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Chapter Four

GLASTONBURY 2019



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A ONCE IN A GENERATION GIG

HOW BILLIE EILISH MESMERISED THE GLASTONBURY FAITHFUL WITH A STORMING, LIFE-AFFIRMING SET
BY NEIL CROSSLEY

As landmark Glastonbury moments go, Billie Eilish's 2019 performance on the early evening of Sunday 30 June is up there with the very best. By the time of the festival, the groundswell of interest in the 17-year-old Californian was so big that organiser Emily Eavis was forced to bump her up to the Other Stage. In retrospect, Billie could probably have played an even larger one. Of the festival's 200,000 attendees, 40,000 showed up to watch her.

It's well known that a performance at Glastonbury can have a pivotal impact on the career trajectory of aspiring artists. When Adele headlined the Pyramid Stage in 2017, she recalled the importance of her first Glastonbury performance a decade earlier, a finger-picking acoustic set on a sofa in 2007. Glastonbury is unlike any festival in the world and offers a warmth and vibe that will soften the hearts of even the most emotionally hardened and aloof performers. For the artists walking out for the first time, it can also seem pretty daunting.

"Damn, there's a lot of you," exclaimed Billie in her LA drawl as she looked out from the stage, backed by a drummer and brother Finneas on keyboards and bass. The opening song was *Bad Guy*, a thrilling, thumping track and the first single off her debut album. It was the hugely infectious instrumental section that really got the crowd bouncing as one. Equally compelling were the two tracks that followed: *My Strange Addiction* and the dark, brooding *You Should See Me In A Crown*.

Dressed in a dynamic, oversized Stella McCartney cartoon T-shirt and shorts, bandana and surgical mask, Billie was a charismatic presence, bouncing, dancing, striding across the stage, a dash of colour against the minimalistic backdrop. She galvanised the crowd, setting them up for the big drops. Her stage patter was basic but effective - honing in

Left: Finneas sets the tone on keyboards as Billie, dressed in a characteristic riot of colours, fires up the crowd





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on sections of the crowd and telling them, "If you despise yourself, this one's for you."

Few artists appeal to such a diverse cross-section of fans as Billie; her appeal goes far beyond the pre-teen and teen market. This was evident when looking at the audience at Glastonbury's Other Stage, as children, teens, 30-something parents with baby carriers and grandparents stood collectively enraptured and intrigued by her inaugural performance. "It's like the whole world is looking at me now," she said mid-set in excited, wistful tones.

For *When I'm Older* and the viral hit *Ocean Eyes* Billie lay flat on the stage. "Hold your phones down and look at me in the eye," she told the audience. "We'll never be in this moment ever again." Ballads *Wish You Were Gay* and the swooning closer *Xanny* proved a beguiling conclusion to what one observer called a "once-in-a-generation set".

Mid-way through the set – just as Adele had done from the Pyramid Stage two years earlier when she recalled her first intimate performance on acoustic guitar at Glastonbury – Billie told the audience about the first time she played London, to a capacity-sized audience of 200 people at the Courtyard Theatre. It had been, she said, the highlight of her career.

For the set closer, Billie unleashed the hit *Bury A Friend*, a hypnotic track with a dark, dense vibe and lyrics that focus on teenage suicide. In a review of the performance for *Variety* magazine, journalist Malina Saval was not alone in pondering

the paradox between eight and nine year olds in the audience at Glastonbury that day singing gleefully along to a song that was ultimately about taking your own life.

"It's this artistic duality of Eilish – fresh-faced California teen; gloomy depressive – that was so mesmerising to observe," wrote Saval. "And you wonder: do these kids know that Eilish is singing about death? Is this collective expression of impassioned awareness and youthful ruin over the demise of human life the most beautiful thing you've ever witnessed or is it deeply disturbing? With Billie Eilish, it's a complex and enrapturing combination of both."



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Top: Japanese band Baby Metal perform on the Other Stage prior to Billie's show-stopping set



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Left: Billie's vivacious performance captivated thousands and revealed a rare talent to waves of new fans



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