

The image features the five members of the Backstreet Boys standing in a row against a futuristic, blue and purple background with light rays. They are all dressed in white suits. The man on the far left is wearing sunglasses. The man on the far right is holding a microphone. The word "MILLENNIUM" is written across the middle of the image in a stylized, white, outlined font.

MILLENNIUM

## THE BACKSTREET BOYS IN INDIANA MARCH 2000

When tickets for the Back Street Boys' "Into the Millennium" concert in Indianapolis went on sale, my 12-year-old daughter Brooke had been logged in to the ticket sales website for 40 minutes ready to pounce. At the appointed hour she started dialing the ticket office and mechanically punching redial every 10 seconds. The number was always busy and the website never completely loaded.

The concert was sold out in about 20 minutes, as far as we could tell. Brooke dealt with it philosophically. She had seen the BSB in San Jose and was willing to accept that she wouldn't catch another show. She said she still wanted to go see her grandma with Alzheimer's in Indianapolis. That's what got me to puddle up and call my scalper buddies. Two days later I had two seats for \$250 apiece. Overcoming her natural reluctance to embrace nature's least cool creation, Brooke actually hugged me.

Three months later we arrived in Indianapolis, a day before the show. Brooke's fuchsia hair, the result of a bargaining session over nose-piercing, eliciting its first positive comment from the lady driving the Hertz bus. My mom, about midway through the Alzheimer's tunnel, seemed unfazed by the hair color. Her husband was less accepting, but he kept his criticism to a few symbolic Hoosier gibes. Mom seemed glad to see us, if unsure who we were, and spent most of the weekend offering us cookies, cereal, more cookies, coats and boots to wear, more cookies, popcorn, and cookies.



Mom's yappy little dachshund begged relentlessly for attention and peed on the floor when he didn't get it. She fussed over him and fed him ice cream and cookies. "He's just like a person," she'd say. True, he had learned to whine in a sequence of pitches that flawlessly mimicked the inflection of a particularly strident human expression of self-pity. When things got overwhelming Brooke and I would go in my room and shut the door, and the dog would scratch and whine out in the hall. This was the first dog that Brooke didn't like. begged for a dog for as long as she could remember, she had trouble owning up to these new feelings, but eventually proposed in the privacy of my room that the dog be fed to a meat-grinder.

Friday afternoon we escaped Mom and Alzheimer's and the cookies and the dog and took off for the Conseco Field House for the BSB concert. I didn't have a clue where we were going, so the first stop was a local gas station to purchase a map. "Nice hair," the teenage boy behind the counter enthused to Brooke. I told him we were going to see the BSB, which cooled his attitude considerably. Teen boys hate the BSB, just like teen boys hated the Beatles. Maybe they're embarrassed by the bands' public display of teen-boy sexuality. Then again, maybe they're just jealous.

We got to the arena early and parked near the entrance. We paid \$20 for a glossy program. We waited with about two thousand kids and parents for the gates to open an hour before the show. I'd say half of the people in the crowd were girls between about 9 and 13. They clustered in fours and fives, usually dressed alike, and usually with one or two moms. The clothes ranged from clusters in strappy little summer tank tops with skin-tight pants (Brooke: "disgusting") to small groups in backless halter tops with faux-cheetah boots, pants, and cowboy hats (Brooke: "sad") to a few pods in sequins and tiaras (Brooke: "what-EVER").

Some of the younger moms were clearly the active fans in the family. One redhead barely out of her teens held up a redheaded toddler girl, who in turn held up a glitter-encrusted sign that read, "A.J., I'm little but give me a chance."

We knew we weren't in California any more. About 30% of the crowd would qualify as "overweight," including the kids. (Brooke: "It's a fast food thing.") And then there were bangs, and POUFs, instead of ponytails. Baggy t-shirts were still in and translucent plastic hadn't arrived yet. Excitement rippled through the crowd as little girls saw Brooke's pink hair. They would reach out to touch it and say, "oh, COOL." The associated parents usually gave me the Big Frown for re-infecting their region with this style virus they thought they'd gotten rid of, but one mom with a pierced eyebrow stepped right up and asked her what brand of color she used.

About one in ten kids was a little boy - 8 or 9, with a friend or two and a mom or a dad. The little guys were extremely excited, and many of them wore BSB t-shirts. They were completely inured to the little girls. We only saw only one teen boy all evening, smiling gamely and holding his girlfriend's hand. "That guy has a lot of guts," Brooke judged.

The stage was a centrally located hexagon with a raise-able platform in the middle. A steel truss-work superstructure hung from the ceiling with five arms extending to the far reaches of the arena. At the far west end, a huge black box emitted tentative puffs of fog. Partially obscured flying harnesses gave away the plan, which Brooke confirmed knowledgeably to nearby audience members. The band would enter from there. Our seats turned out to be great - right under one of the trussed steel arms where, Brooke explained, one of the Boys would later twirl over us in a nifty flying routine during the show. "I hope it's Kevin," she confided (turned out, it was).

She was too excited to snack so I went out to the deli in the corridor and ordered a glass of wine. "No alcohol at this event," the wizened old guy behind the counter said drily, eyes sweeping the growing mob of tweens. Two other mom types waiting in line with me sighed. "The guy has no idea what we're going to go through tonight," one of them chortled. We ordered cokes and potato salad.

I cruised the vending. Glow-sticks for \$5, t-shirts for \$30, programs for \$10 or \$20, all manner of junk food, cotton candy in blue and pink for \$5, bottled water for a mere \$2.50. Some things in Indiana have changed - nobody would have known what to do with bottled water 10 years ago, except maybe to squirt it at somebody. There were also the ubiquitous basketball chotchke, it

being Indiana and all. Conseco Field House is first and foremost home of the Indiana Pacers, and Indiana is the birthplace of basketball.

Showtime was listed as 7:30. About 7:15 the screaming started. Somebody would see something - a roadie or lighting tech crossing the stage - and the screaming would ripple and swell and die away. At 7:40 the crowd executed "the wave" several times until that ripple, too, died away. At 7:50 the opening act appeared - two middle-aged black rappers called the "Jungle Brothers." They did break-dancing and led a call-and-response: "Jungle" - "BROTHERS" - "Back Street" - "BOYS!!!"

A few minutes later the second act appeared - a girl group singing and dancing to taped back-up music, wearing what I suspected were non-functional headset mics. The lead was a tough little gal, short, with a grim, surly gaze. A real bad-ass. The other four were taller and all were accomplished dancers. The tallest was so lanky with such fantastic deltoids that I took her for a drag queen. She was breathtaking.

After the second act the house lights came back on and canned music played for 45 minutes. Kids fidgeted and squealed. Snacks were bought and eaten, and the bathroom lines flooded out into the corridor. Most of the recorded songs were covers of 60s and 70s hits, shaped to fit the 90s. Cutting to the chase, a tacky nouveau-disco cover of "I Want to Take You Higher" morphed the lyric simply into "I want to get higher." 9:00 came and went and the crowd showed no sign of getting ugly. Nobody would get mad at the BSB, even if they had to wait forEVER. Jeezus, I thought, even the Grateful Dead didn't make us wait that long. Did they?

Around 9:15 the lights started to dim and sustained screaming began. The musicians, all in white, emerged from under the stage and took their places at their instruments. Then the serious sub-woofers came to life and jolted my collarbone with the theme from *Star Wars*. Onto the central stage marched a military parade of 10 perfectly proportioned young men and women in flight suits carrying lighted spears. They were every race and every blend, another new thing in Indiana.

As the spear-carriers had completed their first circuit, the BOYS THEMSELVES appeared in the spotlight, flying in over the heads of the crowd in fantasy-military body armor on airborne skateboards. The screaming shrilled and the music swelled. The BOYS landed on the stage and marched around the four quarters in perfect formation, stopping at each compass point and coming to military attention, stiff against the waves of hoarsening screams. We saw close-ups of their faces on giant video screens. They did not flinch.

They were so . . . BOY. I realized with some chagrin that it had been a long time since I knew or noticed boys like that. So vulnerable and invulnerable. How sweet and sexy it was, these boys so lovely and strong and innocent, lifted up by the military music, viewed through unexpected tears. I knew it was an archetype, probably phony, but it was no less real for that. I remembered other boys, other times. For a moment it all seemed so unfair. "How far you boys are from Viet Nam," I thought. And then I found that I was very, very glad.