

Why I cry at concerts

I thought of Julie as I was getting ready for Roy Harper's concert last Saturday. Julie and I listened to Roy Harper's albums on her music centre in her bedroom with her German Shepherd dog, Mazda, lying on the floor between us. We could not have predicted that Harper would still be performing 35 years later at a concert to celebrate his 70th birthday. Rock music was not the domain of old men, and we couldn't see further than our A-Levels back then.

I've been to some big gigs in recent years, of musicians that Julie and I liked, and I have cried at all of them. We listened to Neil Young's 'Old Man' in Julie's bedroom; a song that Young wrote aged 24. It's so poignant hearing him sing it now he is in his sixties, closer to the 'old man' than the young man that narrates the song. I sobbed through it when I saw Neil Young at the Hop Farm Festival in 2008 and again at Hyde Park in 2009. I blubbed throughout Roy Harper's rendition of 'When an old cricketer leaves the crease' at Saturday's concert, which is odd because I can't bear cricket. I cried instead for the metaphor of ageing in the song, the passing of time and people. Then Harper invited his old friend Jimmy Page onto the stage. I whooped and pummeled my husband's arm 'Jimmy Page, Jimmy Page!' I said, in case he hadn't noticed the legend on stage.

I hadn't seen Jimmy Page perform since 1979 when Julie and I saw Led Zeppelin at Knebworth. The two of us agreed that we could die happy once we'd seen the band, aged all of 19 as we were at the time. Zepp's performance lived up to our expectations, and that concert remains a high point in my life. Jimmy Page was a surprise guest at Harper's concert, now white-haired and pony-tailed; so different from the '70s photo of Robert Plant and Jimmy Page that hangs by my desk. I hadn't expected to see him perform again, ever. Overwhelmed by the moment, I cried through the rest of the concert and long after it ended.

I've been trying to figure out why I get so emotional at these concerts, when the old greats play. First of all, I'm astonished that they're still performing in their sixties and seventies, decades of life experience permeating lyrics written in their youth. Harper talked at the concert of two friends he had lost in the past month: Bert Jansch and David Bedford. The latter had been due to perform at that concert. None of us know when we, or our friends, will be the 'old cricketer' leaving the crease. When we attend these concerts, we don't know if it will be the artists' last performance. These artists are such good models of older people, of ageing; that you don't have to stop performing, take up golf or watch daytime television instead. It gives me hope that I will carry on writing, going to concerts, doing the things I enjoy as I grow older.

I also cry when I am in a large crowd. Twelve years into a chronic illness, I suffer from low energy, aches and pains, but I am nowhere as bad as in the early years. I hardly left the house for four years, and then suffered claustrophobia due to my enforced isolation. I overcame it with the help of a couple of friends by gradual exposure to pubs and cafes: ten minutes at first, then building up to whole evenings until the anxiety left me. I can now go gigs, as long as I get sufficient rest before and after the event.

Just before my illness struck, I went to a concert at the old Wembley Stadium. During the worst of my illness, I thought that this was the last such event I would ever

attend. Now, when I am at a festival or concert, there is a moment when I look at the raised arms of the crowd, punching the air, applauding, and I feel grateful to be there, that the Wembley concert was not my swansong after all. And I cry at those moments.

It was only this weekend at the Roy Harper concert at the Royal Festival Hall on 5 November 2011 that I realized that I cry for Julie too. I cry for the afternoons in her bedroom listening to records back in the '70s; I cry for the reason that I can't ask Julie to join me at these concerts, or phone or write to her to tell her about them. Julie died a week before her 25th birthday, in 1985, having taken an overdose of Paracetamol a few days before.

So I cry for lost youth – mine and the artists' – for the richness and maturity of their delivery of old songs, for lost friends, for not knowing when our time is up, for the sheer joy of being in a crowd when it seemed, once, that I would never experience that again. But most of all I cry for Julie.

© Maria C. McCarthy, 2011

Links:

Roy Harper performs 'When an old cricketer leaves the crease' at the Royal Festival Hall, 5 November 2011

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWoL0eLEmGA>

Roy Harper performs 'Any Old Rock' with Jimmy Page at the Royal Festival Hall, 5 November 2011

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M2bdLAVHbQU>