

DISQUIETING FOOD FOR THOUGHT

ROGER WATERS

MERGES MUSIC AND MESSAGE

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LIVE REPORT

One easily could write a full review extolling the massively impressive visuals and incredible musicianship. After all, this was a Roger Waters show and over-the-top spectacle is expected. But we are living in what might be termed (via understatement) "volatile times," which matters to Roger.

It matters quite a lot.

Bassist/singer/conceptualist Waters, 73, has stirred controversy pushing his strident worldviews during performances that are as much socio-political commentary as they are rock concerts. He has openly supported U.S. military veterans, publicly decried the ravages of world poverty and malaria, supported the Live 8 benefit and condemned the Israeli West Bank wall. He has been accused of anti-Semitism, has lost corporate funding, enraged popular disc jockey Howard Stern ... there even is an organization calling itself We Don't Need No Roger Waters. But then, as Heraclitus sagely noted, "The mixture which is not shaken, decomposes." And that is why this writer likes Roger Waters.

The ex-Pink Floyd kingpin's show June 20 at Staples Center in Los Angeles (part of the so-called Us + Them Tour) opened with standard fare: "Speak to Me"/"Breathe" followed by "One of These Days," "Time" and a very crisp rendition of "The Great Gig in the Sky," augmented by Lucius group members/singers Jess Wolfe and Holly Laessig.

"Welcome to the Machine" subtly introduced Roger's activist agenda, reinforced by subsequent song choices as the show proceeded. "When We Were Young," "Déjà Vu," "The Last Refugee," and "Picture That" from latest solo album *Is This the Life We Really Want?* included projected imagery of fingers on gun triggers, drones exploding vehicles below, war-torn Afghanistan and the first of the "F-bombs." Then a retreat to standard Floyd material with "Wish You Were Here" and "Another Brick in the Wall" (parts II and III) with school children march-

ing in orange jump suits, tearing them off to reveal the command "Resist" emblazoned on their chests.

Protest themes soon accelerated as the evening's second set opened with "Dogs," from Floyd's *Animals*. Descending from the ceiling and spanning more than half the arena, a series of screens appeared showing the smoking chimneys of London's Battersea Power Station (the *Animals* album cover). "Dogs" segued into "Pigs (Three Different Ones)" as the screens flaunted provocative imagery of President Donald Trump. Multiple pictures of him with the word "Charade" materialized. He was portrayed variously as an angry toddler driving a toy car, a baby held by Russian President Vladimir Putin and posed firing a penis gun, amongst other unflattering depictions. The crowd roared its approval. As "Pigs" concluded, "Trump is a Pig" flashed across the screens.

Animals is a complex album, now 40 years old, as pertinent now as it was originally. Inspired by the George Orwell novel *Animal Farm*, it depicts a society comprising mindless sheep, belligerent dogs and tyrannical pigs. Lyrics to "Pigs" includes the passage, "Hey you, Whitehouse. Ha-ha charade you are." That reference identifies not the Washington, D.C. White House but notorious Englishwoman Mary Whitehouse, the 1970s-era religious anti-pornography campaigner; an intriguing coincidence of lyrical history.

"Money," of course, followed, ushered along by more Trump images. An inflated pink pig inscribed with "Piggy Bank of War"

floated around the venue. The crowd loved it.

And then came a musically impeccable rendition of "Us and Them," sparked by Ian Ritchie's soaring sax lines atop keyboardist Jon Carin's symphonic foundation. Screened images were unsettling: mothers and children scavenging landfills, Black Lives Matter, the slogan "love who you wish to love," burning oil fields and children—lots of children. A lady seated nearby was crying. Others in the audience appeared shaken, angry. "Smell the Roses," a lament over destroying beauty, furthered the narrative.

A return to Floyd classics with "Brain Damage" and "Eclipse" closed the second set, leading to an encore of "Vera," "Bring the Boys Back Home" and "Comfortably Numb." The latter rode splendid guitar work by Dave Kilminster as a laser light-formed *Dark Side of the Moon* pyramid appeared above the audience. An apt ending to the story, leaving one to ponder if "comfortably numb" is, indeed, our collectively present state of being.

Considering the David Gilmour/Nick Mason/Waters legal fight over ownership of the Pink Floyd name, it's clear Waters at least owns the band's essence ca. 2017. For many concertgoers, this simply was an outstanding concert by an angry man. Yet, it went well beyond that in terms of carefully crafted narrative.

We need voices like Waters, especially now. Younger attendees might not fully be aware of *Animals'* satirical relevance, but dramatically unsettling visuals and lyrics conveyed the essential message: live compassionately, "resist" when necessary. 