

ONJ – Now That I’m Here

21 August 1999

I glanced at my watch. Again.

It was only 300 km from Toronto to Canandaigua, NY, but crossing the border on a bus with 48 passengers would surely prove time-consuming. Someone was bound to hold us up.

Cecilia had the same concerns. We were unexpected mates on this journey. Mutual friends had introduced us during my previous visit to Toronto and we didn’t have much else in common other than we both loved ONJ. But when Cecilia heard that I was going to the show – the closest one on the tour, no dates in Canada – she bought her own ticket and we made plans to go together.

I don’t know how long she had waited for this moment, but for me, it was 20 years in the making.

When I was 9, I went to the movies for the very first time. I saw Grease. It changed my life. It took me a few more years to realize just how much I really loved Olivia Newton-John, but when puberty kicked in for good, I was a total goner.

In 1982, I was still too young to venture from the suburbs to the Montreal Forum for the Physical tour. Besides, the show had sold out in a matter of minutes. But years later, I wore out my “Olivia in Concert” videotape playing it on a loop. Our state-of-the-art Betamax VCR, acquired in 1984, was technically a family possession, but in reality, I exerted full control over it. Between Olivia and Chrissie, that VCR really earned its stripes.

On August 21st, 1984, I saw Chris Evert Lloyd in person at Jarry Park for the very first time.

And now, through sheer serendipity, on August 21st, 1999, I was about to see Olivia Newton-John. I just had to go a little farther. About 900 km farther.

Finally, a couple of customs officers took charge of the busload. I breathed a sigh of relief as every passenger ahead of me got processed without a hitch.

I pulled out my ID when my turn came. The American officer looked me up and down. “Where’s your passport?” he barked at me. I hadn’t travelled far over the past year, so I’d let it expire. But crossing over into the USA was just a formality. It always was.

He pulled me out of the line-up and gave me a stern lecture. My Quebec ID meant nothing to him. When he asked the purpose of my trip, he noticeably smirked when I said “Olivia Newton-John concert”. He was clearly taking sadistic pleasure in seeing me squirm. I was practically hyperventilating trying to answer him in a neutral tone, shocked

to find that I had to edit out some expletives unexpectedly demanding to roll off my tongue.

NOTE to self: Of all the passengers likely to hold up the entire bus, I'm the one.

He demanded to see my concert ticket as well as my return bus ticket, lest I be a defector. He disappeared with both tickets, leaving me standing there. After what felt like an eternity, he finally came back and let me through, smugly satisfied to have gotten his dose of alpha-male domination. F*&@**\$ asshole!

By the time the bus reached Canandaigua, Cecilia and I knew we had to hurry. But the bus didn't run through the little resort town. It let us out seemingly in the middle of nowhere. Luckily, a young man cycled by us on the rural road. "The Finger Lakes Performing Arts Center? Yeah, just follow this road – should take you about 10 minutes".

We breathed a sigh of relief. It was 7:30 and the concert was at 8:00 PM.

After 20 minutes of walking at a brisk pace with no sign of civilization in sight, we started panicking. The sweltering late-summer heat broke into a drizzle. We broke into a trot.

Could it be that I had waited 20 years and travelled 900 km only to get lost so close to the destination? For the second time in a few hours, I was on the verge of hyperventilation.

We reached the edge of town and eventually the venue at 8:05. So much for that ETA! We were exhausted, drenched, and panicked that we had missed the beginning of the show.

Thank gawd for Jim Brickman! Olivia had an opening act, and all we missed was his first couple of songs. Cecilia and I split up to get to our respective seats.

I found my way to the 14th row. I collapsed into my seat and closed my eyes for a second, grateful for the solitude, trying to dry off and get a grip on the day.

But let's face it: my journey to get to this moment was nothing compared to Olivia's.

When Olivia announced to the world that she was fighting breast cancer in 1992, I was devastated. Not only because her health was at stake – although the prognosis was good – but selfishly, because I now had to consider that I might never see her in concert when she cancelled her scheduled tour as a result.

Breast cancer was just the latest in a string of calamities that befell her over a short period of time, after the tragic death of her 5-year-old god-daughter, the death of her father just as she got her own diagnosis, the bankruptcy of Koala Blue, and later on, divorce. If she had decided to quietly heal in a secluded place and enjoy life without ever re-emerging in the public eye, not even her most ardent fans would have begrudged her.

The fact that she was here at all – on tour, and *Back with a Heart*, as her latest album proclaimed – was proof that she was not only a survivor but a “thrifer”, as she called herself.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath just as the dark stage lit up to the opening notes of “Xanadu”. When I opened my eyes, she was there. Luminous.

“The dream that came through a million years, that lived on through all the tears...”

I could feel myself inhaling and inhaling, but mysteriously having lost the faculty to exhale. For the third time today, I was close to hyperventilating. Yes, she literally took my breath away.

“Now that I’m here, now that you’re near...”

She was right there. She was real. Until she appeared, or rather materialized – whatever it is that goddesses do – I still had a lingering doubt.

“Have to believe we are magic, nothing can stand in our way...”

No, I reasoned, Olivia couldn’t possibly be real – no earthly creature could be so perfect.

*NOTE to self: That’s right, it turns out Xanadu *was* a documentary.*

“Have you never been happy, just to hear your song?”

I struggled to stay in the moment as the set list flowed effortlessly from ethereal pop to twangy country, from spirited salsa to lush lullaby to rollicking rock. It’s a fine balance – trying to live each moment fully, all the while trying to imprint it on your brain for posterity.

When Olivia sang “Close to You” as a tribute to Karen Carpenter, she introduced the song by saying: “She was my friend and I miss her. ...Still.”

I thought of Jann, and it sent a chill down my spine.

As Jann Arden rose to fame in the ‘90s, she mentioned Olivia and Karen Carpenter repeatedly. They were her childhood idols, her game-changers. In one interview, Jann told Peter Gzowski how hard she tried to sound like Olivia on an early recording. She was saying it self-deprecatingly, but the two pitch-perfect notes she sang as proof – from “Sam” – made the hair on the back of my neck stand on edge.

What a strange twist of fate that my game-changer was also hers. I had loved Jann from Day 1, and even more from that point on.

This was all happening much too fast. Olivia's crystal clear voice wrapped itself around one melodic gem after another – playful, tender, melancholy, seductive, sometimes all at once. I tried to drink it in while making deals from the 14th row – oh please, just one more song, oh please, just one more encore – not ready to let her go just yet. What if this was a one-off, a farewell tour?

After the exuberant “If You Love Me, Let Me Know” – we did, and we did – Olivia reciprocated the declaration with “I Honestly Love You”. It was the end of the show. One fan near me clutched her heart in equal parts wonder and despair.

I ran down to the edge of the stage with my little Instamatic camera, just as Olivia was taking her bow on that side. She radiated kindness and inner peace, like she was lit from within. She made eye contact with me for a fleeting second. The kind of moment where time stops. The kind of moment you don't want to experience through a viewfinder. I was glad that I only raised my camera afterwards as she waved to a different section of the crowd.

As several concertgoers placed flowers and other gifts at the lip of the stage, I did the same. I left a “Living Under June” CD with a note explaining, just in case Olivia was unaware of her, that Jann was essentially her spiritual daughter (and Karen's).

Years later, when Jann eventually recorded a duet with Olivia, my head nearly exploded.

NOTE to self: Apparently, if you think hard enough about two separate entities, you can make them intersect. (...Okay, fine, Amy Sky – take all the credit for bringing them together.)

On the bus back to Rochester, and onwards to Toronto after that, Cecilia and I didn't talk much. This night had been the kind of magical experience you selfishly hold onto as long as possible before you can start to articulate it.

I wondered if it meant as much to Olivia herself to be back on stage, to bask in the adoration. Did she ever tire of singing all those greatest hits over and over? Was she doing it just for our sake? If she could go back in time, would she choose a different musical path? That young Aussie girl who grew up listening to Joan Baez and Nina Simone, would she trade some bubblegum chart-toppers for the credibility of a singer-songwriter or a folk prophet?

Clearly, she could write. Her own compositions were as heartfelt as anything she'd ever sung – the bittersweetness of “Rosewater”, the quiet resolve of “The Dolphin Song”, the gravitas of “Can I Trust Your Arms?” later written with her daughter Chloe. And her willingness to bare her soul on “Gaia” made that album nothing short of a revelation, a full 25 years into her recording career.

Yes, she could have been a different artist – the Principle Girl, as one newspaper article once crowned her. And yet, it is completely impossible to imagine her trajectory without

the Grease hysteria, the “Physical” craze, and a zeitgeist whirlwind of black leather outfits, all-the-rage hairdos, headbands and fitness videos.

In fact, it was precisely because of her world domination as pop culture’s “it” girl that the Principle Girl had a platform to make people listen.

She crusaded against the Japanese government to stop the senseless killing of dolphins caught in tuna nets. She ranted against the Reagan administration in an SNL opinion piece. She was the first celebrity to advocate for the preservation of oceans and rainforests, and helped launch the Children’s Health Environmental Coalition. She had made the very best use of her stratospheric star status.

On the surface, she didn’t appear to be a maverick. “If white bread could sing, it would sound like Olivia Newton-John...” quipped one wag long ago in a vaguely dismissive retort. Well, I guess when ridiculously beautiful people attain massive mainstream success, they run the risk of being dismissed as lightweight, right down to the condescending smirk of an alpha-male customs officer.

That made me appreciate even more the twists and turns of Olivia’s career path – singing, acting, activism, philanthropy – when it would have been so easy for her to coast. The fact that she handled her iconic fame with such poise and, when faced with adversity, turned outward to help others – well, that made her all the more worthy of reverence.

“Anything to declare?” asked the laid-back Canadian customs officer.

“I love Olivia Newton-John” I answered. In my head.

As the bus pulled into the Toronto terminal later that night, I felt at peace.

I concluded that Olivia loved being on that stage for us, maybe almost as much as we loved her for being there. She would never be the tormented artist crippled by the weight of the world on her shoulders, or the melodramatic diva prone to meltdowns. She just loved to sing. She was an entertainer.

I believe every time she performs at a charity benefit, every time she signs an autograph or grants a dying wish, every time someone pays top-dollar to meet her at a fundraiser for her cancer wellness centre, she blesses the day she recorded all those hits. Because they made her who she is, and she continues to make a difference in the world.

I believe she knows exactly who she is.

I believe she has become exactly who we needed her to be.

I vowed to see her again.

There are moments in life that change you.