have been no changes in the U2 lineup all these 40+ years.) While I still think that Carlos Santana is the best guitarist alive (sorry, Clapton, Pete Townshend, or Jack White fans), The Edge is also guitar deity, with his unique cascading style that fills the stadium. In a musical genre defined largely by crashing guitar licks, The Edge stands out, and he alone would be worth the price of admission.

The four musicians often spread out 100 yards from each other, rather than just playing in a tight space. Almost no other band is so stripped down in its core, and even warmup acts like the Lumineers have more members; the basic quartet of lead/rhythm guitarist cum drummer cum lead singer cum bassist is primordial to rock and roll, and a real throwback. They played several songs from the set and the encores from a B stage surrounded by fans who stood in what was a crowded mosh pit for hours. The screen was so big and overwhelming that it distracted from my enjoyment of the music, almost putting the music in service to the video images, rather than the reverse. I would have been glad to see them just play the album tracks and the other songs, without the screen and the moving pictures, but this appears to be the norm in the big stage productions that are stadium shows. I will say that the many changing colors of the Joshua tree itself were quite beautiful, especially the red one, a copy of which I have attached. I understand from much commentary that this was actually a stripped-down version of the recent U2 stage architecture, but I would happily listen to them on a smaller stage and focus on the songs, rather than be entertained by the lush visual tricks.

I know many people like The Lumineers, and they have their own folk music fan base, but I didn't care for them. I liked *Cleopatra* from their second album, but I think it was because they used a great picture of Theda Bara as an inspiration, from the 1917 silent film of the same name:

https://www.google.com/search?q=you+tube+lumineers+cleopatra&rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS710US710&oq=you+tube%2C+lumineers%2C+cleopatra&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0j69i64.11644j0j8&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8 They are a Denver-based group, and opening for U2 will surely expose them to many new fans.

Inasmuch as the Ariana Grande terrorist attack had occurred in Manchester, England two nights before and U2 had appeared on Jimmy Kimmel the previous night where they spoke eloquently of the tragedy (see http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/u2-on-manchester-attack-terrorists-hate-everything-we-love-w483946?utm_source=email), I was surprised how little Bono said to our crowd, something like "no end to grief means there's no end to love," but little else.

Soon after the recent Bataclan terrorist attack in Paris at an Eagles of Death Metal concert, U2 hosted the group at their own Paris concert, showing great solidarity and courage. Here, security was stepped up, and Ticketmaster sent all ticketholders

a notice to show up early and plan more time for searches. We did so, somewhat to our chagrin.

Here, I will rant, so feel free to skip to the end, but NRG is the most inaccessible modern venue I have ever attended. As most of you know, I have to use a cane these days, until I have knee-replacement surgery, for which I am preparing, but of necessity, I use a disability lens when it comes to many basic services and issues, sort of like a reformed smoker who rails at second hand smoke and public health. I give the Harris County folks an A for available parking and the security checks, where everyone is screened or wanded, and where bags are checked.

There were enough so that lines did not build up, and we were admitted without any delay or problems, only to find huge snaking lines to have tickets scanned. Here, NRG gets an F. There were about 10 gates on the South end, where we were, and 6 of them were devoted to the fans who had purchased floor seats (about 8,000 of the 60,000+ overall), while the largest number of folks were lined up in two rows, until they finally opened all four. But they did not open until well after 5:00 for a show scheduled to start at 6:30, where they had written all of us to show up early, and thousands did so, *por pendejo*. And it was over 90 degrees and Houston-muggy. And in the cohort of 30 in front and 30 in back of us—those I could see—there were several fans in wheelchairs, or with canes or walkers, and one poor bastard on crutches. And we were limping along with everyone else, with no staff assistance, no special customer service, and no expedited handling.

One of the guys scanning tickets couldn't get his wand to work, so it was one line moving for a very long time, until they finally opened the other gates. Once we were finally in, there was no staff to tell us how to get to the elevators, and most folks walked up the long crisscrossing ramps. As in life generally, I lucked out when Tina got exasperated on my behalf and knocked on an unmarked glass door, and they let us into an elevator that took us to the floor where we had tickets. After this ordeal, there was the Bataan Death March half way around the stadium to get there—airports with roving carts could teach them a thing or two about getting people where they need to go when they are not fully able-bodied. And I almost crippled myself schlepping all the way from what was about 4:00 on a clock face to about 9:00, where our seats were. They were good seats with no steps, but at Toyota Center, where the Rockets play, they have wheelchair attendants all over the place who descend upon anyone who asks for one or who enters the venue with a cane, so we will not clog up the various pathways where they sell nachos and beer and merch.

As soon as we were seated, I complained to a friend in high County office whom Tina had seen when she was looking for help, and so had an hour on the phone yesterday to give the manager my take on the accommodations. I pointed out the dearth of information on the NRG website, and heaped scorn on Ticketmaster for how hard they make it to buy disability seating. I belong to the U2 fan club, and had advance notice and a password for early ticket purchases, only to discover that the limited seating for wheelchairs and mobility-impaired fans was not available through this means. Shame on them, and the merger of Live Nation and Ticketmaster means that they run the universe with almost no competition or feedback loops. They also would not send me the damned tickets online until two days before the show (they said it was to thwart scalping, but they must think scalpers are stupid), and did not answer my queries or emails about the matter. Gimps of the world, unite/ *Acavados unidos!!* Final grades: Music: A, venue: D on a generous curve.

Back to the review, now that I have that off my chest. They came out with The Edge crashing the chords of *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, *New Year's Day*, and *Pride (In the Name of Love)* on the B stage, and then they performed The entire *Joshua Tree* set. JT is a fantastic album from 30 years ago about the wonderment of the United States to these Irish rockers, and it contains three of their very best songs, *Where the Streets Have No Name*, *I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For*, and *With or Without You*. Their encores included 7 more songs, including *One* and *Miss Sarajevo*. We left after a great evening of music, with The Edge still thrilling us.

I could barely sleep with the receding excitement and my knee pain, but it was worth the wait. There are only a handful of acts I would see in a stadium, and am grateful that Springsteen, The Who, The Stones, Tom Petty, and others whom I love, still fill up more reasonable-sized basketball arenas, so I do not have to navigate the long distances. We chose not to see Taylor Swift and Paul McCartney last time they were in Houston, because they booked Minute Maid Field—a fabulous baseball and commencement venue—because the acoustics for baseball do not work equally well for music.

Thanks to my Posse, and I always enjoy engaging with you after a review or Posting. Still to go this summer: two more guitarists, Carlos Santana and John Mayer. In the space of a month or 6 weeks, we will have heard three of the very best. I am reminded regularly what a lucky boy I am.

Michael
May 26, 2017



