

My First Concert: John Lennon's Last

In 1974, 20,000 people including this writer attended a historic show

By [Robin Eileen Bernstein](#)

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Credit: [liveforlivemusic.com](#)

By the time I crawled into bed after seeing my first rock concert, it was nearly three in the morning, yet I found the energy to scribble in my beloved red diary. “FANTASTIC!!!!!!” I wrote in my loopy adolescent script. It stretched across an entire line, widely spaced uppercase letters followed by not one, not two, but six exclamation points. Then I dropped off to sleep with my lips turned up in a smile and my ears still ringing. My review would turn out to be a huge understatement.

The show was the opening night of Elton John’s sold-out run at Madison Square Garden, Thanksgiving 1974. I was 15 and took the train from my hometown of Far Rockaway in Queens into Manhattan with three girlfriends, leaving behind half-eaten turkey and untouched pumpkin pie. Rumors were flying about a special guest — someone *really* big. I

was moony about the Stones, so I pinned my hopes on Mick Jagger (although my true love was Charlie Watts because, more than anything, I wanted to play drums like him).

The drum thing hadn't gone over well with my parents. "Girls don't play drums!" they insisted. As far as I knew, they were right. But I wore them down and they reluctantly agreed to lessons.

"She'll outgrow it," Mom whispered to Dad, a corporate nine-to-fiver who dismissed the entire rock music world as "a bunch of long-haired hippies."

When it became obvious that I wasn't going to outgrow this, they promised to buy me a set of drums. By Thanksgiving, I had picked my color: blue sparkle.

The Power of the Drum

That night, my first inside the Garden, we hiked up to our \$7.50 seats in the green section, third row, with a view of Elton John's back. Binoculars helped. Lighted matches and the red-hot embers of cigarettes, legal and not, blinked like fireflies, transforming the dusky arena into a sweet-scented planetarium. I didn't smoke a thing, but I was giddy just the same.

I ping-ponged between two fantasies: imagining Mick Jagger strutting on stage and imagining myself on stage behind Elton's drummer Nigel Olsson's eight-piece honey-gold drum kit, my skinny arms and legs pounding out a powerful rhythm.

This required considerable mental effort because to me, rock drummers were tattooed British guys who overindulged in sex and drugs, not uptight Jewish girls who worried about split ends and acing geometry. Yet Olsson was slim and catlike, with black bangs nearly covering his eyes and hair draping past his shoulders, swinging with a rhythm all its own, like Cher's.

"He looks like a girl," I thought, and suddenly all things seemed possible.

'The Beatles Trumped the Stones'

About an hour later, Elton confirmed that a special guest would join them on stage. "I'm sure he will be no stranger to anybody in the audience, when I say it's *our* great privilege, and *your* great privilege, to see and hear..."

"Mick Jagger," I whispered, crossing my fingers and toes.

“...Mr. John Lennon!”

Twenty thousand fans erupted in that frenzy known as Beatlemania. I scanned the stage with my binoculars, which was no easy feat because the ground was actually shaking. In the white spotlight was a slender man with thick auburn hair parted down the middle. It's his hair I remember, perhaps because it reflected the light like a halo.

John Lennon Sings 3 Hits

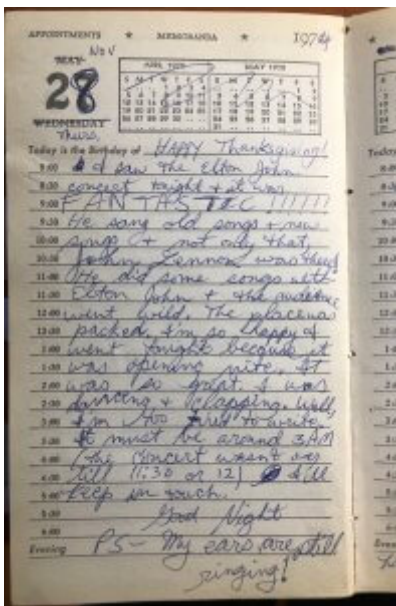
My prayers for Mick Jagger evaporated like smoke from a spent match. Even I knew The Beatles trumped The Stones.

Then I was screaming, waving my arms like wayward windshield wipers, which resulted in me accidentally belting a guy holding a rather large camera. It sailed out of his hands in a sickening slow-motion arc that, by some miracle befitting the evening, he managed to intercept before impact.

At that moment, I sorely wished I'd brought my camera. Lennon launched into “Whatever Gets You Through the Night,” “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” and finally “I Saw Her Standing There,” which he introduced with credit to “an old estranged fiancé of mine, called Paul.” Then John Lennon left the stage.

One Impassioned Scream From The Green Section

Six years and one week later, on an otherwise ordinary Monday evening, December 8, 1980, Dad gently woke me just before midnight with horrible news that instantly transformed my first concert into John Lennon's final arena performance.



Credit: Robin Eileen Bernstein

This time I waited until the next day to write about it in my diary. There was no upper case and there were no exclamation points, just paralyzing disbelief. Dad, who by now had softened his stance on long-haired hippies and girl drummers, seemed wounded, too, in some intangible way. This was the same man, after all, who used to sing “I Wanna Hold Your Hand” to me when I was five.

I no longer care that I forgot my camera that night because, magically, the entire concert was immortalized on Elton John’s *Here and There* album. Today when I play those three tunes, if I listen *really* closely, there it is, one impassioned scream from the green section, third row, from the lungs of a 15-year-old girl at her first concert. She can’t believe she’s seeing John Lennon! Nor can she quite believe she’ll get what she so desperately wants: to play blue sparkle drums in front of a cheering crowd, onstage in a band.

She doesn’t yet know that by the time Lennon would leave this world, she’d be the drummer in a band that would play on many stages in front of many crowds, for many years to come.

And she doesn’t know that even now, after more than four decades, she’ll still get the same electric thrill every time she gets a chance to pick up her sticks and perform. I want to reach into the speakers, back through time, and gently rest my hand on her shoulder.

I want to whisper to her, “Yes, someday you will.”



By [Robin Eileen Bernstein](#)

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