

PAUL McCARTNEY AT MUSICARES

WHEN I HEARD PAUL McCARTNEY was to be honored as the 2012 MusiCares Person of the Year at its annual gala, I wanted in. The affair is hosted by the Recording Academy, the organizers of the Grammy Awards, and the night's proceeds provide resources to musicians and members of the recording industry needing financial and medical assistance.

As usual, the \$1,500 ticket price was way out of my league, but I had to pay my respects. The chance to see an iconic Beatle perform, live and up close, with a host of other legendary musicians covering his songs, promised to be an epic occasion.

John Lennon was always my favorite Beatle. I loved his dark iconoclasm, his nasal voice, the morbid undercurrents to his music, his edgy personality, and his political activism. But McCartney's catchy melodies, so integral to the Beatles' success, were ingrained in my brain. And the hits from his solo career, such as "Jet" and "Band on the Run" were unforgettable and echoed my youth.

The McCartney extravaganza was to be held at the Los Angeles Convention Center's main ballroom and would host roughly three thousand industry heavyweights with a vegetarian menu chosen by McCartney himself. I'd always found the downtown convention center a penetrable venue due to its large size and numerous loading docks, underground garages, side doors, and back entrances. I'd glided into many an event there—from yoga workshops to fashion industry trade shows to post-Emmy Awards parties.

But the McCartney tribute promised to be an otherworldly affair with a cross section of global celebrities such as Smokey Robinson, Carole King, Richard Branson, Brian Wilson, and Jack Nicholson. With such a celebrity-dense gathering, there promised to be suffocating layers of security, guaranteed to induce stomach-flipping levels of anxiety in potential crashers.

I decided to partner up with my fellow rule-breaker and music aficionado SHANE KERCH, who was a virtuoso in such high-stakes situations. He was in his midfifties, stood about five foot eight, and had wild black hair that came with a rock 'n' roll attitude. Shane was always a stalwart wingman. A biochemist turned real estate magnate, he was a brilliant businessman by day and a savvy gatecrasher at night. He was also an expert photographer and, with his pocket vest, multiple cameras, and faux press lanyards, would blend perfectly into the media scrum.

On the night of the fundraiser, we decided to show up in the middle of the pre-event cocktail reception, when arrivals would be at their peak. I researched several names of employees of the Recording Academy who were sure to attend, and Shane and I committed them to memory. As we drove east on Interstate 10 from Santa Monica toward downtown, we ran into the usual hellacious traffic and spent our time in the car barking out our chosen names and their spellings over and over. Each of us assigned ourselves three names each, as backup.

On arrival, we parked in the convention center's underground parking garage and clambered up the fire exit to the lobby. At the entrance, we saw a familiar line of massive black Escalades with tinted windows dropping off an endless stream of luminaries.

The security presence looked like Guantanamo Bay, and the atmosphere felt kinetic. Flattops with wrist radios, earpieces, and wrap-around shades stood every few feet. All of them seemed in constant conversation with one another.

Shane and I tried looking self-assured, despite our tightening sphincters, soggy armpits, and labored breathing. After slaloming through a gauntlet of rhino-necked guards, we made it into the registration area. Hundreds of attendees lined up in front of dozens of long tables to check in and receive their lanyards for the evening. After waiting a few minutes, our turn came, and Shane and I blurted out our chosen names as breezily as possible, considering the circumstances. A middle-aged, eagle-eyed minder quickly found them on his iPad and I began reaching for a lanyard.

"Hold it, Tonto, we need to see your identification," he said sharply, rapping my extended hand.

"Damn, we left our wallets back in our driver's car," I responded, going into my usual spiel. "Who knows where they're parked at this point. I can try giving them a call." I made a show of dialing (my sister's phone number) but couldn't get through.

"We can't reach our driver," said Shane. "The event starts soon. Can you give us a break?"

"I've been given strict instructions that no one gets a lanyard without ID," he said. "*Next!*"

An intense security guard, alerted by our protracted conversation, came over, stood behind the minder, and leveled us with heavy stink eye.

Time to go. Shane and I cantered back through the security minefield and headed for our car. We grabbed some lanyards from the

trunk and flipped them back to front on our chests, just showing the black, opaque underside. Then we headed to the catering trucks at the side entrance and waltzed past hundreds of plates filled with McCartney's vegetarian feast into the main ballroom.

Hundreds of attendees were now beginning to flood in and take their assigned seats at elaborate tables filled with flowers, cutlery, and wine. The ballroom lighting was dimmed and the roof stippled with hundreds of sparkling lights, which gave the place a planetarium feel. This was no rowdy concert crowd ready to flip open their Zippos and ignite a joint. It was a sophisticated, button-down, black-tie congregation. The Woodstock generation had definitely assumed a new look.

We hovered on the perimeter of the attendees, careful not to linger for more than a few seconds while looking for some spare seats. Crashers are like white sharks—you've got to keep moving or you're dead.

The tables filled up quickly. This was a massive tribute to a live Beatle, and it looked like 100 percent of ticket holders were attending. It was going to be tight as a tick. The mood was electric as spectators fidgeted with their silverware and talked in hushed anticipation.

Suddenly the show started with the acrobats of Cirque du Soleil's LOVE performing a piece from their Las Vegas show. After a few moments, McCartney and his band briskly and unexpectedly took the stage and launched into the Beatles' "Magical Mystery Tour."

It was an unprecedented move for the gala, as the Person of the Year usually doesn't perform until the very end of the show—and sometimes not at all. The song stunned the audience into rapt silence. Here was the cofounder of the Beatles and his band singing one of his legendary hits without warning or delay.

Security was unimpressed, many of them walking from table to table for a close gander at everyone's lanyard. Shane and I continued walking the perimeter, hoping for a pair of spare seats.



Paul McCartney performing at the 2012 MusiCares gala. *Courtesy of Shane Kerch*

The emcee, British comedian Eddie Izzard, took the mic after McCartney's initial set, made a few jokes, and reminded everyone that "for Paul McCartney, words are not needed. The music speaks for itself."

An array of famous musicians began their tribute sets, putting their twist on McCartney's legendary songs. The Foo Fighters pounded out "Jet," getting a standing ovation from McCartney, and Alicia Keys performed "Blackbird" on the piano. Alison Krauss followed with "No More Lonely Nights." The songs were so good, anybody could sing them and elicit strong reactions. The crowd sang along word for word and erupted with prolonged applause.

As the musicians bore in, the tribute songs poured forth, and the night wore on, the security began standing back, finally giving Shane

and me some badly needed relief. We'd been circling the immense ballroom scanning for a life raft—anyplace to sit—for more than forty-five minutes. Finally, between sets, audience members began moving around, getting out of their seats and fraternizing with each other at adjacent tables.

I spotted two open seats at a near center table about a hundred feet from the front stage. I motioned to Shane and we made a move. As we got closer, one of the two spare seats filled. Norah Jones then began singing "Oh! Darling" on a new rotating stage behind us that, in our seat-seeking frenzy, we hadn't even noticed. We were caught standing in the crossfire of the shifting operations of the MusiCares show. A giant light beam meant for Norah Jones lit me up like a pinball machine.

We had no choice but to try to hunker down at our target table. I sat at the one open seat, and Shane crouched beside me, popping up and down continually like a whack-a-mole, reeling off pictures in his photographer role.

The other members of the table were all stiff white music executives with their spouses. They kept flitting their attention between the moving performance of Norah Jones and their two new irritating interlopers. Finally, the song ended.

"Excuse me, but who are you guys?" said one double-chinned, gray-pomaded Humpty Dumpty.

"I'm Elvis Presley and this is Screamin' Jay Hawkins," I said in my best Elvis impersonation while pointing at Shane.

My joke elicited frosty stares.

"Actually, we're just taking some pictures for Getty Images," said Shane.

"And what's he doing?" asked Humpty Dumpty, pointing at me sitting at the table.

"I'm carrying some spare batteries and bird-dogging some key visuals for our chief photographer," I answered.

Humpty Dumpty grunted and gave us a skeptical smirk. Several of the attendees at the table had looks of permanent surprise—stretched faces and raised eyebrows—the result of bad cut jobs. On the party circuit they were known as “rabbits screaming through cellophane” or “Frankenbunnies.” And it wasn’t just women. Some of the men had off-kilter Kirk Douglas chin clefts and cheek implants. The flickering lights bathed all this facial scaffolding in a prismatic Halloween glow.

Katy Perry appeared on the rotating stage and began belting out “Hey Jude.” She wore a sleeveless gown and a large pink petal headpiece that rose a foot above her head. Her stirring voice and *Alice in Wonderland* attire mercifully diverted the attention of the attendees at our table. Tony Bennett followed with a jazzy version of “Here, There and Everywhere,” and Sérgio Mendes performed his famous bossa nova hit version of “The Fool on the Hill.”

I soon noticed another table nearby that had several seats open. Humpty Dumpty resumed his pointed questioning after the Mendes set, and I whispered to Shane that I’d reconnoiter a new table and signal back.

My new target table was close to the main stage, centrally located, and seemed half empty. By now, between music sets, there was ceaseless foot traffic up front, as many of the event’s key executives moved around to hobnob, network, and slap each other on the back. Sweating profusely, I waded through the crowd, bumping elbows with Tom Hanks, Stevie Van Zandt, and a few coked-out musicians I didn’t recognize.

I got to the table and sat my quivering ass down trying to catch my breath. A pudgy-looking fellow in his late thirties with a distant stare sat two seats to my left. I gazed at his profile, and the longer I stared, the more familiar he looked. He vaguely resembled Paul McCartney. Then I realized it was Paul McCartney’s son, James.

Uh-oh. If Paul McCartney’s son is sitting at this table, it’s probably a very important table. As the penny began to drop, I turned to my right and confronted a gut-wrenching sight: an enormous pair of

bug-like sunglasses was directly monitoring me from six feet away. She was wearing a feathery white hat and an opaque expression.

"Who you?" she enquired in a vaguely familiar accent.

I began to speak, then stutter, then sputter something incomprehensible.

It was Yoko Ono.

"I'm me," I finally blurted out, shooting out of my chair and standing stiffly.

I then realized I'd been sitting in Paul McCartney's chair. He was obviously backstage preparing for another set or kibitzing with the organizers. George Harrison's widow, Olivia, was also at the table, looking at me with an alarmed expression.

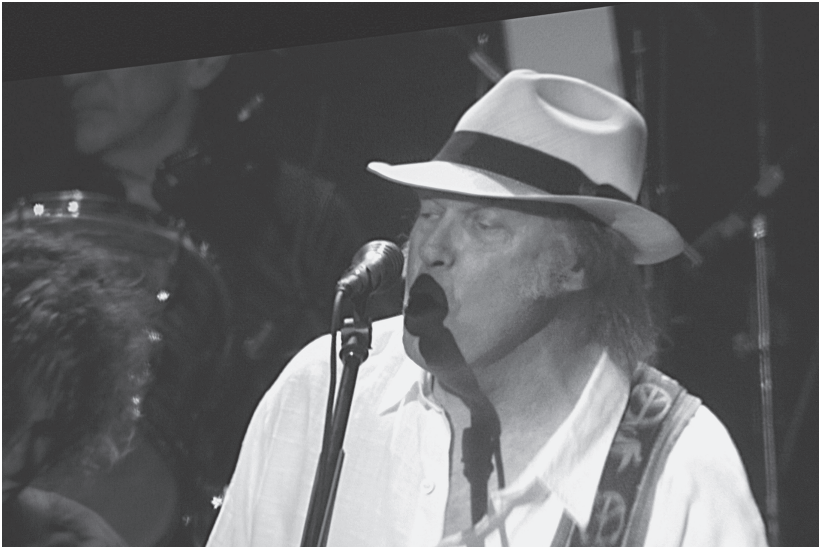
I bowed deeply to one and all and fled.

I ducked and weaved back through the crowd, jostling several attendees, stepping on some waiters' toes, and tripping over several chairs toward Shane at Humpty Dumpty's table. "We've got to get out of here," hissed Shane. "Your buddy [Humpty Dumpty] is over there talking with security."

I looked around and was overcome with paranoia. We seemed in the center of a giant security dragnet closing in by the second.

Our best hope was to rush toward the front stage and embed in the large media scrum—to hide in plain sight. Shane agreed, and we soon found ourselves kneeling among hundreds of other photographers in front of the enormous speakers. We kept our heads down and I helped Shane polish his lenses, swap out his digital cards, and reinstall his batteries. The key was to look busy, very busy. I stayed crouched for what seemed an eternity waiting for that fatal tap on the shoulder.

The savior, God bless him, was Neil Young and Crazy Horse, his longtime band. They came out and launched into an outrageous rendition of "I Saw Her Standing There" with squealing guitars, improvised riffs, and Young's howling, high-pitched voice: "*She was just seventeen, and you know what I mean . . .*"



Neil Young performs "I Saw Her Standing There" at 2012 MusiCares gala. *Courtesy of Shane Kerch*

Soon the whole crowd was on its feet, stamping and singing along. Even security got into the act, moving and swaying. Young's appearance and his take on the early Beatles classic has become legendary, viewed millions of times on YouTube. Even after Young finished, the entire crowd stayed on its feet for a lengthy ovation. McCartney, back at his table at my former seat, stood beaming and clapped wildly.

As the evening drew to a close, James Taylor and Diana Krall coperformed intimate and affecting takes of "Yesterday" and "For No One."

McCartney hopped back onstage to perform a new song, "My Valentine," for his bride, Nancy Shevell, and the Wings song "Nineteen Hundred and Eighty-Five." He finished with "Carry That Weight" and appropriately "The End."

"Thank you so much everybody," McCartney told the audience. "That's it—go home! Thank you for caring and thank you for coming."

As the crowd began dispersing I noticed attendees still shaking their heads in wonderment. It was an exhilarating and spectacular evening. I was emotionally worn out from all the memories stirred by the music and my constant dodging of hostile guests and probing security.

While walking out I locked eyes with Humpty Dumpty, who was putting a coat on his wife's shoulders. Across the expanse of several tables I shrugged and gave him a thumbs-up. He flipped me the bird.

The only other downside was that my ears were ringing for days afterward. In crasher world, you always pay a price in the end.