

The Heart of Denver

By Annie Halseth



The Pepsi Center is at the head of the Denver entertainment scene. It is a massive structure that dominates the downtown area by Six Flags. It capitalizes on its size by surrounding itself with parking lots, creating the illusion that it is isolated in the core of Denver. The Pepsi center is home to the Denver Nuggets basketball team and it hosts shows such as Cirque du Soleil and Disney on Ice. It also hosts some of the biggest concerts in the Denver area, such as Adele, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Bon Jovi, and Ariana Grande. It can hold up to 20,000 people for a concert and cost \$180 million to build (all of which were reported to be private funds) and construction lasted 21 months. It is reported that it takes around 1000 people to staff an event and it is built on 45 acres of land.

The Pepsi center 's monolithic structure presides over the most popular entertainment events in Denver; yet for a city that prides itself on the unique structures and culture surrounding entertainment (Red Rocks, The Fillmore, The Ogden, Ophelia's, ect...) the Pepsi Center feels out of place. There is a prevailing sense of consumerism that is inherent in the structure; even the name *Pepsi Center* just oozes corporate money and commodities. Though I have only attended a few concerts at the Pepsi Center, these few experiences were enough to dissuade me from attending any future events (though I am sure there will be exceptions to this statement).

While the Pepsi Center may be fit for function for larger sporting and ice events, many regular concert goers maintain that there is a loss of connection when attending a concert at this venue. The crowd is too large, the stage too far, and the people too internally focused. So while the Pepsi Center may be the head of the entertainment scene in Denver, I would argue that the heart remains in the smaller venues. The Ogden, The Bluebird, Summit Music Hall, and Red Rocks continue to propagate the intimacy of concerts and the individuality of the venues adds texture and variety to the diverse music scene in Denver.

I was once invited to a large concert at the Pepsi Center in September of 2013. The venue stands large and imposing in the heart of Denver, intimidating and exciting my young teenage mind. Once inside the venue, it was easy to become lost in the crowd. People pushed and shoved their way to the front, (or to whatever they perceived as the optimal vantage point) uncaring who they upset or blocked in their mission. The band was Muse. They had recently had a huge influx in their following due to their presence on the new *Twilight* soundtrack and the crowd was full of twittering preteens and their reluctant parents.

But the band itself was disconnected from the crowd. They played on their individual platforms on a large stage that dominated the venue. Strobe lights turned their movements into a collage of images and the sound rarely deviated from the studio produced tracks that we were so familiar with. The crowd was kept 20 feet away from the stage by ominous security guards who wore grimaces and beeping walky-talkies. Away from the general admission crowd on the floor, the rest of the audience watched silently from the thousands of seats surrounding the stage; looking for all the world like silent and ghostly specters.

For my 20th birthday I went to a The Pretty Reckless concert at the Ogden. The crowd flowed with the music and took turns carrying people to the front. I was picked up by complete strangers and surfed the crowd to the stage where I shook hands with the lead singer. The security guards carefully lowered me to the floor where I was easily absorbed back into the crowd. The band talked to the audience, praising Denver and sharing their music with us. Their music was organic and played with obvious enjoyment, the drummer breaking his drumsticks and the guitarist constructing complicated solos and intricate melodies that we hadn't heard before.

The crowd found a connection in the music and the realization that we were all there for the release from the tedium of daily life; the release that live music gives us. There is a sense of anonymity in a crowd. The insight that though you are surrounded by people you are also completely alone, absorbed as everyone is in the music and the atmosphere. The collective attention on the performance is freeing, a kind of exhilarating awareness that allows you a freedom that cannot be found elsewhere.

But The Pretty Reckless did not arrive in a vacuum. As a female fronted rock band, they have fought tooth and guitar pick to be at the forefront of the rock genre.

"I love rock n' roll, so put another dime in the jukebox, baby"

With its 'devil may care' attitude and skintight leather, rock n' roll is a genre that has oozed testosterone from the very beginning. Bands such as The Beatles, Led Zeppelin, The Who, and The Rolling Stones are credited with defining rock music in its modern context. With these foundational bands being comprised of all male members, rock music found itself on a set path for male domination. This immediate segregation of the sexes was reflective of the time period more than of the music itself. The sixties are largely credited as the defining moment for rock n' roll with rock legends such as Jimmy Page, Paul McCartney, Pete Townsend, and John Lennon emerging as the founding fathers of the genre.

It wasn't until Woodstock in 1969 (perhaps the most notorious musical festival of all time, evolving to become a mythological event in the memories of contemporary music lovers who attempt to recreate the event with festivals such as Coachella and

Bonnaroo) that female rockers started to gain popularity in the genre. In 1969 at Woodstock, Janis Joplin performed with her band Big Brother and the Holding Company and began to make an indelible impact on the rock community. Though her music incorporated more blues and folk than what would be considered 'rock' by modern audiences, Joplin's influence on female rockers should not be underestimated. TIME magazine described Joplin as "probably the most powerful singer to emerge from the white rock movement" and she is listed as #46 on the Rolling Stone's list of greatest artists and #28 on their list of greatest singers.

"I ain't gonna lose my chance, no I don't want to lose it"

Yet Joplin was not immune to the "sex, drugs, and rock n' roll" stereotype that has followed the genre since its inception. In 1970, before the release of her biggest selling album, "Pearl," Joplin died of a heroin overdose at only 27. The seventies proved to be much more welcoming to female rockers than the sixties, with bands such as The Runaways, The Pretenders, and Heart finding success within the genre. Joan Jett has had a long and illustrious career in rock music that spans over four decades. But that success was earned. The Runaways, an all-female teen band that Jett founded when she was only 17, constantly fought against the stigma that girls can't rock. Though some of the early appeal of The Runaways was its young female presence (they were pitched as glam jailbait by late manager Kim Fowley), Jett says, "I made a point in The Runaways not to play up my sexuality."

It is not a stretch to say that Joan Jett paved the way for female rockers in popular rock music. Dave Grohl of the Foo Fighters and Nirvana credits Jett for her part in creating the punk scene in L.A. while guitarist Pat Smear states, "You gotta put the Runaways at the same level as the Ramones and the Sex Pistols." Smear adds, "They were doing in L.A. what those guys were doing in New York and London: getting kids to join bands. But I don't think Joan gets what people feel about her. Because she is a very modest person."

"You know I gave my life to rock n' roll"

Despite the inroads made by female rockers such as Joan Jett and Janis Joplin, rock music is still dominated by the males. Acts such as Halestorm, The Pretty Reckless, and Paramore still perform under the shadow of the stigma girls can't rock. The Pretty Reckless, fronted by the talented and controversial Taylor Momsen, has broken chart records for a female fronted rock band. With their new record debuting tomorrow, Momsen's band is set to blow up the charts and continue to make their mark on the world of rock n'roll. As Momsen states, "As a female, its fucking great."