

There's no one like Neil

By Gail Grenier Sweet ©2004

It was a cool night June 19. My fingers had shrunken. I was clapping so hard, my rings were rattling around and I thought I might fling them off.

I didn't care. I was watching Neil Young at the Marcus Amphitheater, drawn out of my seat like thousands around me, applauding "Bandit," a song I had never heard before. Neil played acoustic guitar and sang, melancholy, over and over: "Someday you'll find everything you're looking for."

If only.

How do I describe the sweet and bitter songs of a man who bares his soul but always bares it obliquely? Neil is ever the artist, and nothing is direct. I'll never decode some of his songs — and I'm sure he's often just playin' with us. But his "Greendale" concert was one of the best I've seen since I first saw him perform about 30 years ago because:

- Neil did a lot of talking, which is rare. The nature of this concert is an "Our Town" type story. Neil is the narrator as well as the voice (through song) of all the characters, portrayed by actors in a remarkable moving set.
- The concert held 1-3/4 hours of new music, but I could follow it.
- Neil unleashed fire I don't recall seeing before. He may be a 57- year-old folk rocker, but his lyrics and set showed he's still passionate about protecting the earth ("Be the rain"); about the Patriot Act ("We'll be watching you and everything you do and you can do your part by watching others too"); about peace ("Support the war"); about privacy ("fighting for freedom of silence... trying to be anonymous"); and about common decency ("The only good thing about TV is shows like 'Leave it to Beaver'.... "A little Mayberry living could go a long long way").

After Neil's very moving "Greendale" set, he played 45 minutes of encore music for his enthusiastic audience (composed of folks from about 8 years old to about 60). With classics like "Hey Hey, My My" and "Like a Hurricane," the amphitheater came alive with a sea of people standing and moving without inhibition to the music. It was as if the sound went into our bodies. The wild-haired woman next to me described the experience as "transcendent."

When George Harrison died, I realized the old rock icons can't perform forever. So if I love their music and can afford the ticket, I'm going to see them play. I just bring along earplugs.

Neil runs on creativity; every album is different. His show is never an oldies review. He's the only musician who can sing "Rock and roll can never die" without irony to a melody that sounds like an old country song. His legs move to a rhythm only he can sense. His face may be craggy and his hair ragged, but his voice still rings pure and high. There's no one like Neil Young.

The End

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