

An Evening with Eric Clapton

by Lesley Dawson

Eric Clapton was coming to town. He has always been one of my heroes and I wanted to be at his concert whatever may come. Now this might sound a bit desperate and unnecessary, as I regularly attended such concerts in England.

I had memories of seeing The Rolling Stones, yes, the actual ones, in Roundhay Park, when a group of us had smuggled white wine into the venue in a soup flask, while watching Mick Jagger strut up and down. Bruce Springsteen also made an appearance there too, singing “Dancing in the dark”. An indoor concert in the Queen’s Hall, now defunct, had hosted Elton John and his piano, but without Kiki Dee. Earlier still the Beatles, before they became really famous, and you could still hear the words they were singing.

So, what made this concert so problematic? It was in Jerusalem, which is where I happened to be working at the time. Ah but, I worked with Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem and the concert was in west Jerusalem. Those of us working for international NGOs tended to stay on our side of the Green Line in solidarity with local colleagues who did not have permission to enter Jerusalem.

This event was a huge temptation and we all agonized about attending or boycotting. Two of the young physios in our team, one Dutch and the other Australian, thought we should suspend our political principles for one night and insisted that I needed to accompany them, as a chaperone. As you can imagine I didn’t take much persuading.

It was late evening and beginning to be dark by the time the concert got underway. I thoroughly enjoyed myself singing along to “Wonderful tonight” and “After Midnight,” once I had dealt with my fears about being recognized and named a collaborator by my Palestinian friends and thought ‘Fear seems to exist only in our imagination.’ In fact, as I looked around, I saw glimpses of other people I recognized from Save the Children Fund and World Vision, who were also having a night off.

The beer tent was open, and we all imbibed enough to allay any worries about being challenged by the Israelis present. As I was dancing away in a world of my own, I realized that my two younger colleagues were giggling behind me. Before I could turn round to see the cause of their merriment, I was suddenly hoisted into the air on someone's shoulders. After my initial shock I began to enjoy the sensation, it being something I had always envied happening to other people. This continued until my hand brushed the hair of the man on whose shoulders I sat. It was very, very short. I couldn't quite work this out until I saw my so-called friends taking photos of me on this guy's shoulders. Good grief, he was an off-duty soldier in the Israeli Defense Force. This became even clearer as I looked down at his army shirt and trousers.

What could I do? This would surely look like collaboration, if seen by my boss or other local colleagues. If I made a fuss and asked to be lowered down immediately, I would be recognized as a foreigner. I stayed where I was until the end of that set of songs, glaring fiercely at my friends who were in hysterics.

At an appropriate moment I asked to be let down and even managed to say "Toda raba" instead of "Shukran iktir." to the grinning young Israeli, who looked as if he had enjoyed the experience as much as I and had understood that we had both crossed the line. I sighed, as I reminded myself, I was really too old for this sort of caper and would refuse all future such outings.