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Kevin Mazur / Kevin Mazur Photography

"I'm so happy to be on stage again," said the pop star at Sunday night's private New York concert, at which she wore a Britney Spears T-shirt

Like a Vision

Madonna came and went quickly, but still managed to express herself. No "Borderline." No "Material Girl." No "Vogue." She stuck to her new material, doing five songs in 25 minutes

By B. J. Sigesmund
NEWSWEEK WEB EXCLUSIVE

Nov. 6 — You could have cut the tension in the room with a Jean-Paul Gaultier cone bra.

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Newsweek

B.J. Sigismund
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

THE RUMORS THAT MADONNA, now a denizen of London, was considering performing a small concert in New York began months ago. A couple of weeks back came the official confirmation: the performance would take place at the intimate Roseland Ballroom on Nov. 5. But no tickets were to be sold. In the week leading up to the show, devoted fans won admission through radio contests and music-industry folks frantically speed-dialed in favors. Just last Thursday, the showtime was announced: 6 p.m.

So here it was, well past 8 p.m. on the big night. The venue was packed, the fervor was fantastic and the leather-clad crowd was pushing toward the front of the arena. Many fans had arrived earlier than usual, well before the official start time, to get a spot as close to the stage as possible. The concert hall was decorated to match Madonna's current psuedo-cowboy style. (She appears on the cover of her new CD, "Music," in a rhinestone-studded shirt and two-gallon hat.) Giant plastic horses and bales of hay sat to the side of the stage. Big horseshoes lit up the walls.

What she played

- "What It Feels Like For A Girl"
- "Music"
- "Impressive Instant"

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The ecstatic crowd whooped, jumped up and down, and threw their arms out to her with more

Every section of the ballroom brimmed with fans, from the chic to the schlubby: couples, packs of women, groups of gay men. All waited patiently through Everlast, the rapper-turned-folkie opening act, then had their endorphins further pumped by Deep Dish (the DJ team that remixed "Music").

The singer emerged at exactly 8:30 p.m. Her first

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in their lifetimes.

surprise of the night was where she appeared: on a set to the right side of the stage, kneeling down on all fours in the back of a pick-up truck. But the bigger shock appeared when she stood up: her Britney Spears T-shirt.

On stage for the first time in the United States in two years, she sang and danced with the loving-my-life energy that made her a superstar. "Hello New York!" she teased. "Are you as happy to be here as I am?"

As if she had to ask. The ecstatic crowd whooped, jumped up and down, and threw their arms out to her with more gusto than Al Gore or George W. Bush will see in their lifetimes.

There would be no "Borderline" at this concert; nor any "Like a Virgin," "Express Yourself" or "Vogue." Madonna stuck to her new material. She opened with "Impressive Instant," the second track on her new album.

Madonna's voice, ironically her most unremarkable attribute, was in pretty good shape. She continued through "Runaway Lover," an almost a capella "Don't Tell Me" (her next single) and "What It Feels Like for a Girl." Before she began the latter song—a ballad some might call a pop feminist anthem—she said, "I want to dedicate this to Britney." Madonna has stuck up for the controversial teen pop force in the past, and once said that she and daughter Lourdes sing Spears songs together. The T-shirt—with apparently, no bra—actually highlighted one significant demographic that was mostly absent from the crowd: teenagers.

The 42-year-old singer may do another full-fledged tour—her first since "The Girlie Show" in 1993—and this five-song mini-concert and a Nov. 28 date in London are considered trial runs. In some ways, it was a scaled-back affair. There was just one set, two back-up singers, and a handful of dancers (all in cowboy regalia). Perhaps most notably for Madonna, now a mother of two, there were no costume changes.

Her final song did get classic Madonna treatment. While she sang "Music," her first No. 1 single since 1995, a long montage of images from the last 16 years of videos and appearances played on a huge screen behind her. With clips from everything from "Like a Virgin" to "American Pie" to her various MTV Awards show performances, the epic presentation underscored what everyone in the audience already knew. That through sheer drive, smarts and creativity, Madonna molded herself into the most watchable pop star of our time.

That's why we'll always wait for her.