

## The Wiggles: Arena Rockers for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Johnny Cash was the Man in Black, but the Wiggles--Greg, Murray, Jeff and Anthony--are the Men in Yellow, Red, Purple and Blue.

Greg Page, The Wiggles' lead singer, actually retired late last year. I wasn't shocked to receive this news. When I saw the band perform last August (in the company of my young daughters I feel compelled to add), Greg was absent and his understudy, Sam, wore the yellow jersey. Years down the line when I boast that I saw The Wiggles in concert, some guy will surely best me by declaring that he saw the *original* Wiggles lineup, and the band was never the same once Greg left.

The Wiggles arrived on the Ryan Center stage in their trademark Big Red Car, unbuckled their seat belts and waved to the crowd. Wiggles cognoscenti that I am, I noticed immediately that yellow Wiggle Greg was literally not himself — someone else had his shirt on. Murray, the Red Wiggle, announced that Greg was sick. I was immediately curious and guessed food poisoning, but held out the possibility that his face had been bloodied in a bar fight the night before. Then again, perhaps the oft-cited band destroying "creative differences" was at the root of Greg's absence; I speculated about the form an ugly intra-band rivalry would take in The Wiggles. In retrospect, I feel shabby about these suspicions. Greg has a condition called orthostatic intolerance which produces unpleasant autoimmune disorder type symptoms, and forced him to stop performing.

Greg or no Greg, the 90-minute show was a winner, and featured not just The Wiggles, but also six Wiggly Dancers, and The Wiggles' stable of costumed characters — Captain Feathersword, Dorothy the Dinosaur, Henry the Octopus, and Wags the Dog. The band performed a nice selection of tunes, including that paean to pedestrian safety, "Stop Look Both Ways." But you need more than just songs to engage an arena of kids, and there were two large video screens flanking the stage, as well as numerous props. Oversized apples, oranges and grapes were deployed during the "Fruit Salad" number, and there was a 30-foot inflatable of Murray that, for comic effect, kept falling over on top of the hapless guitarist. The versatile Wiggly Dancers were in constant motion, morphing from baton wielding crossing guards to dancing fish to folkloric flag twirlers. All this activity freed up The Wiggles to venture into the stands and glad hand, pose for pictures, and collect flowers brought for Dorothy the Dinosaur, who, as Wiggles fans know, loves roses.

Some of the kids in the audience clapped, danced and smiled, but others squirmed in their seats, or passed the time on the floor inspecting spent paper cups. A number of them, particularly the younger ones, looked stunned, overwhelmed perhaps by the size of the crowd, the noise, and the visuals. It's not surprising that young children might be intimidated or puzzled — a 90-minute show is a lot for a toddler to absorb. Two-year-olds are accustomed to listening to The Wiggles in the car, or watching them on TV; attending a concert with ten thousand other people is completely foreign to them.

The Wiggles play for the kids, but they don't forget who's buying the tickets. Murray, like any good arena rock performer, mentioned how beautiful Rhode Island was, and that the band had

been to Newport and eaten chowder (which he said was pronounced the same locally as in Australia). He also joked about the traffic, and at one point donned a New England Patriots jersey. Nothing you wouldn't expect from Aerosmith or Bon Jovi.

In fact, the entire show may be a homage to, or send-up of, arena rock itself. During a segment called "Music with Murray," the eponymous guitarist began by playing the opening chords to "Stairway to Heaven." This got a chuckle from the grownups, although I'm sure it went over heads of the training pants set. Before one song, parents were asked to hold up their lighted cell phones to simulate stars in the sky. Perhaps the Wiggles were invoking the now remote 1970s and 80s, when holding Bics aloft in appreciation of a particularly fine drum or guitar solo was standard concert operating procedure.

The concert ended with the Wiggles Medley, which was like hearing the Rolling Stones or Bob Dylan blast through snippets of their back catalogue. You know the songs, you've probably heard them too many times before, but it's still fun to hear them again. As the Wiggles left the stage, I made a fist, pumped it in the air, and let forth a "Whoo!"

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