

The Immensity of Intensity  
1976-Lynyrd Skynyrd at Miami Marine Stadium

By Neil Harden

My seat at this occasion wasn't in the Stadium at all, but in an 8' wooden pram with my good friend Dan Trescott (SMHS track teammate, class of 1974, little league football teammate-SM grey ghosts) and a young lady neither of us knew very well at all. Give her credit for the courage of an adventurer-some spirit! Dan and I, two years out of high school, not normally heavy drinkers, couldn't show up to Lynyrd Skynyrd in a boat with a woman without a requisite supply of beer (I don't remember if I asked our female friend if she wanted to drink).

We launched the boat beyond the boat racing pit area towards the Rusty Pelican, and rowed towards the Stadium within sight of security personnel. Our strategy was to ignore their shouts and not make eye contact.....it worked. How could it not, they didn't have a boat. As we neared the Stadium, it became easier to ignore them as our attention was increasingly drawn to the growing crowd, the sights and sounds, the normal pre-concert buzz. "This" Stadium the "water" added novelty to an already uniquely popular rock concert.

Being a couple of hours early to secure our spot in the limited space between the front of the Stadium and the floating stage about 40-50 feet away, we were surprised by the number of people already there. There were perhaps a hundred other larger boats and some cruisers anchored behind the stage in the boat basin. Some of them launched dingies, surfboards or inner tubes to secure a spot exactly where we were headed! Having obtained our prime viewing location about 2/3 of the way out from the center, we were feeling good about ourselves and in command of the situation. Wow.....this was going to be great, an energy and intensity were already evident in the air, the Stadium and the water!

Our little buffer zone area between the Stadium and the stage was bisected by a floating catwalk connecting them. I noticed wires on the catwalk the size of my wrists leading to a large junction box at the front of the stage. The momentary recognition that everything on stage had to be powered from the Stadium was consistent with my Dad's determined teachings about practical things like plumbing, electrical and mechanics.

As we were taking in the scene, imbibing, settling in, it became apparent that there was not going to be any respecting of personal space! There were surfboards, inner tubes, inflatables nudging around us such that we were now only 1/2 way out from the center with more people trying to squeeze in. Some who had a small boat that wouldn't fit were now swimming in (actually diving under towards the center), money in hand, trying to buy proximity to the stage! Several were in the water hanging on to the catwalk and the start was still an hour or so away. This was going to be interesting indeed!!

Another flash of recognition; we're in 8 feet of water taking up space and only 3 of us in the boat. What began as feeling a little cramped was suddenly appearing wasteful and overindulgent. We would have to be steadfast in our insistence that no one board our

vessel. Our resolve was tested repeatedly with offers of \$ and various contraband. We did honor our female companion's need for a modicum of personal space and respect. In our buffer zone area, nothing was fixed and everything was changing. People were now coming down out of the Stadium into the water. There was no more room. We were full to capacity....plus! Rumor had it that there had been a scuffle outside because people with tickets were being denied entrance. This was because the Fire Marshall's declaration that the "walk aisles were full" which certainly seemed to be the case from our vantage point. This bizarre intensity was exciting and amazing and verging on dangerous just as Skynyrd came onto the stage.

In an odd way, once the music started, things calmed down a bit or so it seemed. For me, the lead-up to the actual music was a peak experience so that the majority of the concert was inconsequential (if that's possible) until they played Free Bird at the end. Free Bird, normally played is a high energy song with several escalating crescendos of four lead guitars, impressive by any measure!! Leading up to Free Bird there had been the occasional person trying to climb on stage- amusing but harmless. Ratchet that up 10 fold for Free Bird! The railing to the catwalk had been pulled down. People were hanging in the water (salt water conducts electricity!). The road crew assistants were doing all they could to keep people off the stage. As many as a dozen would be trying to climb on stage at a time and making it before being returned to the gyrating, frothing mass of humanity below. This occurred not before they would drip everywhere including the large electric junction box on stage. When it came time for Free Bird to end, the lead bass guitar player would start again with greater fervor having never broken rhythm. There was a feedback loop, the more excited the crowd got, the more intense the band got, and on and on and on and on....The frothing salt water spray agitated the out of control crowd below and caused sparks and smoke to shoot from the electric box.

One of the road crew gets momentarily electrocuted when he attempted to unplug one of the circuits so he started kicking at the plugs. Another roadie was swinging on an oar or a paddle as people continued to climb on stage while Free Bird continued on for 10- maybe 15 minutes. At the height of this bedlam, I saw the oar swing at my older brother, my own brother! I'm so surprised that no one died!

The music was fuel for the mayhem, and when it stopped, no one had anything left. We were spent, empty!! There was a period of unbelieving stunned silence before a roar of approval gained momentum. I was shocked at what had just transpired or had it all been a dream?! As I glanced around just as many people were wildly, reflexively cheering as were stunned into a catatonic silence. It was a surreal atmosphere to say the least. As some boats began roaring away and coming frighteningly close to us in the darkness, I glimpsed dozens of others (some not even in boats) scattered out in the water. I'm so surprised no one got run over. We had been in relative luxury, only three in an 8 foot pram, but I felt like we'd survived a battle, mortal combat, by pure luck.

Maybe that's why that was the last rock concert held at Miami Marine Stadium.