

CURRENTS

Live Aid defined music for Gen X

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Philadelphia, birthplace of our nation, can also lay claim to being the U.S. cradle for a modern cultural phenomenon: the fund-raising mega-rock concert. Thanks to favorable geography, the availability of super-capacity John F. Kennedy Stadium, and the experienced local promoters Electric Factory Concerts, Live Aid debuted in Philadelphia on July 13, 1985.

Yours truly was among the 101,000 in the stands in Philly 30 years ago for this exhilarating occasion.

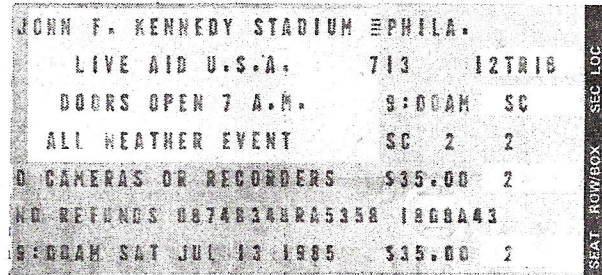
The organizers billed Live Aid as a “global jukebox,” and for those of us in the stands, it delivered a heady dream lineup: chart-topping artists, complemented by music legends, all performing live in a single daylong concert. For \$35, it was a priceless bargain.

Reportedly 1.5 billion people around the world watched the live broadcast of the concert, which raised more than \$280 million in funds and global awareness exponentially for Ethiopian famine relief. As a member of Generation X, I knew how the baby boomers who had been to Woodstock reveled in being able to say that they had been there. Live Aid was my shot at attending a generational touchstone event.

So what was it like to be at (one of) the centers of the universe that day? In a word, hot. The mercury soared to 88 humid degrees, and if you were at all familiar with good old JFK Stadium, you know that there were very few amenities. The restrooms flooded early in the day, and lines stretched for blocks, so we tried to keep our bathroom runs to a minimum.

One concertgoer took climate control into his own hands, spraying us and others in the sweltering crowd with a hose from a broken cooling station. A dude behind us in the bleachers kept complaining that he felt ready to hurl, which kept my friends and me a little on edge. Fortunately, when you’re a college student, such creature discomforts don’t ruin your enjoyment of the day.

What do I remember about the show? The concert’s opening hymn, “Amazing Grace,” sung by Joan Baez, kicked off the festivities at 9 a.m. And we danced as the local favorites the Hooters performed their two-song set, surprising the global audience who knew little of them. We cheered when Teddy Pendergrass returned to the stage in his first performance since the 1982 accident that left him paralyzed.



Ticket stub from Live Aid in Philadelphia's John F. Kennedy Stadium on July 13, 1985. The concert pass cost \$35.

And the music went on and on. It was as if I had designed my fantasy rock all-star team: Bryan Adams, Simple Minds, the Pretenders, Tom Petty, the Cars, the Power Station, and Duran Duran. A reunion of Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young proved that there’s always hope for reconciliation. A set by the surviving members of Led Zeppelin thrilled fans who had first rocked out to them back when “Stairway to Heaven” was new music.

While the bands set up at JFK, we’d watch the large screens that we could barely see to get a glimpse of the acts performing at the partner venue, Wembley Stadium in London. Not a bad bill across the pond: Sting, Dire Straits, Queen, David Bowie, the Who, Elton John, U2.

I recall thinking at the time that Phil Collins was a hero because he was the only singer who performed in the morning at Wembley, and through the magic of the Concorde jet (remember those?), in the evening in Philly. Of course, this feat primarily required Phil to sit tight in first class during a three-hour flight, but hey, it seemed impressive then.

The evening showcased some of music’s biggest acts. Philly girl Patti LaBelle, capped by a remarkable sculpted, beaded plume of hair, stirred it up. Mick Jagger moved like, well, Jagger as he performed a duet of “It’s Only Rock ‘n Roll” with Tina Turner. My favorites, hometown boys Daryl Hall and John Oates, played along with their idols, David Ruffin and Eddie Kendricks of the Temptations. Then Lionel Richie led the all-star choir in one of the songs that started it all, “We Are the World.”

The concert wrapped at 11 p.m., just under the wire of Philly’s notorious concert curfew. Departing for the burbs after a long, but stellar day, I had the satisfaction of having helped a humanitarian cause while also earning the right to say that “I was there” for the defining musical event of my generation.

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