

Henry Rollins is Back in the Van: Rock and Rollins at The Met



Henry's van. Photo by Mark Binder

Henry Rollins walked on stage at the Met, wrapped the mic cord around his fist, leaned in, and said, "I've been waiting three years to do this show."

The sold-out Tuesday night crowd went wild. We sat back in our chairs, and the barrage of words began.

You may know Henry (as he is known to his fans) from his days as the lead singer for the punk rock band Black Flag, or the Rollins Band, or his radio show, or his film credits, or his role on "Sons of Anarchy."

But I know Henry Rollins as one of the hardest working solo spoken word performers in the world. His performances are a machine gun barrage, blending stand up, first-person storytelling, celebrity gossip, and "inspirational therapy," as one fan called it before the show.

COVID's lockdown put him into hell - he had to stay home - but now he's back on the road with a 75-date tour - and that's just between March and June.

It wasn't surprising that a good chunk of material happened pre-pandemic.

We heard about a farewell gathering for Henry's friend "Jimmy," who was dying of cancer, but organized a gathering of punk gods as a farewell party. We laughed as Henry stood tongue-tied in front of Deborah Harry and watched in bewilderment as Iggy Pop kept his distance.

It's hard to know the difference between the character of Henry and the reality of Henry Rollins. At 61, in a black tee shirt and black slacks, Henry looks a lot like a fit 45-year-old white marine with thick arms and a tight crewcut. He's the guy you wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley.

Inside his head, though, he's just as frightened and messed up as the rest of us. This year's show played up his childhood, as a Ritalin-drugged kid shuttled between his divorced parents, a kumbaya mom and a fascist alcoholic dad.

Imagine you're a kid and your drunk Dad is waving a handgun, and confesses that he and a bunch of army trainees had been flying a helicopter in Texas and murdered an Indian in a boat.

The only gun you've ever played with is a shitty toy cap gun, the kind with red paper caps, so when Dad hands you this weapon, it seems like Dad finally wants to play, right?

Henry lifts the heavy gun up and presses it to his Dad's forehead, like an image by Banksy.

But the trigger's too hard to pull, or maybe the safety is on, so Dad grabs the gun back and lives to drink another day.

And young Henry decides that he needs to raise himself and be a good guy.

All this is bookended by the news during lockdown that his Dad is dying, and the story goes a long way to explain why, when Dad finally croaks, Henry didn't give a fuck.

I've seen Henry a bunch of times, and listened to just about all of his audio recordings. (Well worth digging up and hearing.) It's usually a blend of weird and witty.

This year, unsettling anger and violence run through the show. Henry wants us all to get along, but his solution to male predators? Give cute handguns to women.



The audience as Henry walks on stage. Photo by Mark Binder.

At the core of the set is a story that could be called “Stalking the stalker.”

A guy from Finland broke into Henry’s house several times, and called Henry a Communist. Henry, who lives in a fortress and works hard for his money - he keeps his whole staff on payroll, even though he’s not earning - is terrified, patrolling inside with the lights off and a cheap Walmart serrated knife for protection.

One afternoon, while driving home, Henry sees the Finland guy walking down the road, and shouts, “Get into the car.”

Surprisingly, the guy does, and the confession that follows is how Henry basically assaults the stalker, justifies it and then gets away with it.

Henry locks the stalker’s backpack in the trunk, and when the guy asks for it back, Henry chases him around the car, finally punching the stalker in the face. Oh, and the whole time they’re both wearing blue masks to prevent the spread of Covid.

There’s a happy ending. Finland stalker guy got deported, and Henry felt virtuous enough to tell us about it like he was the hero.

I don't know if everyone else in the audience was as disconcerted as I was.

Usually, Henry Rollins is self-aware enough to realize when something's wrong with this picture. But the other night at the Met, he passed this off as just another funny story where he was the hero. At least he kept Finland guy from getting locked up in LA County jail, right?

After that, the final piece about an out-of-breath Henry screaming a duet of "Rise Above" with Cindi Lauper at a 2019 for gay homeless kids fell a bit flat. As did his imprecations that "You're my people. I'm your people" and we should all be good to each other.

After two hours, Henry finished with, "That's it. You can go now."

He pulled the microphone off its cord, put it in his pocket, waved, and walked off stage as everyone jumped out of their seats and gave a standing ovation. Or maybe we were all just tired of sitting.