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MUSIC REVIEW | STEVIE WONDER

# Stevie Wonder and Friends, Here and Gone

By BEN RATLIFF  
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## Correction Appended

[Stevie Wonder](#) has asked some unanswerable questions in his songs, but he deals mostly in optimistic certainty; the ideas of eternity and unconditional love don't vex him.

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Photographs by Michael Nagle for The New York Times

Repetitious images captured Stevie Wonder's Madison Square Garden concert on Saturday because photographers were allowed only minutes to take pictures of Mr. Wonder, who performed with his daughter, Aisha Morris, and others.

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The presence of one of his guests, [Tony Bennett](#) — they alternated verses on “For Once in My Life” — functioned as another tribute to her memory: Mr. Bennett and [Ella Fitzgerald](#) were her favorite singers.

Mr. Wonder started the concert with a moment of silence for the victims of Sept. 11, 2001, and then began with “Love’s in Need of Love Today” from his record “Songs in the Key of Life.” Next came two songs from the album “Innervisions”: “Too High” and “Visions.” Over a vamp in “Visions,” he opened up a long monologue, bellowing at the top of his pitch range. “I can’t believe it,” he shouted. “Here we are in 2007, and we’re still practicing the same bad habits that we had centuries ago. We love the God that we serve, whether we are Christian, Muslim, Jewish or whatever we might be, and we still ask our God to give us the right to kill in his name. It’s unacceptable. I can’t believe it.”

This is why so many of his songs are played at weddings or anniversary parties, and his show at Madison Square Garden on Saturday was full of these promises of constancy: “Ribbon in the Sky,” “Overjoyed,” “How Will I Know,” “Don’t You Worry ’Bout a Thing.” When the men in his songs think of their women, they don’t do half-measures. They speak, backed with the forces of history and nature. They say things like, “I feel like this is the beginning/Though I’ve loved you for a million years.”

It’s secular music with gospel rhetoric, though on Saturday Mr. Wonder filled in the blanks here and there by chanting “God is good” during “Master Blaster” and in other, more indirect ways too.

His mother, Lula Mae Hardaway, died last year. During the show he talked about her and to her; he explained that she gave him a push from beyond, telling him to start touring again. (He’s been touring the United States since August, his first American tour in more than 10 years.)

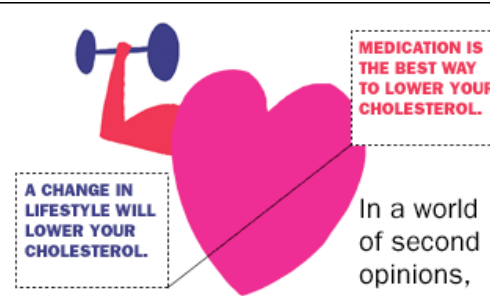
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He returned to this theme at the end of the show with equal conviction. “Hate is unacceptable,” he said. “If you can’t do nothing but hate, why don’t you go on and die and go to hell?”

This thundering shared the same two-hour space with transcendent goofiness.

Mr. Wonder is an excellent mimic. He told a story from his teenage years when his minder thwarted a date with the girl for whom he wrote “My Cherie Amour.” Toward the end of that story he imitated the low, businesslike voice of the minder talking to the girl and her mother, as he heard it through a glass against a hotel wall; to that end he held the microphone to his neck to get the perfect muted effect.

He also imitated instruments. For about 15 minutes he used that scrappy invention of which he is probably the supreme master, the talk box, which enables a performer to sound as if the instrument is inside his mouth. He went on and on with it, singing little bits of other people’s songs: “New York, New York,” “Ain’t No Stoppin’ Us Now,” “We Are Family,” “What’s Going On” and Parliament’s “We want the funk” chant. And later Mr. Wonder performed a comical but impressive harmonica-solo showdown with Frederic Yonnet, another exceptional musician.

Oh, and Prince showed up, but here he was just another musician. In “Superstition” he played chicken-scratch rhythm guitar on a borrowed Stratocaster against Mr. Wonder’s stuttering clavinet. Mr. Wonder’s band, with three keyboardists, two percussionists, three backup singers, a drummer, two guitarists and Nathan Watts’s driving, band-leading bass, was fully engaged, pushing out funk on all fronts. Yet a half-hour more of the talk box would have been just as good.

#### **Correction: November 22, 2007**

A music review on Monday about Stevie Wonder, at Madison Square Garden, misidentified the first song he performed. It was “Love’s in Need of Love Today” — not “Too High,” which was his second song.

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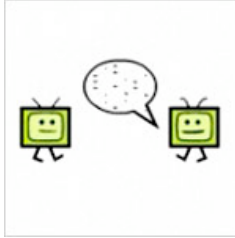
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