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MUSIC > THE BEATLES IN MILWAUKEE

Still a thrill, 45 years later

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Forty-five years ago, on Sept. 4, 1964, The Beatles gave a concert in Milwaukee, stop No. 12 on their first American tour, which visited 25 cities, from San Francisco to New York.

It was the only time the group appeared in Wisconsin.

When they took the stage at the Milwaukee Arena that late summer evening, they had already accomplished the lofty objective they had set for themselves years before, as remembered by George Harrison in the book "The Beatles," by Hunter Davies:

"John would shout, 'Where are we going, fellas?' We'd shout back, 'To the top, Johnny!' Then he would shout, 'What top?' 'To the topmost of the poppermost, Johnny!'"

Five months earlier, Beatlemania reached an amazing peak during the week of April 4 when 12 positions on The Billboard Hot 100 singles chart were held by Beatles songs.

On Aug. 12, about three weeks before the



A ticket stub from The Beatles' 1964 concert at the Milwaukee Arena. Prices ranged from \$3.50 to \$5.50.

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BEATLES > Visit lasted about 24 hours

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Milwaukee concert, Variety estimated that 80 million Beatles records had been purchased since the band signed its first contract in the summer of 1962. Two-song 45-rpm singles were priced at 79 cents each in an advertisement for Milwaukee's Gimbles-Schuster store on Sept. 3, 1964. At that price, Beatles' record sales by August 1964 added up to \$63 million, equivalent to more than \$425 million in today's dollars.

Ringo Starr was 24, John Lennon, 23, Paul McCartney, 22, and Harrison, 21.

Front-row seats

Lenore Barczak was a West Allis teen when she took a bus to The Beatles concert on that fabled Friday night in Milwaukee. She's only one of a few Wisconsin residents who can say they saw the Fab Four live, and the fact that she sat in the front row and was captured on film by a TV news cameraman — a copy of which was preserved by Milwaukee's "5th Beatle," radio DJ Bob Barry — elevates her into Beatlemania air so rare she should be able to charge Boomers to be in her presence.

Despite the great seats, she and her group didn't hear much music. "I heard the first note of the first chord, but from that point on the Beatles were completely drowned out by thousands of screaming girls," she said. "We screamed all the way through, too!"

Bruce Agacki was a Milwaukee teen old enough to drive his own two-tone, black-with-a-white-top, 1956 Buick Special Coupe to the concert with friends. "I'll never forget the concert's electricity," he said. "The screaming was the loudest I've ever heard, and it didn't stop until they left the stage."

There was a bank of speakers above his seat, so he was among the few who could hear the Beatles over the screaming. "They sounded just like they did on their records or on TV," he recalled. "But the whole atmosphere really overtook what was happening on stage."

Jackie Grandy was a Milwaukee teen when she went to see the Beatles with her two best friends, Bonnie and Kathy.

"We used to meet at the bus stop on school days and listen to Bob Barry on a transistor radio. One morning he said he was going to play a new Beatles single, so we heard 'Do You Want To Know A Secret' for the first time together. When it was over we stood and cried and thought it was the most beautiful song ever."

Grandy and her friends sat on the left side about "half way up into the

stands." They couldn't see very well and didn't hear much music. "But like most of the girls we screamed and cried throughout the concert; everybody had make-up dripping down."

Two-thirds back from the stage in the center section sat Bill Dreher, a Bay View teen. He accompanied his mother and younger sister to The Beatles show as their "aide-de-camp."

He didn't hear any Beatles music. "There was no break in the screaming once they took the stage," he said, "it was loud and crazy."

Tickets

The 12,000 or so individuals at Milwaukee's Beatles concert held tickets supplied by Topping and Co. International House. Tickets were priced from \$3.50 to \$5.50, which in 2009 dollars equals a range of \$24 to \$38.

Proprietor Nick Topping was an experienced concert promoter, having booked shows featuring Miriam Makeba, Pete Seeger and others. In February 1964, just after the Beatles were featured three Sundays in a row on "The Ed Sullivan Show," he was contacted by Chicago-based Triangle Productions and offered an opportunity to promote a Milwaukee appearance by the group.

The Milwaukee concert was scheduled to begin at 8 p.m. with four opening acts: The Exciters, Jackie DeShannon, The Righteous Brothers, and The Bill Black Combo. However, a few days before, Clarence Frogman Henry replaced The Righteous Brothers on the bill.

Prior to the concert, Harrison, McCartney, and Starr gave a press conference hosted by Barry. Lennon, nursing a sore throat and saving himself for the show, wasn't present.

When a reporter asked whether they were aware of Milwaukee prior to the gig, Starr replied quickly in his Liverpool accent, "I've 'eard of the beer that made it famous!"

In response to, "Have you gentlemen given any thought to what you will do after the bubble bursts?" Harrison answered "Ice hockey," and McCartney: "Ringo originally wanted to own a string of hair-dressing salons."

Concert reviews

"On Friday night at the arena, the Beatles took the stage at 9:10 p.m.," wrote Gerald Kloss of The Milwaukee Journal in a review that was published on Sept. 5. They opened with "I Saw Her Standing There."

Kloss referred to them as "bushy

haired intruders from Liverpool." He continued: "So here they were at last, almost within falling dandruff distance and they looked even more cuddly than they had on the Ed Sullivan TV shows."

According to Kloss, they also performed "All My Loving," "A Hard Day's Night," "Long Tall Sally," and "Can't Buy Me Love," although he incorrectly listed the song as "Don't Buy Me Love."

Kloss noted, "They played and sang for 30 minutes and occasionally a zealous honk from the bass guitar or a snatch of vocal harmony would penetrate the din from the enraptured audience."

Milwaukee Sentinel reviewer Bernice Buresh also used the wrong contraction and listed "Don't Buy Me Love." More of her observations:

"Surely the Arena rafters trembled as the long-haired singers moved through lines of police up to the stage. How loud can screams be and still not surpass the volume humans can tolerate?"

"Flashbulbs exploded from so many parts of the jammed Arena, it momentarily was brighter than daylight. The glare could be likened to that seen on films accompanying a nuclear explosion."

"The girls got a little of everything. John Lennon threw in some hilariously funny gestures and certainly didn't look sick ... George Harrison blinked his long eyelashes. Ringo Starr, perched behind his drums, got to sing, which delighted everyone."

Morale boost

The Beatles swept out of town the next afternoon, but only after McCartney phoned a 14-year-old girl named Christine Cutler, who was a patient at St. Francis Hospital.

She had a ticket to the Friday night show but at the last minute couldn't go because she became "very sick." One of her physicians called the The Milwaukee Journal in an attempt to arrange a contact from her favorite Beatle.

McCartney agreed to make the call and reached her at 2:30 on Saturday afternoon. They chatted for several minutes and then he said, "Well, now, I've got to hang up, you see. But you will smile, though. That's the main thing, you know."

Later the The Milwaukee Journal reported the girl "wanted to take the telephone home with her. And then the nurses cried."

Afterwards the Beatles and their entourage loaded into four black limousines and were escorted to Mitchell Field by 10 motorcycles. Their visit to Milwaukee lasted about 24 hours.

Former TV anchor Karcher recalls his night with Fab Four

John Karcher attended The Beatles concert at the Milwaukee Arena when he lived on the city's northwest side and was a sophomore at Dominican High School in Whitefish Bay. Today, the former WISC-Ch. 3 news anchor lives in Verona and is a freelance writer.

"The Beatles were the lead story in 1964," he said. "They consumed our lives. It was all Beatles all the time."

When Karcher heard WOKY DJ Bob Barry talk about the upcoming concert on the radio, he asked his dad to go downtown and get tickets for him, his sister, Joan, and friends Bill, Brigitte, and Fred.

"I told him he'd have to get there early, so he took the bus and was fifth in line at 4:30 a.m. the day they went on sale," he recalled.

For his superlative effort, the saintly dad got five tickets about "50 feet from McCartney on the left side of the theater," John said. "He could have gotten front-row seats but he was worried about us getting crushed by the crowd. The tickets were \$5.50 each times five, and my dad was also concerned about getting reimbursed — that was grocery money for a couple of weeks back then! But we paid him."

Although not certain, Karcher believes The Beatles show was his first concert. It was some introduction. "There were a lot of police in the arena, and Red Cross workers circulated with smelling salts because people were passing out. The excitement was amazing. When the Beatles came on we all got goose bumps."

Like most attendees, he only heard a few notes.

"The screaming was deafening," he said.

As loud as it was, however, Karcher said every time McCartney "wiggled his head" the decibels would increase.

"When the concert ended, we were hoarse from yelling and jumping up and down but we kept saying, 'Holy cow! We just saw The Beatles live! We were in the same room with them!'"

Karcher remained a Beatles fan, bought every one of their albums, and still listens to them today.

"They are the ultimate, past or present," he said. "I don't think there will ever be a bigger or better musical act. That's why the world's love for them continues."

— Ted Schaar