

# Rock on!

Writer and mom **Leslie F. Miller** takes her daughter to the Hannah Montana concert and learns a little something about earplugs, bathroom breaks and surviving a 'tween concert.

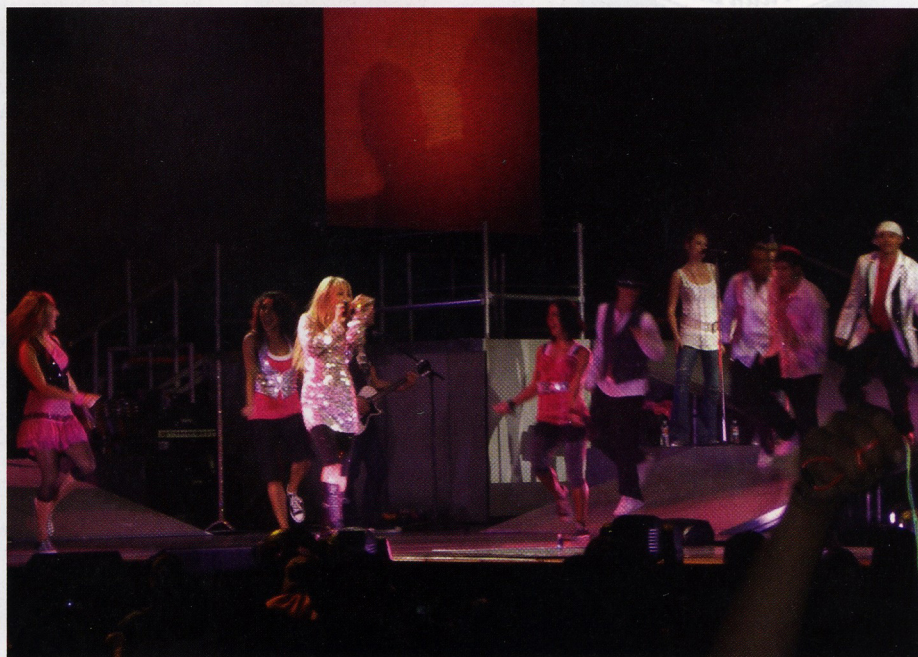
**M**y 10-year-old daughter, Serena, appears at the kitchen door in a black T-shirt with a silver guitar on it, plaid shorts that hang to her knees, white socks, gray Nikes—and, unusual for her, a studded leather cuff, a dragon necklace and a skull ring. “Young people who go to concerts wear lots of bling,” she says in response to my surprised look.

When it’s my turn to find an “outfit,” I choose black and jeans. And lots of bling. (I’m not young, but I *am* Jewish.) And we are going to one of the hottest concert events of the year— Miley Cyrus, aka Hannah Montana, with opens the Jonas Brothers, at 1st Mariner Arena.

Fathers have dressed up like girls, mothers have sung on the radio and children have written essays full of lies to snag tickets to this concert. Others have gone an even more extreme route, spending \$2,500 for a single floor seat. I bought ours, in row W, for face value— \$64 each— from my friend, Dori Armor, who sacrificed her own seat to let me take her two kids, Mac and Jamie, and Serena. I was a 'tween concert virgin and felt lucky. “*Bwahahaha*,” she probably said to herself while handing me the tickets.

When I arrive to pick up Dori’s two kids, their dad, Bill Watson, chair of the performing arts and humanities department at the Community College of Baltimore County, holds out a bag of eight earplugs, one for each ear. “Like your dad giving you a condom— you might need it,” he says, a sympathetic glint in his eye.

I take the bag with an air of nonchalance. After all, I cut my teeth on KISS, Heart, UFO, Cheap Trick and Led Zeppelin at Largo’s Capital Centre and Baltimore’s Civic Center (now 1st Mariner Arena).



Miley Cyrus performs the first half of her concert as alter-ego Hannah Montana, and the latter half as herself.

Compared to these rock 'n' rollers, Hannah Montana should be child's play.

AFTER STANDING IN LINE AT THE DOOR along with thousands of other panting teenage girls and their mothers, we find our seats. I notice immediately that a purple curtain hangs in front of the stage. Every time hands poke at the curtain from behind, it ripples and roughly 13,000 petite humans scream at once. It is a sound like no other. It deserves its own planet. My eardrums crackle and buzz, and my daughter's eyes grow huge from the shock of the volume.

I reach for the bag of earplugs and after quickly but calmly inserting my own, I offer all the kids a pair. It's like strapping on an oxygen mask in an airplane: You can't

save the kids until you save yourself. Once my drums are shut tight and the hysteria becomes a suffocated din, I hear the woman behind me telling her daughter, “You screamed right in that lady's ear, hon.” “It's OK,” I say, pointing to the small beige marshmallows in my ears. All around me are girls and women. Of course. The men and boys are at much tamer events— ice hockey games and monster truck rallies.

At last, there is an explosion and a cloud of smoke and the Jonas Brothers descend from the ceiling on a platform (and continue to descend throughout the show). Occasionally, some of the kids sing along to the songs, but mostly they scream, “I love you, Nick/Kevin/Joe” and jump up and down. Sitting there, I take strength



from the mothers who've come before me, like my friend Kim Webster, whose children—along with my own and Dori's—attend St. Francis of Assisi School in Mayfield. Kim and Dori took their then-11-year-old daughters to their first concert a couple of years ago. "Dori and I were all psyched to get boozed up at the Hilary Duff concert, only to find that they don't sell alcohol at those shows!" says Kim. "So we had to endure close-to-front-row action, lip-synching, anorexic, gyrating Hilary with her new veneers for two-plus hours."

And then there's Pam Lynch, a Louisville mom who braved the 2006 HFStival with three 13-year-old boys. She filled what she calls her "Mom Bag" with snacks, sunscreen, sweatshirts and a giant blanket, and read to them her list of NOs ("no mosh pitting, no body surfing, no visiting the tattoo or body piercing stations or even contemplating any of these things"). Still, she was unprepared for what awaited, including "a young couple on my blanket doing things in public that some would never do in private." Her advice for anyone taking young kids to outdoor festivals: buy pavilion seats. "Save the lawn seats for when you feel like reliving the evil side of your youth," she says.

I was almost 10 when my dad took me to the David Cassidy concert at Merriweather Post Pavilion in 1972. Though Cassidy is respectable and became one of only a handful of 'tween idols who didn't end up in oblivion or jail, I usually choose to publicize a way-cooler concert (my second) I attended a few years later: David Bowie at the Capital Centre in March 1976. My mother handled it like a pro—and without earplugs. "Every second person was smoking dope," she explains. "That's not the kind of crowd that screams a lot."

I'm happy to report that judging from the screams at the Hannah Montana concert, no one was smoking dope.

Since Bowie, I've been to more arena concerts than I can count. I watched Iggy Pop spread himself with peanut butter on top of a stack of amps. I was thrown out of venues for hanging around the stage door too long (it's how I met the Ramones). I got an autograph from every member of Cheap Trick, including their road manager, when they opened for UFO and Rush. I saw Heart backstage because my friend—well, she was naughty. And, because that same friend was naughty again, I felt a drip of Leslie West's sweat when he left the

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stage and a gust of Ted Nugent's wind when he took it. Though I mostly see quieter bands in smaller clubs these days, I like to think I could still handle Green Day. But 'tween concerts? They're another thing entirely. It's not the volume of the music that will kill you. It's the nearly lethal effect of 13,000 girls aged 10 to 13 collectively screaming their lungs out.

At one point I retreat to the restroom, which I discover is full of other moms with the same idea. We're all seeking respite, wearing our earplugs like gang colors. When I get back to my seat, the Jonas Brothers have finished and the crowd thins to tinkle and buy junk. Next to me, David Merkin, from Bethesda, is talking on his cell phone. "Loud," he's saying to the caller. It's the understatement of the year. Merkin, who has brought his 8- and 6-year-olds here tonight, has two pieces of advice for parents bringing their kids to rock concerts: park far away (so you can leave faster) and eat before you come. The kids I brought filled up on dinner at home, but Mac is still lured by the \$7 bucket of cotton candy.

TO THE FANS' DELIGHT, HANNAH MONTANA begins after a short intermission. To my dismay, the screaming only gets louder. "I've heard Baltimore fans are my loudest," she says several times—in similar words. David Merkin and I look at each other as if to say, "Squeeze my finger. This is going to hurt." And it *does*. Miley/Hannah engages the audience in a contest. The left, middle and right sides of the room take turns screaming. The winners get to... scream some more.

Her portion of the show is divided in two, with the Disney character Montana performing the first half and Miley Cyrus performing the second. Apparently, the two personas have a different set of songs (and different hair color). Miley's songs are better, though neither of them seem to be singing live. At the end of the show, she sits on a stool with her guitar and plays a song she wrote for her grandfather. This one might be real.

With a long drive ahead of them, the Merkin family leaves before the encore and I feel insanely jealous and abandoned. But that soon gives way to anxiety over getting the four of us out alive after the concert. We make it to the steps and out of the

## 10 Tips for 'Tween Concerts

>> **Get enough tickets** so that multiple parents can chaperone. In a crowd of many thousands, one parent can have a tough time keeping three kids together, and younger children come with additional hassles. The only way to keep abreast of concerts is to check artist Web sites frequently for tour news.

>> **Pack plenty of earplugs!** Have at least a pair per person, but a few extras are helpful in case of loss.

>> **Eat a filling, healthy meal** before the show. With the price of concert tickets, why spend more money on concessions?

>> **Smuggle contraband**—water, snack bars, etc. Bobbing up and down and screaming for two hours in a hot room causes thirst and hunger. Most venues don't allow outside food; a "false bottom" created by a piece of matching fabric in your purse can camouflage any number of goodies, including a small camera.

>> **Take a pain reliever.** It can take anywhere from 20 to 45 minutes to work but can prevent a headache for up to six hours.

>> **Park in the designated lot** farthest from the venue. Close lots fill up first and clog at the concert's end.

>> **Designate a meeting place** and distribute emergency phone numbers in case of separation. Beware: separation happens.

>> **Take a picture of all the kids**—near the concert sign or a poster. Even if you don't buy any of that overpriced crap after the show, the kids will have a great personal souvenir of the night.

>> **Pack pajamas** and let kids change in the car. If they fall asleep on the drive home, it's easier to put them right to bed.

>> **Remember:** Like with childbirth, most people forget the pain.

lower seating area quickly, but at the doors we are crushed by teeming 'tween hordes. Some are pushing us toward the exit. Others are shoving us toward the souvenir stand. I'll have none of that. The sooner this is a memory, the better.

As we walk to the car (we get a little lost and end up circumnavigating the arena), I recap the night, thinking the kids must be disappointed in the lip-synching and the posing and the mediocrity. But they loved it. All three kids are smiling that kind of dazed, star-struck smile that I like to call *satisfasution*—satisfied exhaustion. And it's that look that makes you, despite your protestations and your screaming headache and the loud hum between your ears, do it all over again next year.

Unless you can find a sucker like me to take your kid. □

*Leslie F. Miller is a Baltimore writer working on a book about cake.*