

# Long Read



Johanna Gohmann: 'I long to stand in a tight crowd, uncomfortably holding my own coat, and cheer on someone in velvet pants, salvation blasting through me via electric guitar'  
HARRY ZERNIKE

# Rolling *back the* rock of ages

In an age when live music is no more, the yearning to recapture that lost rush can be overwhelming – especially when you're in the 'wrong' age bracket, writes **Johanna Gohmann**

**T**he last concert ticket I purchased before Covid-19 crushed its diseased, spiky red boot over everything was to see folk-rocker Mondo Cozmo. It cost \$18, and was to be held at Rough Trade, a smallish venue in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. I bought a single ticket, as I knew that if I invited any of my middle-aged friends to a concert in Williamsburg on a Monday night, they'd blink at me like I'd just asked if they maybe wanted to meet me at Coney Island at 3am to punch each other repeatedly in the face.

I am also middle-aged. In my 40s, to be precise (ish.) And if there is one thing I have learned from my decades of concert-going, it's that I am now no longer supposed to want to go to concerts. Sure, I can go to old people concerts. I can go perch on a blanket in Central Park, and bob my head as older bands play acoustic versions of their hits – say, Eddie Vedder plucking out Even Flow on the mandolin. Or I can get a ticket to Jagged Little Pill on Broadway, and sway my perimenopausal hips to You Oughta Know.

But other shows? Where crowds crush against the stage, throwing their bodies and beer around with wild abandon? These should no longer be on my list of acceptable activities. And if I do still insist on attending, can I not have the decency to haul my aged flesh up to the balcony, and just peer down over the side in my progressive lenses?

One of the last concerts I attended pre-pandemic was Barns Courtney, and I was – again – on my own. I stood down on the floor among the swarms of youths, most of whom were clad in those blue jeans I no longer understand, with the waistlines so high they appear to be swallowing the wearer whole, like a wide-legged denim shark.

I could feel the crowd on the floor shift and shuffle as it always does before a show, and I noted that I was now somehow standing next to what appeared to be the other "old people" in attendance. As if the crowd were acting as a sifter, straining all of the crowd's feet to a huddle in the corner. Someone bumped sharply into my back, and a twentysomething woman with a sleek blowout protectively held her arm out for me. I thanked her, and she smiled, introducing herself as Kayley. She was at the concert with her friend Kelly, a woman with an even shinier blowout. Kayley and Kelly both worked in banking.

"We're the only ones of our friends who have money!" they smiled proudly.

"So, do you, um . . . know someone in the band?" Kayley asked me, her eyes peering at me curiously. I could read the question on her face. Was I perhaps the mother of the drummer, here to cheer on my handsome son? Did I maybe mix up venues, thinking this was a lecture on Glennon Doyle's Untamed?

"No," I shrugged. "I just like live music."

Kayley nodded enthusiastically. "Totally!"

And then the concert began, and the room was flooded with sound and light, and it no longer mattered that I was wearing Aerosoles in a sea of Vans. I lost myself in the drums and fervour, and when the singer demanded that we all "jump jump jump!", I did as instructed, even though it meant wetting my pants slightly. Because that is what

sometimes happens when a body that's given birth to a 9lb human does several consecutive jumps.

At the end of the set, Kayley turned to me, beaming, while the crowd screamed for an encore.

"That was great!" she gasped.

"It was!" I agreed.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I hurried to check it in case it was about my son. It was. He wet the bed, read my husband's text. Where are the clean top sheets?

I quickly tapped out a reply as a roar went up from the crowd. The band again took the stage, and I roared along with them, quietly reflecting that my son's bladder appeared to be somewhat synced with my own.

That concert now feels like it happened in a different lifetime. And this past year marks the longest stretch of my adult life without seeing any kind of live music. (Unless you count the hordes of musicians that crowded Brooklyn's streets the day Donald Trump was defeated, which was so exhilarating and moving, I burst into tears at the sight of a random trombone.)

**W**e all have our daydreams for the things we'll do once the pandemic is over. Some of my friends fantasise about a return to the theatre, perching on a velvet seat to applaud Patti LuPone. My mother wishes to once again sit in a wooden pew and listen to a man in a robe explain the path to salvation. Me, I long to stand in a tight crowd, uncomfortably holding my own coat, and cheer on someone in velvet pants, salvation blasting through me via electric guitar.

Now, when I stare at the forlorn refund email for Mondo Cozmo, I wonder about the fate of concerts. Will they ever be the same again? Or will they all be dystopian, Flaming Lips-style shows, where we roll around music halls like lost beach balls, encased in plastic bubbles? How old will I even be when venues reopen their doors? The way things are going, I may be so grey-haired and withered that I get mistaken for some microdose-induced vision, a sunken-eyed spectre roaming among the children in sensible slip-ons.

I attended my very first concert when I was eight. It was Crystal Gayle. I sort of hazily remember her cascading, shower curtain of hair swinging behind her as she sang about something making her brown eyes blue. (What caused such a thing, the eight-year-old me wondered. Contact lenses? Ringworm?)

But the first concert I attended that really moved me, the first show I went to where I felt the electricity fizzling through the crowd, and felt the bottom drop out of my stomach in the most delightful way . . . well, I'm just going to say it. It was New Kids on the Block.

At 12 years old, I wasn't even much of an NKOTB fan, but more a fan of not being ostracised by my tween friends. So I indifferently joined a cluster of kids heading to Market Square Arena in Indianapolis. But by the time I emerged from the venue – raw throated from shrieking, my ears experiencing their first ever tingle of tinnitus – I was certain of two things: one, Donnie Wahlberg was a god among men; and two, ►►



Barns Courtney performs live at Electric Ballroom in Camden, London in October 2019 GETTY

outside of my dreams, that was the closest I'd ever felt to flying. I practically levitated to my friend's mom's minivan in my Hangin' Tough hoodie. My years of Catholic school had clearly lied to me. This was Holy Communion.

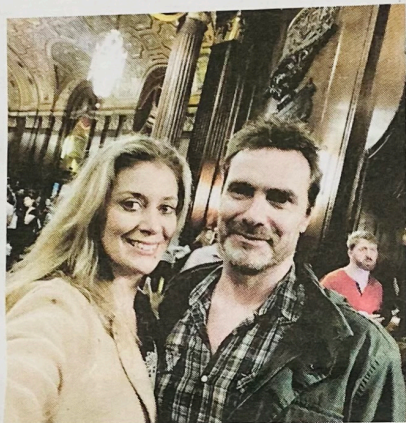
I have chased that same concert high ever since. With great success, I have to say. Though my passion for concerts often leads people to assume I am knowledgeable about music: that I can coolly rattle off the names of band members or the dates of albums, or easily discuss how the blues gave birth to skiffle which gave way to Def Leppard. And I cannot. I don't even have any real loyalties to specific genres or artists. I likely cheered for the Polyphonic Spree as loudly as I did for Pixies and for Prince. (Okay, maybe a little bit louder for Prince.)

I did have a brief but magical stretch, in my early 30s, where I had a gig as a pretend rock journalist. I was living in Dublin at the time with my Irish husband, and I answered an ad for an "online music correspondent". I was ecstatic when I was offered the position, though suspicious it was actually real, as I never spoke to a single person behind the operation. Every communication took place via a loof, "Hey there"-type emails, which made it all feel vaguely hoax-like.

Fortunately, I was never asked to give any money to the site, but then I was never given any money either. However, I was given something I valued far more - passes to gigs. I attended reams of shows, all for free, all in exchange for my "coverage", which essentially consisted of me taking shaky video clips while dancing and trying not to spill my pint of Smithwicks. It was - in a word - glorious. I saw amazing bands in tiny venues, and all from the third or fourth row. (My husband outright refused to stand in the front row, unwilling to betray his Irish sensibilities with such an overt display of enthusiasm for something.)

I saw smaller artists like Tegan & Sara and the Vaccines, and bigger bands like the Killers. I saw MGMT, Snow Patrol, White Lies, Vampire Weekend. I saw Florence Welch of Florence and the Machine climb along the side of the balcony in the Olympia Theatre. I gazed skyward as Pink swung overhead dangling from a strip of fabric. I stood in the "Splash Zone" of a Kylie Minogue concert, close enough that I could see the water droplets hitting her famed posterior during a finale that involved fake rain.

And I fainted while watching Lady Gaga. Not due to any Beatles-esque like emotional frenzy, but because I had recently recovered from the flu, and being in a tight crowd while attempting to dance proved too much for my lungs. I careened backwards into a crowd of 19-year-old Little Monsters (the official term for Gaga fans), their monster claws retracting from my 33-year-old weirdness like I was the sole monster present. David caught me before I landed in a pile of pleather purses, and dragged me to the back of the venue. Once I regained consciousness, I insisted on seeing out the show (Gaga hadn't sung Poker Face yet). My weary husband forced me to watch the rest standing at the back, where oxygen was more plentiful.



Jo and her husband David at a Dermot Kennedy concert in the Kings Theatre, Brooklyn



Kylie Minogue performs live on stage during the first leg of her Aphrodite Les Folies Tour; below: a Kylie concert towel GETTY



Johanna Gohmann strikes a pose at the Electric Picnic

I know some would say my love of concerts is simply connected to my youth. That it reminds me of simpler, freer times, and is now akin to taking trapeze lessons, or giving myself purple highlights - merely another spoke in the careering wheel of a midlife crisis. But, as I never really stopped going to concerts at any point in my life, I can't say this is entirely true.

And I'm sure many would just tell me to grow up. My father said as much to me once, when I was waiting in line to see Arcade Fire. I was chatting with him on my phone, and when I mentioned where I was, he said: "Aren't you a bit old for that?"

I was 30.

Rock and roll has always been considered the domain of the young. But who needs music more than the middle-aged? We are the ones who know what lies round the bend. We know that time is short. We know all there is to gain, and all there is to lose, and that you'd better wave your hands in the air like you just don't care.

One of the gifts of getting older is that, in many ways, this is true: I just don't care. Not really. Do I feel a blip of self-consciousness when the Kellys and Kayleys offer me extra space, because they seem worried I might throw out a knee? Sure. But I've also been around long enough to know to seize happiness wherever I can find it. And I know that only a fool deprives themselves of full-hearted joy because they are worried about how it looks. Now, wouldn't it be nice if shows all started at 8pm sharp and we fully did away with encores? I would support these changes, yes.

Though I will concede that I equate shows with feeling free. Concerts are the only thing that blast away my own inner concert of worry and stress. They're the closest I can get to meditation or prayer - to emptying my head of my own noise, and letting it fill instead with song. Which is why the absence of concerts at this point in time, when high anxiety is our new inner baseline, when we're boxed in our homes and freedom is so scarce, feels exceptionally bleak.

The other day, when doing some mindless quarantine cleaning, I came across the complimentary hand towel that was given to me at that Kylie Minogue concert. When my son was a toddler, it was the perfect size bath towel for him, and I would wrap his chubby frame in it as he ran around the apartment, the words "Splash Zone!" written in big white letters across his tummy.

Now that he's eight, it's been redeployed as a dust cloth. But I hold on to it. And I try to envision some day in the distant future, when I am again down on the floor, and crowds no longer fill me with fear, but again feel like communion. Granted, I may be so old I'll have the towel wrapped around my head like a ragged scarf, like some cartoon witch. But I dream of it anyway. I want to stay in the Splash Zone. ■

