

Arts and Leisure: Excessive ovation syndrome spreads at concerts

by CNS

When was the last time you stood to applaud a performance, whether at a concert or at the theater? More to the point, when was the last time you didn't stand to applaud a performance?

TAKING A STAND - Somebody's got to stand up and say enough is enough when it comes to all this standing up. CNS Photo by Jim Baird. So commonplace is the standing ovation these days that to many, the gesture has lost its meaning and perhaps its sincerity, too. Writer Joan Kaufman, a frequent contributor to New York Magazine, has gone so far as to coin the term "ovation inflation."

Somebody's got to stand up and say enough is enough when it comes to all this standing up. Here are our critics' views.

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Think before you stand up

By Valerie Scher

There's a malady sweeping the nation that's highly contagious to concertgoers. It doesn't have a name yet, so let's call it Excessive Ovation Syndrome (EOS for short). Those suffering from it stand and applaud at performances that aren't good enough to deserve such enthusiasm. In extreme cases, they shout "Bravo!" during events that are best forgotten.

The more people pay for tickets, the more susceptible they are to EOS, because ovations confirm that their money was well spent. Even those in bargain seats can easily catch it from their neighbors. The urge to stand and cheer may be irresistible if everyone around you is doing it.

Alas, EOS has no cure. But awareness is key to treatment. As concertgoers, we must ask ourselves: Is this performance so exceptional that it merits a special response? Is this truly an event in which mere applause isn't enough?

On rare occasions - the operative word here is "rare" - ovations are entirely appropriate.

But that doesn't mean that everything is worth an ovation. Too often in our culture, ovations are knee-jerk responses before heading for the exits, push-button reactions rather than genuine outpourings of pleasure.

The danger is that ovations will become so routine that they'll hardly mean anything at all. Their worth will be devalued; their excitement, seriously diminished. What was once a high point of concert-going will become humdrum.

So let's fight EOS together. With enough determination, we can win. All it takes is staying in our seats.

So excited, can't sit down

By Nina Garin

Standing ovations. What is the big deal?

You want to stand and clap after a performance? Go ahead. Who cares? Sometimes critics can be so jaded.

They go to tons of shows, usually with tickets they get for free. So it really takes an OH-MY-GOD performance to get one of us to stand up, let alone clap all that hard. But most people are not critics. Most people pay for their tickets. Sometimes they even stand in line or wait on the phone an entire morning trying to score a pair of hard-to-get ones.

Then part of the fun is actually waiting for the big night. You get a new outfit, maybe. Make some dinner reservations. Get a few drinks and talk about what might be included or left out of the set list. By the time the actual concert comes around, it's already turned into a special event.

So what if the singer gets drunk and forgets the lyrics? If the experience was still fun, what's wrong with clapping and standing?

Perhaps I have this attitude because I've committed the worst kind of concert faux pas, even worse than wearing a band T-shirt to that group's concert: I stood during an entire sit-down concert. In high school, some of us had an embarrassing obsession with the "9 1/2 Weeks" soundtrack. That's how we were introduced to Bryan Ferry.

So, of course, when Ferry came to town, I was there. And I was jump-up-and-down, 14-year-old kind of excited. It didn't occur to me to sit down during the concert, even though everyone else was seated.

The people behind me were hopping mad. But they were grown-ups. They probably didn't have to beg their parents for permission and money and a ride to the show.

Now that I'm an adult, I don't stand up like that anymore. But when people at shows get so crazy excited, it reminds me of being that giddy teenaged girl. And I'm certainly not going to ruin that feeling for anyone.

Praise or just a good stretch?

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Show that's truly worthy, please rise

By Anne Marie Welsh

The first time I thought about a standing ovation was at the Kennedy Center Opera House in Washington, D.C. I was in my usual aisle seat in Row R of the orchestra section, and well before the curtain closed on the graveyard scene of "Giselle," a gentleman to my left rose from his seat in the ornate box closest to the stage and began applauding and bravo-ing with unimaginable vigor and volume for that evening's ballerina, the great Russian expatriate Natalia Makarova.

Because she had recently married a high-profile San Francisco businessman, I recognized the applauding ovator. He was her husband.

Needless to say, Makarova's performance deserved the ovation. She was already a legendary interpreter of the romantic role when she left the Kirov Ballet in Mother Russia and had danced that evening, as she rarely did, with Mikhail Baryshnikov as her Albrecht. It was in every way a memorable performance, near-sublime in its musical subtlety. Her industrialist husband, Edward Karkar, merely jumped the gun, bringing thousands of others to their feet sooner than they might otherwise have risen to applaud.

Fast-forward 10 years to 1986 at San Francisco's Curran Theatre. This particular evening, another husband to my left rose vociferously to his feet to lead the cheering for his wife, Carol Channing.

The show was "Legends," a dog of a piece if ever there was one, and this audience at the Curran Theatre rose far more reluctantly, though eventually lemming-like at his lead to cheer and clap. Their ovation was surely not for the play, or even the performances, but was a nostalgic salute to the stars - Channing and her sublimely different foil, Mary Martin.

Whether kicked off by adoring husbands savvy about star-power and the box office, or by fans merely eager to express their enthusiasm, the standing ovation once was a mark of the audience's discernment. And why not?

Artists who give lifetimes to refining their craft and who offer unusually good performances sometimes deserve a special, vigorous and standing response.

For those who dole out their standing O's more selectively, the standees all around can be a little bit annoying, too. The rest of us feel trapped in the bottom of a human well, unable to see the stage or the

performers taking their bows.

So take a load off your feet, folks. Think before you stand.

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Did that really deserve a standing ovation?

By George Varga

What is the sound of one fan standing?

That's a question I ponder at concerts where I find myself giving a one-person standing ovation. It seems like the most natural response to inspired musical performances that are so moving or dazzling, or both, that rising to my feet is the least I can do to show my appreciation. That I may be alone in offering my approbation is neither here nor there.

What is the sound of one fan sitting? That's a question I ponder as concertgoers around me rise to their feet while I remain seated. As someone who often goes to three or more concerts per week, I believe standing ovations should be a reward for exceptional music-making, not an automatic response at the conclusion of a rote or nearly rote performance.

The first concerts I attended as a budding 12-year-old rock fan (by The Doors and Jimi Hendrix Experience, respectively) were very good. But neither received a standing ovation, simply because they didn't reach a transcendent level of excellence and each audience was savvy enough to realize it.

The number of good, so-so and mediocre bands I have since seen that did get standing ovations is formidable. Ditto the number of great artists who coasted on automatic pilot, rather than elevating their performances through sheer determination and skill.

I've seen standing ovations given to performers in virtually every style of music, from blues, reggae and jazz to country, folk and heavy metal. Some were well deserved, many not.

One of the most memorable occurred when I was 16 and saw Muddy Waters in 1972 in Frankfurt, Germany. The charismatic blues icon received a two-minute standing ovation after performing a jaw-dropping bottleneck guitar solo during his first song. When he returned for an encore 90 minutes later, a fan ran on stage, dropped to his knees, and bowed at Waters' feet.

Most memorable of all was the ovation accorded Fats Domino at the 1980 Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland. The vibrant New Orleans rock pioneer, who resembled a giant cannonball with legs, concluded his charged set by knocking his grand piano across the stage - with his stomach - while simultaneously pounding out a rollicking solo.

The audience, which consisted primarily of young fans in their 20s like me, rose as one to cheer - and did so for the next half-hour. Domino, who had given his all (and who likely realized how artificial and predictable most encores are), wisely declined to return to the stage. Sometimes, less is more. And better.

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Good job? Say it with thundersticks

By James Hebert

So the standing O is the status quo. Should this be a surprise? After all, we live in the Inflation Nation. Kids leave high school with GPAs so far out they're tracked by GPS. Athletes are showered with cash for the ability to toss a ball while simultaneously being tall.

Our entire lives are supersized, from the food we scarf to the cars we drive. If you can't see a fellow motorist's kneecaps through the sunroof of the next vehicle over, you need a bigger SUV.

That plumping up extends to approval, validation and ego-stroking of all kinds. Run a race, remember to vote, do your level best to put right foot in front of left, and you're likely in line for some kind of honor - a sticker, a certificate, a reality-TV gig.

Whole factories in China are now being constructed to manufacture Getting Out of Bed Medals for the U.S. market.

Even humor has been affected.

Q: Why did the chicken cross the road?

A: He didn't - but give him a hand for trying! (That one brings 'em to their feet every time.)

And that's what the standing ovation stands for now. It's the equivalent of a Certificate of Participation. It's saying, in essence: "You had the courage to take the stage. Then, you had the skill, pluck and tenacity not to fall off. Bravo!"

So for audiences at concerts and plays and recitals (even movies), it's necessary to stand up just to keep up.

What's the solution to the dilution?

Be the SUV. Ramp it up. Don't just stand, for instance. Stand on your fellow patron's shoulders. Just make sure your socks don't block his ears, lest he miss your frantic shouts of approval.

And don't simply clap - make a clatter. For example: Why should the use of cymbals be limited to the people onstage? At opera houses, it's obvious there are far too few giant foam fingers being waved around. And how about some creativity to those ovations - some cooperation, even?

Doesn't Wagner deserve The Wave? If you liked the way the orchestra made Hunding's hounds yowl in the "Ring" cycle, what's wrong with hooting to the tune of "Who Let the Dogs Out?"

It's important to remember that when we take to our feet en masse, we're not just saluting the performer;

we're acknowledging our mutual fine taste, generosity of spirit and general joie de vivre (literally, "lack of independent thought").

"Look at us, we're beautiful," chirps a lyric from an artist who goes by the appropriately oversized name Moby.

So beautiful it's almost too much to stand.

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