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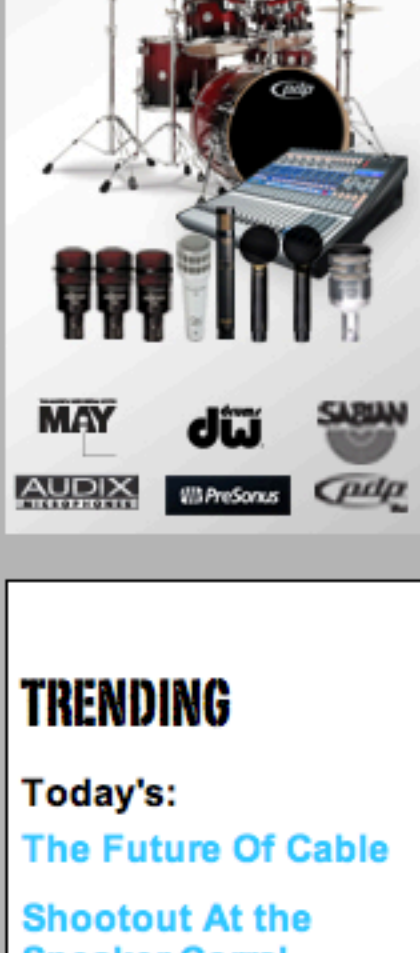
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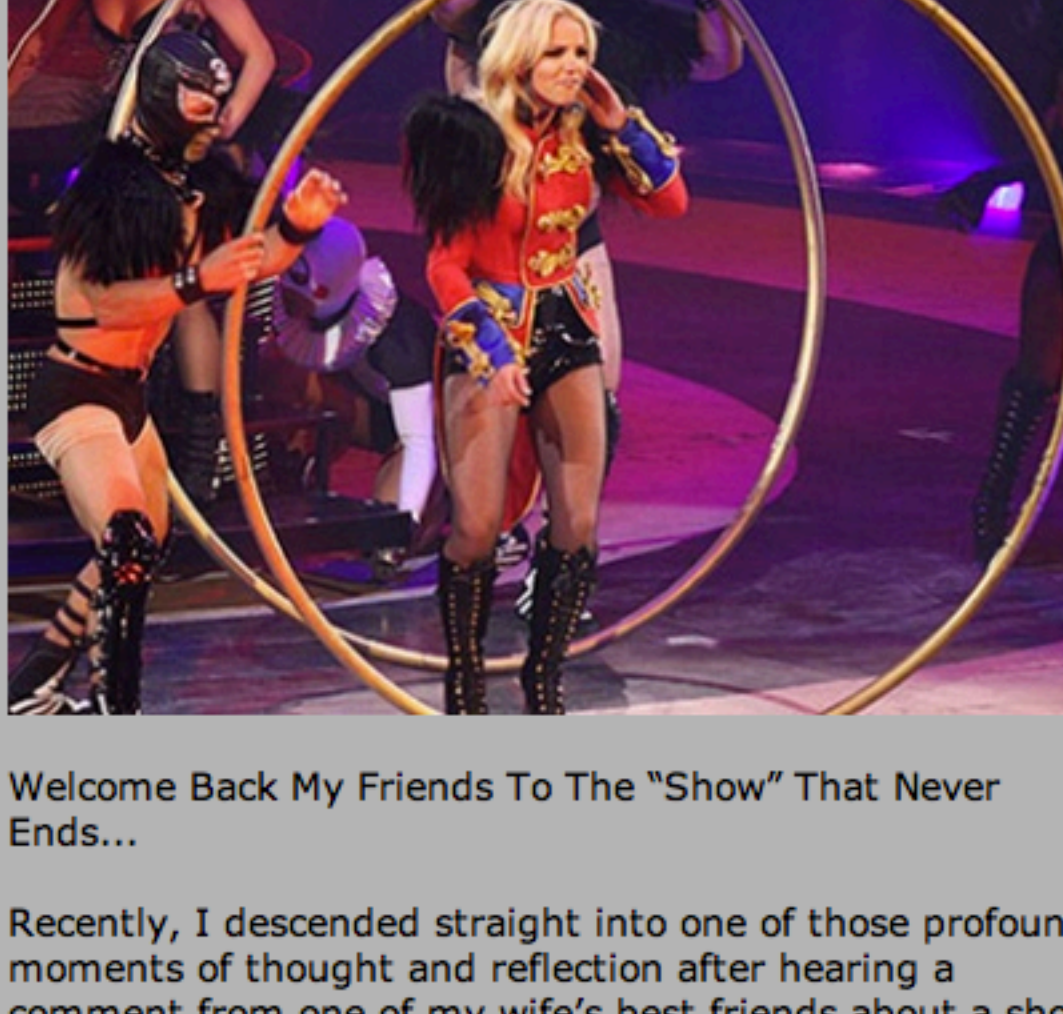
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THE SHOW VERSUS THE CONCERT

By robertscovill on Tue, 07/09/2013 - 1:52pm



Welcome Back My Friends To The "Show" That Never Ends...

Recently, I descended straight into one of those profound moments of thought and reflection after hearing a comment from one of my wife's best friends about a show she recently attended. My wife's friend—let's just call her "Angie"—is a big music fan who loves to go to concerts and loves music in general. I have gotten Angie into a few shows in my time and it's always a great time attending a show with her.

Now, Angie is not an industry professional, nor a production co-worker. Nor is she a critic or industry insider. Nope, it came straight from lips of a woman who owns a lawn-care equipment outlet, a blue-collar music fan through and through. Now, no disrespect meant at all, but my wife's friends are, generally speaking, not my "go-to" source for music industry trends and insights. But after her comment, I have to admit; I may have to rethink that strategy moving forward.

Recently, she and her teen daughter attended a concert for one of the reigning doe-eyed superstars of whose music she and her daughter are considerable fans. When I asked her "how was it?" I was a little startled by her simple but, in retrospect, very insightful response.

She said, "Well, it was a great show but not really a concert at all" Uh ... okay, Angie, you now have my full attention, please tell me more.

She went on to say that, while the lighting, and the numerous costume changes and acrobatics and pyrotechnics and set design with all its moving parts were very impressive, she actually went there to experience the music and hear the performer and her band perform the songs. Uh ... wait, what did you just say???

Of course this sent my noggin reeling and I've been thinking about it off and on ever since. It got me to thinking about the path that concert production has taken over the decades and it made me start to wonder where it all kind of took a tack toward where it is now and certainly made me wonder, where is it all going?

Did this all kind of start in the '50s and '60s where concerts became much more than music performances; they became social commentary and rallying events? Does it have its roots in the '70s and '80s where there was a steady diet of "one-upmanship" by every band able to sell-out an arena? Or is it a child of the excesses of the '90s money boom or conversely a backlash to the grunge movement's "everything understated" mantra?

At the end of the day, has it all culminated into essentially just a bunch of mini Super Bowl Half time shows making stops in every city? The answer is probably a "yes" to all of those submissions in varying degrees. All I know, is that Angie's comment stopped me in my tracks and got me thinking about it for quite a while.

Now, while I had moved on and kind of put my wonderment about Angie's comments away in my sub-consciousness for safe keeping, those thoughts came roaring back to the foreground again this morning while awakening for an early morning flight out of Newark. The TV was on and frankly I can't remember the channel, but on came an ad for a new reality show. It seems that in today's world, all streams of consciousness and social commentary flow from and through the menu of reality shows.

The new reality series is called "Tait Stages". The show apparently centers on the infamous staging company Tait Towers and all that goes on behind the scenes during the building of some of the most exotic and elaborate stage designs for today's biggest artists. Tait Towers is known for the grandest and most elaborate stage designs we have seen in the touring world to this point. Think U2's 360 tour and you get the idea. Tait are the builders of some of the most magnificent and grand designs in the world.

I have to admit that I haven't actually seen the show as it has yet to air, and so I can't comment directly on the show itself. But the tag and teaser lines in the commercial took me directly back to Angie's comments. Here are a couple of samples: "It used to be that artist sold records, well now they're in the business of selling seats and we help them do that" along with the final one "We're only as good as our last show".

Now while these seem like relatively innocuous—yet enticing—tag lines cherry picked by the marketers of the show, I was struck by the fact that the first one is essentially saying that today's artists are no longer in the business of selling music, they are in the business of selling concert tickets and that that can't be done without a good set design. Really? Hmmm ... Admittedly, that disturbs me a bit.

Okay, I work in the industry, I see the writing on the wall and there might be just a little more truth/reality in that statement than I would care to admit. But, the true sentiment of it may be the real disheartening part for live music fans. The social commentary it provides is that the music performance and even the music itself doesn't really have as much meaning anymore to the attendee. What apparently matters more is how music is presented in the context of the production elements of the show. I read it as "we really don't care what the picture is of, as long as we get to see it in a really expensive and elaborate frame".

Even the last tag line is traditionally attributed to entertainers not production companies. i.e. "In this biz you're only as good as your last _____" fill in the blank. show, recording, movie, performance etc. Rarely have I ever thought of "set design" when saying that. But maybe that's actually true for anyone's work these days. Maybe you ARE only as good as your most recent work, even if you're the show carpenter.

But with regard to the stage/set designers—I'll even include the lighting designers and choreographers since they work so hand-in-hand anymore—the reality show tag line implies that the tour couldn't be as successful without these elements.

But in today's world, even that concept all starts to come into focus and make a bit more sense if people are indeed driven to pay to see a "show" in lieu of a "concert". Maybe we really are selling seats and not music today. I don't know if mentally or even emotionally, I ever really separated those two things with regard to musical performances until Angie shared her observation.

So I started wondering again; is the large scale concert industry morphing into essentially a cross section of the Electronic Dance Music/"EDM" model and the "Cirque du Soleil" model? By this I mean, in the end, are arena and stadium concerts going to wind up being more about the shock and awe of cutting-edge visuals and production tricks set against what amounts to a music "bed track", where the musicianship element is essentially meaningless? There are plenty of clues to suggest that concerts may be headed squarely in that direction.

I recall seeing what I thought to be an extreme version of this, maybe even an early precursor to this kind of thing while in attendance at Coachella. At a specified time during the night at a break in the main stage performances, the stage along with the lighting and video production actually puts on a "performance". A pre-programmed, pre-recorded crescendo of lights, sound and visuals without a single person on stage steps front and center at one of the biggest festivals of the year. Tens of thousands of people view it every night. The amount of man-hours and production costs associated with creating this "moment" must have been staggering. I watched it once and frankly kind of shrugged my shoulders at the end. "Sigh ... different strokes for different folks I guess"

Given the current scale of, and explosive growth of EDM driven events, it begs this question; is the idea of paying money to watch someone perform their music live, the music that you listen to regularly on all of your devices as the sound track to your life, is that a dying concept? Have we inadvertently marginalized musical performance skills and any intimacy from concerts to the point where they are now nothing more than production showcases with a beat? At what point do the production elements stop serving the music and become it's master?

Here's what I'm getting at. In the Cirque model, the depth of the story definitely takes second seat to the visuals and all of the production and choreography by the dancers and athlete/actors/acrobats in their shows. If you've seen their shows, you soon realize even the stage and the building itself become primary, not secondary players in the production. Now this is not to in any way knock the Cirque shows or portray them in a negative light. From the production point of view, their creativity and work is unrivaled in my opinion with regard to what they do in that context. Their shows are simply stunning to see and witness, but that said, the story lines in their shows do not move me in a way that a great movie or Broadway storyline moves me, nor do they reach a place in my soul that the right lyric delivered with the right melody and rhythm do.

Another challenge that we have with today's concerts in terms of production "tricks" and elaborate staging is that there is no mystery and anticipation to seeing them anymore. Within seconds of an opening night all of your expensive gags are available to view by the world on YouTube. I saw this first hand the other night at the FireFly festival where when the show started, there were literally THOUSANDS of people holding cell phones in the air, not to get a picture mind you, but to record video all of which will likely get posted within minutes of viewing.

I can remember as a young concert goer, you were lucky if you got a glimpse of the coming show's production attributes while perusing a paper magazine (remember those?) like Cream or Rolling Stone for upcoming big shows with grand productions from the likes of Pink Floyd or Led Zeppelin or Rush, etc. But in those cases, it always built anticipation without giving the show away. I wonder as we get more and more instant awareness of show attributes through social media if it will in turn devalue and dilute the "big bang" of the big production? Does it really matter? Have we become completely desensitized to it all now and just go in with the expectation that everyone will offer all the latest gags and tricks? How would you honestly react to a music concert today that only offered par can lighting of the act on a simple stage? Think about that for a second ... honestly.

I've been lucky enough in my life to tour with a number of acts where, while offering high production value, the "performance" of their music was also clearly front and center not only for the audience but just as importantly for the band; not the least of which is Tom Petty.

Even though Tom and the HBs have offered very clever and creative production looks in the past, the music always took a front seat in terms of pecking order. That said, today there is a clear movement in Tom's camp to streamline their productions and put the focus even more on the band and what is coming out of their mouths and their hands, not what is behind them on a screen or moving above their heads.

It's not a money-saving move, it's a conscious-effort-to-put-focus-on-the-music-and-the-musicianship move, and I, for one, applaud them for it.

It's a courageous thing to do during the later stages of anyone's career where there would be great temptation by an artist to lean on elaborate staging and tricks to potentially sway attention away from what might be best described as "warning" skills and abilities. Or even in some instances the temptation to present elaborate production to justify, let's just call them "elaborate", ticket prices. Oh but wait, now we're back to the reality show where the "talent" were apparently being asked to applaud and reward with our dollars are the set and lighting designers right? Remember, their work is necessary in order to sell the tickets?

In the future, I wonder where we'll have to go if we want to "hear" a concert with musicians that "perform/play" their music? Maybe that's the clue to discernment right there; maybe we go to "hear" concerts and we go to "see" shows. I for one am kind of glad rock music is to a large degree back underground and I'm pretty certain country music would be well served by going back there for a while too. Agghh, I don't know, maybe it's just predictable evolution and as the prophet Don Henley once emphatically stated, "don't look back you can never look back".

So what do you all think? Is there a "sweet spot" balance for all of this? i.e. a perfect balance of production scale, musicianship and song craft against a perfect ticket price? I wonder if that balance currently exists or if it will ever exist in the future for people that love ... wait for it ... "concerts" a bit more than they love "shows".

Thanks, Angie.

- Robert Scovill

Gigs concert production show stage staging tait v. vs

Facebook comments box

Posting as Robert Scovill (Change)

Steve Payne · Richmond, Virginia

Robert, thanks for taking the time to verbalize what so many of us are thinking...and thanks, Angie.

Bo Jacob · Virginia Commonwealth University

Robert, you need to see Randy Newman "In Concert".

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