



## Review: Peter Gabriel offers a panoramic soundscape at PPG

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The view from atop “Solsbury Hill” was truly something to observe, even for a new climber with wobbly legs.

Though an amateur millennial songwriter, part-time poet and easy appreciator of timeless sounds, for reasons I can’t fully reconcile with a good excuse, I had never delved deeply into Peter Gabriel’s catalog before Saturday night at PPG Paints Arena (although I’d heard more than I thought I knew).

But after an inspired sonic and visual experience, you can bet that’s being corrected with curious fervor and admiration.

As a video art piece of a man continuously painting and erasing the hands of a massive circular clock in real time from behind its blurred face struck 8 p.m., an intense orchestral build swelled to a dramatic climax.

That's how the utterly fearless and idealistic visionary who managed to charm MTV with progressive music in its early heyday began unveiling his endless array of forward-thinking and bold compositions.

Gabriel's are songs that effortlessly weave uncompromisingly powerful melodies, bright '80s pop sentiments and worldly grooves into tenderly composed journeys guided by authentic emotional light to often cathartic conclusions.

"Maybe time has its claws in all of us," Gabriel posed from the stage. "But imagination can transcend time."

Fittingly, once the swell subsided, his Pittsburgh audience's journey began in reserved fashion under the intimate light of a "campfire." With a Gabriel whistle, the set-piece had been slowly drawn down from the ceiling as a singular symbolic shining star.

Gabriel and his band mates then huddled around it to begin the evening with pensive songs about seeking healing and escapism from the pace of change. First, it was a piano-and-bass-centric arrangement of "Washing Out the Water" then the ominous horn-fueled concrete jungle intensity of "Growing Up."

But eschewing the familiar warmth of nostalgia, much of the set list was characterized by moonlight as opposed to campfire. Half of the 22 songs comprising the three-hour, two-set performance originated from Gabriel's highly anticipated 'i/o,' his first album or new material in more than 20 years.

Over the past few months, Gabriel has released an "i/o" track with every new moon in anticipation of an expected full release at the end of the year. For many grayed-yet-glowing listeners in the audience, that notion might have eclipsed their hopes of hearing some of their deep track favorites. For me, the relatively uninitiated, it was just as well to hear the new phase.

One thing that remained clear was that Gabriel's crisp and pure mid-range power remains fully intact, constantly in tune and well within reach as a comfortable emotive tool at 73. And on songs like "i/o"'s melancholy ballad "Playing for Time," he effortlessly slides into an upper register that would still make Radiohead's Thom Yorke envious.

Gabriel remained within himself as a showman, largely content to post up behind the keys early in the set, but venturing forth more frequently as the show wore on to directly tend to side-situated audiences with somewhat awkward views. Whether it was a quick pump or two of his mic into the air or a little two-step dance with his collaborators, the former Genesis frontman was careful to never let his gesticulations compromise his vocal quality, and they never once did.

On the “i/o” tour, Gabriel has been joined by prodigious talent.

Legendary bassist Tony Levin and drummer Manu Katche in particular stayed firmly in lock-step throughout the night and shined in moments like the deep low-end stomp of “Panopticom” (a song from “i/o” that, when played live at least, sounds like it might have been just as at home on Faith No More’s “Angel Dust”) the urgent down-tempo groove of “Four Kind of Horses,” the dirty back beat of “Digging in the Dirt” and the powerful bombast of “Road to Joy.”

Singer and cellist Ayanna Witter-Johnson provided a confident stage presence and a supremely controlled voice that shifts gears between flighty, hearty and wholesome with ease. Filling the role of Kate Bush on the hopeful ballad “Don’t Give Up,” she and Gabriel exchanged “don’t give ups” that inspired the audience (which filled the arena absent the majority of the upper deck) to join in.

As it all unfolded, the mind-bending work of numerous visual artists accompanied each moment. On “Darkness,” Gabriel and company moved behind screens, which tracked their movements to bring to life an abstract painting.

Before all was said and done, the crowd was stirred to its feet several times over. One occasion came during the desperate fire and groove of “Red Rain,” which featured Gabriel’s full-throated rasp. Then there was a wave of electricity from the surprise set list addition of “Big Time” with its flashy and bright ’80s funk-pop vibe. Similarly, “Sledgehammer” finished off the first set by way of its trademark “Superstition”-style bass line, Gabriel sashaying across the stage and feigning banging his head with his mic.

The audience was swept to its feet again for the unrelentingly catchy and bright “Solsbury Hill,” which initially seemed set to conclude the night’s

festivities before fans channeled their adoration and phone camera lights to lure the band back to the stage for the other-worldly majesty of “In Your Eyes” and “Biko,” the determined tribute to the memory of South African civil rights activist Steve Biko.

“What happens now is up to you,” Gabriel said as “Biko” winded down, before stoically exiting the stage.

In the vocal void, the crowd steadily serenaded the remaining band members as they followed suit one by one.

## **Set list**

### **Set I**

“Washing of the Water”

“Growing Up”

“Panopticom”

“Four Kinds of Horses”

“i/o”

“Digging in the Dirt”

“Playing for Time”

“Olive Tree”

“This is Home”

“Sledgehammer”

### **Set II**

“Darkness”

“Love Can Heal”

“Road to Joy”

“Don’t Give Up”

“The Court”

“Red Rain”

“And Still”

“Big Time”

“Live and Let Live”

“Solsbury Hill”

### **Encore I**

“In Your Eyes”

### **Encore II**

“Biko”

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