

Widespread Panic Rocks the Red Rocks

by Byron Tolson

I was told before my first journey out West in 1994 that, "when you drive across Kansas, it's going to be like traveling through space, it will all look the same and no matter how fast you go, it's still going to take two days to drive through Kansas."

Remembering this statement after visiting Red Rocks Amphitheater in Colorado and seeing Widespread Panic open for Blues Traveller on that wonderful July 4, 1994, I can safely say that Red Rocks alone is worth the entire drive across Kansas. Red Rocks symbolizes the mystical and surreal awes that can constantly be encountered while experiencing America's great western terrain. Throw in one of the best live bands in the world, **Widespread Panic**, harbored by this natural red rock amphitheater and a music fan's fantasy is created.

Red Rocks is nestled in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains and overlooks the distant metropolis maze of Denver, a spectacular sight at night. Once inside the venue, the wide seating benches extend from the stage at 45-degree inclination, one hundred rows up. The seating of approximately 10,000 people is enclosed by two gigantic rocks, creating the two side walls of the amphitheater. Seeing them jutting up into the sky makes one feel ant-like. The upper seating features the lights of Denver with the lights of the western skies, highlighting this environmental bliss.

Widespread Panic apparently enjoys this venue also for they revisit every year for three days to play jamming soulful music. I finally managed to revisit last summer for the 2001 shows being seven years removed from my last Panic at Red Rocks experience. It went by too fast, so I repeated this musical journey this year for the last three days of June.

Flying 2,000 miles to see a band for three days with only a ticket for one day, I do not recommend. Thanks to my good friends Todd and Hetty, who supplied me with shelter, food, transportation, love, and tickets, everything worked out perfectly. Even when a short rain shower delayed our entrance on the first night, we didn't panic, we just celebrated a few more minutes in the back of a pick-up making new friends while waiting for old friends to gather. After making the upward walk to the top gate and entering the wondrous venue, our timing was astonishing, the band walked on stage, did a little of their pre-show sound check jumble and fired up 'Lets Get Down To Business'. A big smile

of relief flashed on my face, warmth filled my heart, and I knew my friends and I along with the capacity crowd were also ready to get down to business.

The rejuvenating spirit of this song and **John Bell** singing, "Let's get down to business shall we, it's time to stop playing games," washed away all travel fatigue, as my friends and I nestled down on the 22nd row, **Michael Houser** side. The band also nestled down on stage into their classic Widespread grooves of 'Please' and 'Barstools and Dreamers.' Next came 'Little Lilly,' a modern Panic song from their last studio album that has a moderate upbeat tempo that I am liking more and more with it's happy energy. After 'Little Lilly' came the sweet melody of 'C. Brown,' exhibiting roots of the classic Widespread groove and Houser's soothing guitar solos. They followed with the fast paced 'Tie Your Shoes' getting the crowd worked up in their dancing mode. After this nine minute ferocious pace, Widespread kept the tempo up whipping out their vocally harmonious 'The Waker.' This song exhibited artful solos from **JoJo Herman** slashing his keyboards and **Dave Schools** thumping away up and down on that big bad six string bass. The band then hit the brakes on 'Contentment Blues' grinding through the slow song with screeching guitars. Just when my feet were getting too relaxed, back comes Widespread with a thunderous 'Imitation Leather Shoes' to close out a smoking first set.

The musical thunder continued during the second set opening with 'Weight Of The World' and 'Pusherman.' Following the 'Pusherman' was a hammering of drums and percussion by **Todd and Sonny** which caused everyone to wonder what's next as the band reached into their classic bag of Widespread again pulling out one of their first originals, 'Coconuts.' The crowd went ballistic with applause for this rare treat and danced wildly through out the song.

The band then paused to allow two guest musicians on stage, **George McConnell** on guitar and **Randall Bramblett** on saxophone. They fired away into 'Dorthea,' a fast beat rocking blues song that McConnell sang with fiery passionate vocals. They continued next with JoJo's Mississippi roots belting out 'Bayou Lena' that has a great grooving New Orleans feel with Bramblett's saxophone being an excellent addition. A slower 'It Ain't No Use' followed as they extended the song into a jam that faded into the Drums. Todd and guest drummer **Cecil Daniels** later joined Sonny on a hard working drum session that gave a nice spiritual feel and breather from an intense evening of music. Dave Schools later joined in on the drumming fun, which set up for his funky bass beat in 'Rebirtha' when the rest of the band

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joined. They extended the song with a jamming spacey style, which continued when playing 'Low Rider' and 'Proving Ground' to end the second set.

'Casa del Grillo' was the first encore song that has a great sounding Latin American groove. Neil Young's, 'Mr. Soul,' finishes the show on a heavy rocking groove sending everyone home looking forward to the next night.

Saturday evening, I once again arrived in timely fashion. After entering the top, I stood on the balcony of Red Rocks, behind the last top row, leaning on the rail while looking down on the crowd for my pack of friends. The band walked on, lead singer John Bell said, "One more time," and they open with a Widespread classic 'The Take Out.' I took in the peaceful instrumental while enjoying the Colorado sunset. JoJo started the singing on the second song with his upbeat bluesy 'Help Me Somebody,' when I noticed an older gentleman beside me taking in the scene like I was. He turned out to be Chuck who jokingly remarked that he has this cool scam going, enjoying a Red Rocks staff pass by keeping the handicap parking clear. I remarked that is a very important productive scam and he being a native of Colorado, informed me of some Red Rocks history.

It was built in the 1930s by the CPA, Community Projects Administration, a work program under Theodore Roosevelt's New Deal. Unfortunately for the natural amphitheater, it was rarely utilized, as sound technology was not able to facilitate the unique challenges for this outdoor venue. The rise of the music industry in the 1950s and 1960s caused technology to catch up.

Thank goodness, I thought, as Widespread launched into their hard rocking 'Give.' I told Chuck one of my favorite lines comes from this song, "I know it may sound funny but, how dare you show up on time." I'm sure we all have friends who are constantly late. Chuck being an older hippie, who used to sneak in Red Rocks to watch **Grateful Dead** shows, appreciated the irony in the lyrics.

I spotted my friends three quarters up from the middle of the stage and thanked Chuck for all the information. I gathered with my group just in time for the drum intro of 'Surprise Valley,' a great out west song starting with the lyrics, "Kiss the mountain air we breathe." After a sizzling 'Surprise Valley,' they slowed it down, but kept the sizzle with a great

grooving hypnotic beat on 'Do What You Like.' They kept the same tempo with 'You Got Yours,' then spiced up the action with the **Talking Head's** song, 'Papa Legba.' The heart warming **Cat Steven's** 'Trouble' followed quite nicely with its pleasant sound and John Bell belting out the emotional lyrics. 'Porch Song' closed the first set, giving the crowd a good dancing workout before the break.

Everyone needed their rest for the second set as Widespread started with the hard driving 'Thought Sausage' and kept the dancing spirit strong following with 'Greta.' 'Junior' was the next thrilling song, as the band flexed all of their muscles, driving their contained distortion, hot tempered lyrics, piercing solos from Houser's guitar, catchy keyboard riffs, thumping bass lines, and another smooth job by the drummers, highlighting all their talented power with this song. After fading this song into a slow jam they started pounding away another thunderous version of 'Goin Out West.' Next, George McConnell and Randall Bramblett guest appeared again for 'Down' and 'Use Me,' a classic funky blues beat song. The band faded into drums teasing the crowd with what I hoped was 'Hatfield.'

Sure enough, after drums, the song about a Native American rain maker was played. 'Hatfield' has a unique Native American sound, which was also an appropriate calling for rain with the dry, hazardous fire conditions this summer. Widespread Panic continued the high energy with a thumping 'Henry Parson's Died' and 'Climb To Safety' closed out a heavy sounding, rocking second set.

The first encore song I had been hoping to hear, an upbeat happy hard luck love song, 'Ophelia.' This classic by **The Band**, has been played by Widespread Panic since their mid-eighties existence, but is another rare treat and caused me to get excitement chills. To close out a wonderful Saturday night show, the fast paced 'Flat Foot Flewzy' left everyone with a fast pumping heart.

Making a 4 o'clock Sunday afternoon show time after two joyous nights, I knew would be difficult. Adding to the excitement, I was taking my sister Jackie, who has been settling in Denver and would be experiencing Widespread Panic and Red Rocks, all for the first time.

Due to an extremely long hot walk from our parking spot on Sunday, we missed the first two songs. 'Driving Song' and 'Aunt Avis' started off the show. We made it for 'Tall Boy' and my sister immediately noticed the intense audience



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participation with everyone moving and grooving to the broke-down-on-the-side-of-the-road party song. We settled down halfway up from the stage, and as if the band knew there would be stragglers, they repeated 'Driving Song,' with a quick two-minute version. Thanks Widespread, it's the kind of song that can help that two-day drive across Kansas. Next was 'Who Do You Belong To?' An easy flowing 'Jack' followed when the band returned to their thunderous ways with 'Travelin' Light,' 'Let It Rock,' and 'Action Man' to close out another great set loaded with the varying rocking styles of Widespread Panic.

The second set started out hot like the weather, jamming the instrumental 'Disco' with Widespread classics 'Diner' and 'Love Tractor' following. 'Clinic Cynic,' sung by the drummer Todd Nance, gave those with an oxygen deficit disorder, a chance to mellow out. It is a relatively new Panic song with a medium paced country feel.

Guitarist extraordinaire and vocalist **Jerry Joseph** joined the band and rocked with two great songs of his, 'Light Is Like Water' and 'Chainsaw City.' This followed with an extensive jam that faded into drums.

When the rest of the band returned, they launched into 'Chilly Water', an appropriate song for an extremely hot afternoon. I told my sister, "Prepare to get wet," but did not expect the plethora of water falling that came over the audience. No telling how many dollars of bottled water were tossed into the air in celebration of the refreshing song's spirit. After the song's completion I was certainly plenty wet and extremely refreshed. The spilled water evaporated off the benches and concrete aisles giving the real smell of quick summer rain just being completed.

John Bell then strapped on his mandolin and he and the band played a soothing soft melody, 'End Of The Show' followed by the jamming 'Ain't Life Grand' to end the second set.

The encore began with 'Let's Get The Show On The Road.' George McConnell and Randall Bramblett once again played with the band during this song that had a somber tone. The lead guitarist for Widespread Panic, Michael Houser, has been bravely battling a terrible cancer while continuing to play with the band. Due to his chivalrous heart, he has played with the band as long as he felt he could. A few days later, he would drop off tour to go home where he is resting, surrounded by family and friends. I know the whole Widespread Panic community is wishing him all the best and extremely appreciative for the great music he and the band

have contributed over the years. Thanks Mikey! He has left an official statement on the band's web site called, "Mikey's Message."

The show finished with the upbeat 'Sometimes' that ended one fine weekend of music. Since Michael Houser's return home, the band has continued on tour with George McConnell and Randall Bramblett help filling in with their guitar and saxophone. The only problem with these Red Rocks shows, they seem to go by way too fast.☺

The inset below contains the letter from Michael Houser which was posted on widespreadpanic.com on July 16, 2002.

Dear Widespread Panic community, and dear friends, Mikey here, with some thoughts and facts for you.

As some of you know, I have contracted a terminal form of cancer. I want to assure all of you that all that can be done has been done, and I want to thank all of you who have contributed information, medicine, and so on.

As for me, I am at my home in Athens, GA, surrounded by my family, and being well taken care of.

In the words of Lou Gehrig "Though some of you may have thought I have caught a bad break, I feel like the luckiest man in the world."

Between my best friends, J.B., Todd, Sunny, Dave and JoJo, and you, our friends, and best support group in the world, I feel strong and well taken care of.

I have hopes of playing again soon, although I can't say for sure when or where, and I hope to see you all there.

*With much thanks and love,
Mikey*