



GUERRA, COMMON, M.I.A.

CONCERTS FOR THE FREE MIND

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Since the beginning of the human race, music has supplied the outlet for those seeking an experience that will transport them from their ordinary circumstances. Listening to a CD you really love is a treat, but a live concert takes the experience to a whole different plane. Recently I was lucky enough to see three artists who try to live outside the small box of today's mostly hedonistic music industry and use their work for the greater good of humanity.

Each is at a different point in their careers. We have the rookie (M.I.A.), the seasoned veteran finally starting to fulfill his potential (Common), and the living legend (Juan Luis Guerra).

When I arrived at Madison Square Garden on May 28 to see Juan Luis Guerra, I had no idea what to expect. I looked around and

all I could think was "DOMINICANS ARE IN THE HIZHOUS!" Not one seat was empty, and the anticipation ran high. After a couple of decent opening acts, the crowd was rewarded for their patience as a projection screen revealed a helicopter taking off from a remote place in D.R. carrying mysterious cargo.

When the chopper finally arrived on top of the Garden, and slowly lowered the crate, the people knew it was what they were waiting for. Guerra came out of the crate dressed like a guerilla soldier and the band began to play. Every single person in the audience stood up and began to dance and sing along to lyrics that spoke of being a soldier for God, love, and righteousness. Projected images of beautiful natural landscapes from the Dominican Republic

and other places added to the ethereal mood that his smooth voice and poetic lyrics set upon the arena.

As I sat there absorbing the energy, I realized that this was not merely a concert for these fans, it was a spiritual gathering. The crowd, approximately 20,000 strong, ranged from people in their early twenties to people in their fifties. Now that's what I call the power of love.

Speaking of love, I have fallen out of love with hip-hop during the past ten years and have expected nothing more from it than what it has become—one long commercial for alcohol and designer clothing. So when I walked into New York City's SOB's on May 23, my birthday no less, I was hoping to spark some kind of flame that had burnt out long ago.

The vibe at Common's celebration for the release of his much-anticipated Kanye West-produced album *BE* was peaceful and warm. As soon as I walked through the doors, I felt like I had arrived at a barbecue thrown by old friends who hadn't seen each other in a while. Common has always attracted hip-hop fans who consider themselves purists—the brothers and sisters who were true to the street, but a little different. The DJ played mostly "intelligent" hip-hop from the early nineties for the very ethnically mixed crowd of mostly thirty-somethings, who all looked like they work in design agencies, record companies, or magazines.

They patiently waited and spent the time engaged in interesting conversations that concerned much more than the weather. When Common finally came out, he looked like a veteran boxer, calmly and comfortably moving around the stage, sizing up his audience. He quickly told the crowd that he wanted everyone to feel free to BE whoever we wanted to be, that this was safe space.

Common took control from jump street; he toyed with the rhythm and pace of his performance all night, jumping effortlessly from intelligent revolutionary to "lover." In order to keep it the hip-hop authentic, he launched into a freestyle, proclaiming his newfound love of wine and ending with a thunderous exhortation to "FUCK BUSH!" His voice was clear and loud, which in live hip-hop shows is a rare treat. But I guess when you have a lot to say, you make it a point to be heard.

Common's message of love and freedom of expression rang loud and clear, because the strangest thing happened at one point. I went up to the crowded bar to buy a drink with no hope of getting it within an hour, and a guy looked back at me and gave up his cozy spot so I could get through and put in my order. If that isn't love, I don't know what is.

And love at first sight was what I felt a couple of months ago, when I was bored and flipping through the channels. Something caught my eye.

It was a young Sri Lankan woman dancing and singing in a rain forest. After I finished watching the video for "Sunshowers" by M.I.A., I felt something that I hadn't felt for a long time. I was truly excited and captivated by a musician. I quickly went to the Internet, emailed all my friends, and told them to watch out—because this girl was gonna make some noise. And make some noise she did. When I walked into SOB's on June 7th, I felt as if someone had transported all of Brooklyn's hot, trendy Williamsburg into the place. The hipsters with their Mohawks and ironic T-shirts filled the space to capacity by the time the show was scheduled to begin. The energy was high and the people came to dance. The techno/house/Bengali music blared from the speakers as the hipsters

drank their Budweisers and Jack Daniels in eager anticipation of the new spokesperson for art, culture, and all things cool.

After what seemed like an hour, the screen behind the stage showed a gigantic Tony Blair giving a cleverly edited "endorsement" for M.I.A. and anarchy. The crowd roared as the 27-year-old Maya and her crew took the stage. The high-energy show began with chants of "Fire, fire, fire," as M.I.A. pronounced their intention to do all they could to burn the system down and create a new one.

Mayas' intensity and stage presence was only slightly reduced because of what was rumored to be a case of food poisoning. She still delivered her antiestablishment statements with swagger, anger, and vigor. Whether you agree with her philosophy or not doesn't matter. You have to stand up and listen, because she is smart, sexy, and unafraid. These attributes create stars and leaders. Her appeal is universal and her lyrics are simple, honest, and brave. And this is the difference between a Maya and the countless Bob Dylan wannabes we see so much of these days.

I'd venture to say that she has the potential to create the kind of movement that Bob Marley created in the seventies. Marley was powerful because anyone from a 10-year-old to a sixty-year-old could understand his lyrics. And that is why his message traveled worldwide. He did not need to hide behind any artistic walls that might be too obscure for the average person who just wants to feel good and dance.

Ordinary listeners do not want to have to decipher cryptic lyrics or "high brow" ideas. They want the truth told to them plain and simple—and give it a good beat, so you can dance to it. And this is what I saw in Maya and M.I.A. that night. Even though a lot of the people at the concert may have been there only to see the "coolest girl in school" and be with the in crowd. At least they heard M.I.A.'s message of "Pull up the people. Pull up the poor."

And to me, that is much better than going to a concert and have someone tell me to go out and buy a Bentley.

Whenever I do things like go to a concert or read a book, I like to sit back and think about what I learned. I felt like all three of these artists gave me something that has been missing and is missing still in society — and that is HOPE. The young fans who were there to see Guerra speak of love through his soft melodies and poetic lyrics gave me HOPE that maybe we still have respect for our wise elders, and can treat them as the sages and teachers that they truly are. Not like over-the-hill burdens on a society that only values youth and physical beauty.

Common gave me HOPE that hip-hop can actually mature into it's rightful place as the blues of our time. That he has lasted this long and is getting better is a testament to a rare talent in the hip-hop world of one-album wonders. I applaud Common for not being afraid to let his music evolve as he changes and evolves as a human being. His message of peace, love, and unity will win out in the end— because as he knows, those are the true constants in our universe.

M.I.A. gave me HOPE that the music industry has new soldiers who have something positive to say and are coming out strong and simple. Bands like this can truly change the world if they are marketed right and keep making beats that people will dance to. If hip-hop taught us anything, it is that you can say whatever bullshit you want over a hot beat and that garbage can go platinum in a minute. I'm just glad that there are bands like M.I.A. out there actually using their talents to point the way to a better world.