

## notes on Classism and the general admission experience

Oct. 23rd. Morning-after Victoria Monet's Concert night 1

House of Blues

2023

Post-Covid

For the concert goers who know, the General Admissions experience can be unsafe, horrific, tragic, and chock full of an infinite number of safety hazards. There are no special entrances or exits for us. There is no special security or venue personnel stationed in our sections to watch over us, with the exception of a few stadiums here and there, who seem to do a better job than smaller venues at keeping crowds settled. The General Admissions crowd is also full of an artist's most affectionate fans; singing along word-for-word to every song; dancing along with every choreographed 8-count in complete sync with the artist; and often out performing back up dancers on stage from there congested little circles they've managed to carve out for themselves in the section. This is a requisite. If you are a General Admission fan and concert goer, you *must* know every step in the choreo and every word in the song, as it is arranged in the set list, because you will not be able to see the artist with your own eyes. This experience may be more of an auditory one for you. I have often hoped that my ears aren't playing tricks on me, and that the artists I go to see live are indeed real people.

In the sea of sardines packed and pressed against each other with pockets of air tucked away above you, you must become omniscient and omnipresent; you too must become a fabulous performer; you must act as if you have already gone to the concert; as if you are *the* artist; for by the time you arrive in "standing room only", there will be no concert for you to see. Whatever you use to see the world, as I do not want to assume that all of us have working eye-balls, makes the world *real*. To go to see an artist is what you pay for, as these aren't the kinds of people you see everyday, and if you are the kind of person that sees these artists every day, I am very jealous of you. So, most pay \$300 dollars, or several more hundreds of dollars to see these incredible-larger-than-life talents. Yet, at the HOB, you may end up paying a hefty price to imagine the artist, catching only very pricey glimpses of an artist you may love or like enough to spend that much, or anything at all, on a itty-bitty-teeny-weeny-very dated- TV screen.

First impressions are important. They are the foundations of a relationship, core memories, and the general attitude one takes toward a person, place, or thing. If I am to feel obligated to give a disclaimer I will only give this one: these are my first impressions on what can be considered a "historic venue".

The House of Blues Chicago is a small venue nestled between 2-maybe 3- other large buildings. When Victoria Monet, a fabulous multi-talented artist, producer, songwriter, and dancer graced the city with her ethereal presence in Chicago on Oct. 22nd and 23rd, I was left to wonder if the House of Blues was the venue for an artist of her magnitude. While the production was stellar, the skin was glowing, and the body was bodying, it was difficult to enjoy *her* and the journey she was taking us on; as it became clear that the House of Blues had

nearly—tragically—oversold their general admission section. I feel that many of us in the general admission section on night 1 would agree that the venue was ridiculously underprepared for the volume of people that had arrived to topple over in that section.

Concert goers kept arriving in dense clusters, amassing at the top of the main stairs, with nowhere to go. Ensembles sticking to each other, attempting and failing to get through what was already a full section by 7:45 PM. Is it possible that just 45 minutes after doors had opened that entire section was full? From the front of the House to the very back of the bar, there was barely enough space to shuffle through the crowd and get yourself to the bathroom in time to relieve yourself. In the locus of clandestine information sharing— the womens' bathroom— several women had reported that at least two women had pulled down their bottoms and peed just in front of the bar. When looking down at my shoes, I had indeed stepped in some sort of smelly yellow liquid... Which I have completely convinced myself to think was beer.

For those of us that had found solace in a quiet corner, in the very back somewhere, just before entering the two arches that take you to the bathroom, there was a man, perhaps a man of some 290 pounds on night 1 of the concert who thought it was a fabulous idea to jump over the railing that separated the bar from that small corridor. Which he did—assuming— in an effort to get to the bathroom. A two foot drop, a 290 pound man, my sister and I standing in the narrow corridor leaning on another set of railings that took you upstairs. The man assumed he had enough space to safely jump over the bar-railing and onto the hallway, but he had sorely underestimated the almost three feet drop from the bar platform to the adjacent hallway. As he braced himself to jump over the railing, his foot got caught on the railing, but his body was already moving, and he would not be able to catch himself in time but he did attempt anyway. As his body was being thwarted over the railing, foot got caught, body fell forward fast-hard-heavy. The only reason he didn't break a limb that evening and severely injure himself or others, is because my shoulder caught his 290 pound fall. I am still in pain.

The General Admission experience includes but is not subjected to: concert goers peeing on the floor, ignoring your polite "excuse me" for fear you will steal their spot, battling your way through the crowd, and having a 290 pound man fall on your shoulder as he is on his way to the bathroom in an effort to pee like a civilized human being, and paying more money than any music consumer should be charged to listen to an artists' live performance as you will not be able to see them perform due to the hordes of people shoved into a section blocking your view.

Before the internalized-classism pops out with the "oh it's *just* general admission" and the "if you want a better experience, pay more" comments, let me ask you this. Do you think it is fair to pay \$300 for a very expensive out-dated TV screening? More importantly: Do you think it is fair to be shoved into a section to the point in which your safety comes into question because I simply did not "pay enough" to matter? This particular overt form of classism breeds violence, and we have all, myself included, become desensitized to it. And by no means are these questions meant to thwart that criticism, of course I can pay more. This does not derail from the fact that *My* life is worth much more than \$300, as is yours.

The live music experience is sublime, divine even, but as much as I enjoy Victoria Monet's music, I was unable to experience her greatness as a result of the venue choice. Who is to blame here? I am not sure. Was it perhaps her team who didn't do enough research on the venue beforehand? Who did not concern themselves with issues of safety? Did the House of Blues Special Events department underestimate how many of us would show up to listen to her play? Is it the responsibility of the consumer to worry about the size, capacity, and safety measures implemented in a venue? The experience was mediocre, and I can't even say that confidently because there was no musical experience *for me*. Although my fellow general admission concert goers were on key and on beat, I, respectfully, did not purchase \$300 in tickets to see them, I wanted to see Ms. Monet. Venues, regardless of the artist and event, should ensure their logistical teams and departments collaborate with these artists to ensure that *all patrons* regardless of how much they pay, enjoy the music and the concert experience. Because that is what we are paying for. In my experience, VIP concert goers rarely go to enjoy the music, but instead attend to grossly display their wealth and/or popularity. With the exception of premium seat buyers that attend concerts hosted by artists like Beyoncé. There's plenty of evidence on the VIP/Premium sections at the Renaissance Tour being so litty they deserved their own spotlight.

They are so many examples of general admissions sections being completely abandoned, disenfranchised, and left to grovel over very expensive crumbs. The majority of the population in the United States can be considered Low and Middle class patrons. This is a population that is living paycheck to paycheck, and \$300 could very well be the difference between eating, going to work, or having a roof over your head that month. \$300 is expensive for the majority of the American population who is perpetually struggling to afford healthy food, healthcare, and housing. The term "poor" has become derogatory in recent years, and it is one that I have run from, but it is very clear to me when a population is considered poor. This is a population that is also considered inferior, and therefore, undeserving of quality experiences, safety, warmth, and kindness. As if any of things were luxuries, and they are not for those of you who have been lied to. To say that a concert goer must "pay more" to receive a better experience justifies considering that consumer as inferior, and as a result justifying subjecting them to violence in every form it comes in.

The same perception is used everywhere. Ramble through my thoughts with me. For example, in many restaurants in the River North area, I have come across many rude Hostesses. You would think that having a reservation ensures a better experience (this is the "paying more" stand-in, in this example) but it does not. You can end up waiting as much as an hour even with a reservation at popular restaurants. The same applies for clubs and party bars in the city, however in this case, your social capital matters and now becomes the stand in for "paying more". For the bouncer to help management curate a memorable experience for club and party-bar goers, young women must have a certain "look" to attend. Example: two groups of 4 young women are in the queue. Both groups are dressed in similar fashions, little black dressers, make up on, leather and more leather, pumps or go-go boots etc. But one group is made up of skinny women with eurocentric features and the other is made up of thicker women with wide noses and lips. Depending on the venue and the city this may vary, but let's say we

are in the Logan Square neighborhood, in this case both groups would receive entry. However, in the West Loop, while both groups might receive entry, the women who receive faster service at the bar and are approached by men, will be the group of skinny women (you get brownie points the more “exotic” you look– I’m not breaking this down for you in this piece). Historically the eurocentric beauty standard favors lighter skinned skinny women with eurocentric features, so naturally that kind of woman will be considered superior and will generally receive better service wherever she goes. Whereas the thicker woman is usually the last to be attended at the bar and generally considered an “eye-sore” by most of the people in attendance. This is usually where the “Oh she’s aight, but she would look better if...” comments start to show up. This isn’t any different than saying “Well you might’ve had a better experience if you paid more for...” comments. Luxuries have now included quality experiences, kindness, warmth, and safety, when these are not luxuries but rather the bare minimum. Paying more for a concert, just like being fit and skinny, does not guarantee a better experience, if you’re a woman or feminized human being you may just be subjected to a different kind of violence. Classism comes along with a variety of nuances and layers, the very vague but somewhat specific examples above cannot possibly characterize all of them. But they do circle around the same question, why do we keep justifying subjecting a population of people to a lesser, increasingly precarious set of experiences, and realities in the name of profit? If music is for all, why do we experience live music in this way? Segregated within our respective sections by class and almost by color. Is this how concerts have died away and can only “truly” be experienced by uber-wealthy concert goers? Knowing that these wealthy companies, conglomerates, and artists may not always assume that responsibilities are theirs; how can those of us in the general admissions section be kinder to each other? And can we please stop being on the floor and jumping over railings and into people?