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## Front-Row Seat, to Go? Rock Fans Pay for Perks With the Stars

By BEN SISARIO

HERSHEY, Pa. — Helena Aguiar had come all the way from São Paulo, Brazil, for a front-row seat to see her favorite band, and she got it: a black metal folding chair with a gold and cherry-red Bon Jovi logo on the cushion, hers to take home. The price: \$1,750.

"It was an amazing experience, even more than I dreamed," Ms. Aguiar, 25, gushed after the show at Hersheypark Stadium here on Wednesday night, as she packed up her chair and lugged it to the parking lot.

Nearly a decade after "The Producers" introduced the \$480 ticket to Broadway, V.I.P. pricing has established itself in the ledgers of rock 'n' roll. This summer Justin Bieber fans can pay \$350 to attend a pre-show soundcheck. For \$800, Christina Aguilera will pose for a picture. (For \$900, Eagles fans get dinner but no photo-op; most packages also include plenty of swag.)

At Bon Jovi's three sold-out



RICHARD PERRY/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Jon Bon Jovi sang in front of the V.I.P. section of his band's recent show in Hershey, Pa.

shows this week at the New Meadowlands Stadium in East Rutherford, N.J., the top package — which includes the takeaway chair, a leather bag and a catered meal — is \$1,875.

Once available only for top-dollar tours by the likes of U2 or the Rolling Stones, V.I.P. packages have trickled down to the rank-and-file of live music, as artists try to maximize grosses and

reap some of the markup value that the best seats get on resale sites like StubHub.com. And despite the soft economy, promoters have found that hard-core

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fans are willing to pay premium prices to get red-carpet treatment for their favorite shows.

"It's probably the biggest negotiation in any tour deal," said Randy Phillips, the chief executive of AEG Live, promoter of the Bon Jovi tour. "On a hot act you can make as much money from 10 percent of the house as the other 90."

Four-digit prices are relatively new for the concert business. In 1996 the average ticket to the top 100 tours cost \$26, according to Pollstar, an industry trade magazine, but since then it has increased more than 140 percent, to \$63. One reason is the collapse of record sales, which has forced artists to rely on touring for most of their income.

Artists and their managers say the V.I.P. programs allow them to dote on their biggest fans, rewarding loyalty with special treatment. And many concertgoers leap at the deals. Laurie Huey, a 44-year-old accountant in New Jersey, has bought six various V.I.P. packages for the current Bon Jovi tour, at a cost of about \$8,500. She has five Bon Jovi chairs at home and expects to buy even more before the tour is through.

"Years ago I used to have to pay a scalper that to get front row," Ms. Huey said. "I would rather pay the Bon Jovi fan club or Ticketmaster and know what I'm getting, because I've gotten burned by scalpers."

At Hersheypark, the well-oiled Bon Jovi machine coordinated several levels of backstage access. Members of the fan club got a backstage tour that included a chance to pose for a photo with Jon Bon Jovi's maracas and mic stand, while the non-fan-club V.I.P.'s enjoyed prime rib, prosciutto-wrapped asparagus and white wine in a separate tent. Participants said their experience was well worth the price tag.



RICHARD PERRY/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Fans in the V.I.P. section at a recent Bon Jovi concert at Hersheypark Stadium got to take their seats home with them.

"I have money," said Jim Leaman, 55, who owns a propane gas company. "So if I want to come to a show, I want to be up front and I don't care if it costs \$100 or \$1,000."

What fans did not see backstage, however, was Bon Jovi. The more famous the stars, the less available they tend to be to fans, no matter the price. For the "Glee" concert tour, which comes to Radio City Music Hall for three nights beginning Friday, a \$300 V.I.P. ticket includes a gift bag and a pre-show party, but no cast appearances. ("Glee" packages, like Bon Jovi's, are long since sold out.)

But Rick Springfield, the actor and "Jessie's Girl" singer, sells ample schmoozing time before and after his shows (for \$1,000, which includes a seat on stage) as well as autographed guitars (\$600). His manager, Rob Kos, said that access helps develop strong relationships with fans.

"Rick's fans are incredibly loy-

al, which is the reason he's still able to have a career," Mr. Kos said. "He's very cognizant of that."

Some consumers, however, see super-premium pricing as little more than exploitation.

"The artists are just gouging their fan base," said Terrell Lowe,

## V.I.P. pricing for concert tickets has become the norm.

49, a brewery sales executive and an avid concertgoer in San Francisco. "The majority of people just can't afford that."

The profitability of V.I.P. tickets has spawned an industry within an industry, with numerous companies competing to run artists' fan clubs and develop special merchandise and ticket-

ing packages. Live Nation, the giant concert company that merged with Ticketmaster this year, owns several such firms, including I Love All Access, SLO and Musictoday.

Promoters say that premium ticketing offers them two particular benefits. One is that high prices up front can effectively subsidize cheaper seats elsewhere, which leaves more money in fans' pockets to buy extras like food and T-shirts. Another bonus is that since V.I.P. tickets are not often included in general advertisements, artists can reap huge profits while avoiding the stigma of listing very high prices; press releases for Bon Jovi's concerts, for example, give a top price of \$150.

Many in the concert industry still worry that high prices and the conspicuous segregation of crowds into the have-lots and have-somes could backfire.

"These aren't just customers," said Dan Berkowitz, the founder of CID Entertainment, which organizes V.I.P. programs for Bonnaroo, Coachella and other festivals. "They are fans who have an emotional attachment to that artist. So if all of a sudden the artist says, 'You can't get close to me unless you've got \$1,400,' they're going to lose people."

V.I.P. packages are not available on every tour, but the number of acts that avoid them altogether is dwindling. The most prominent is Bruce Springsteen, whose tour last year had a maximum ticket price of \$98. In concert he has been known to praise theaters that do not have special V.I.P. boxes.

Jon Landau, Mr. Springsteen's longtime manager, said he had no plans to add V.I.P. packages for future tours. But he said they are likely to be part of the overall concert landscape for a long time.

"If you call something deluxe, if you call something unique," Mr. Landau said, "this is America — someone will buy it."