

Feelin' Alright in Morocco

Rabat. It's sprinkling lightly as we make our way towards the concert grounds; hand in hand, excited we are finally going to see Joe Cocker live. Neither of us made it to Woodstock in '69. Only sixteen, I was too young (or so said my parents) to brave the four-hour drive, and my husband, though a few years older, was living on another continent.

And so, some forty-odd years later, one of our favorite performers has come to Rabat to participate in the tenth anniversary of the nine-day *Mawazine Rhythms of the World* music festival. Stages have been set in various places in the city and outskirts, welcoming musicians as diverse and international as Cimarron, Bharati, Kanye West, Yousuf Islam (formerly known as Cat Stevens) and Shakira, as well as a host of Moroccan artists. But tonight is special and not only because it's our first time at the festival.

It is hard to believe that only four weeks before we were stricken by the bombing in Marrakech; the country is still in mourning. There has been some controversy about whether the festival should be held this year. Some say the money would be better spent in other ways. Some say this music is not consistent with Moroccan culture or Islam. Others say it is not appropriate to hold a festival in the midst of demonstrations and demands for social reforms. Nonetheless, this is the seventh day of the event (a rainy Thursday night to boot) and all performances have been drawing crowds.

We head for the free space. There are no seats, even in the fee-paying section, and we pass several people carrying folding chairs. Because we're early, we find a spot right behind the barrier where the fans that have paid are milling about. We're guaranteed a great view as we are next to the video camera stand where the technician will be taping the show. There's a metal bar to lean on and a concrete surface underfoot. On the "other side," Moroccan carpets are laid out and men are wearing suits (and ties!), the women heels and party dresses. My husband and I in our running shoes are much more "Woodstock" casual: a sporty shirt and jeans for him, washed-out purple "Made in India" top for me (although my jeans have elastic in the waist these days).

The four Moroccan teenagers in front of us are already psyched, singing some of Joe's standards and bopping to their own beat. These boys were not even born when Joe was appearing at Woodstock. Perhaps, their parents initiated them, as we did our sons, with countless hours at home and on road trips. As the crowd fills in, it becomes more and more apparent that Cocker's fans are not limited to one generation or culture. Middle-aged parents and younger gather around with their kids; teenagers in jeans and tee-shirts mingle with girls in head scarves. All around us we catch snippets of conversation in Moroccan Dialect, English, French and Spanish.

My husband whispers to me, “All the people our age are yawning. Do you think we can stay awake?” I laugh. We both know there’s no way we’ll miss this, even if it is past our bedtime.

It is nearly a half-hour past show-time, and still no sign of Joe. The crowd whistles. An emcee appears, asking in French if we are ready to greet the man who “changed the sound of The Blues.” Apparently, Joe says he won’t come out until the crowd is warmed up. Unlike traditional concerts, each *Mawazine* performer comes on stage “cold,” without the benefit of a warm-up act, except for the recorded music blasting from the giant speakers. Voices from another time float over us: Otis Redding, Martha and the Vandellas, Sam and Dave. More whistles and shouts from the crowd until the lights finally dim.

All of a sudden he is there, jaunty and cool as ever, arms flailing characteristically to the rhythm of *Hitchcock Railway*. His face appears on the giant screens on either side of the stage, highlighted by others with pop art graphics. The face. It is a shock at first as we try to guess his age (67). The years, some of them not so kind, are marked there in the creases. He looks a little pale, almost vulnerable.

Snapping his fingers, he moves into *Feelin’ Alright*. Roars from the crowd. The frantic four in front of us are jumping up and down, singing along. “Not feelin’ so good myself,” seems to sum up Joe Cocker’s mood right now. But by the end of the song, the audience comfortably in his jeans’ pocket, he discards his blazer and gets down. Next up is *The Letter*, followed by other classics like *You are so Beautiful*, *Up Where We Belong*, *Summer in the City*. Joe is in top form, jumping (he can still jump!) and gesticulating frenetically as in days of old. People all around us shout out requests. When he finally breaks into *Unchain my Heart*, the song the kids in front of us have been relentlessly screaming for, my husband and I find ourselves shaking our heads, caught in a time warp, transported to another decade.

Umbrellas pop open as the rain falls in earnest, merely adding to the surreal time travel quality of the evening. There are many more umbrellas on the carpeted side of the barrier. Here in our time warp, we sway and clap, move our hips and nod at one another, souls connected by the music. We take pictures and videos with our cell phones, anomalies in a parallel universe.

With each familiar song, we are reminded of some special moment – a friend’s wedding; a wild and crazy party; that summer in Agadir when we ate every night at a restaurant owned by a die-hard Cocker fan. Or just a time when we were feeling down and listening to this music helped us through. When Cocker breaks into the risqué *You Can Leave Your Hat On*, I look around anxiously. I had wondered what the reaction would be if he sang it, but this crowd rocks on, unfazed. Even the newer titles like *Hard Knocks*, the catchy title song from his latest album, soon have people singing along.

And then we hear it. The organ builds slowly, leading into three stark guitar chords that served as the theme of a popular American sitcom (*The Wonder Years*) and a whole

generation. The introductory notes to *With a Little Help from my Friends* bring peace to the night. The crowd lets out an ecstatic sigh; a perfect end to a perfect evening. (It has even stopped raining.) Everyone, no matter where they are standing, sings along, waves their arms.

When the stage goes dark, the crowd begs for more. Chants of “Joe Cook-air” fill the air. Intrepid Joe comes back for an encore: *She Came in through the Bathroom Window* and finally, *High Time We Went*. Once he is truly gone, the concert ended, the crowd slowly disperses.

Tonight Joe Cocker’s music has brought us together. He has lent us his *baraka*, his grace. Everything, at least in this moment, is all right.

May, 2011