

HOT AUGUST NIGHT – Gary Graff

Neil Diamond recorded his first live album on a warm August night in 1972 at the Greek Theatre in Los Angeles. Two and a half months later, the rest of the world found out just how hot it really was.

He came into this concert as a known and respected singer and songwriter. Diamond had scored a number of hits for himself ('Cherry, Cherry,' 'Sweet Caroline', 'Holly Holy', 'I Am... I Said' and the chart-topping pair 'Cracklin' Rosie' and 'Song Sung Blue'). He'd also written for others, most notably the Monkees. Diamond's recent album *Moods* went to No. 5 on the Billboard 200, reaching his highest position to date on its way to a platinum certification.

His stage rep, however, was not yet well-established. "My feeling was ... performing did not come easy for Neil," Lee Holdridge, who orchestrated the songs and conducted the three-dozen string players, said during an 80th anniversary celebration of the Greek. "He was quite nervous and somewhat shy about performing in public, but as his songs became big hits there was more and more clamour for him to come out on the road. It was a tough thing for him. He was not totally comfortable in that situation."

Any anxiety Diamond may have felt was offset by familiarity with the venue, where he'd performed seven shows in August 1971. "Playing the Greek Theatre was a step in the right direction for me," Diamond said during the same tribute. "It's an extraordinarily beautiful theatre, and it's kind of classy. It had theatricality to it that I liked a lot, and ... the reaction was absolutely wonderful. The audiences were wonderful. The reviews were wonderful. There was something special happening at the Greek Theatre, you could tell."

Diamond aimed even higher in 1972, booking 10 shows at the Greek and opting to record the seventh, on Aug. 24, for the album that became *Hot August Night*. This time out he brought an orchestra and carefully crafted a 24-song set that covered all phases of his career to that point. There's a sense of epic grandiosity throughout, from the orchestral 'Prologue' to a melodramatic Side Four that featured emotive renditions of 'Holly Holy', 'I Am... I Said' and a roof-raising finale of 'Soolaimon' paired with 'Brother Love's Travelling Salvation Show.'

Hot August Night was released on Dec. 9, 1972 and single-handedly established Diamond's reputation as a dynamic live performer. "It was the first time I saw him confident on stage," Holdridge said. "That was a moment you say, 'Alright, that's it, right there. I'd say *Hot August Night* was a turning point. That magnetism people associate with Neil Diamond was born on that night."

The double-platinum two-LP set peaked at No. 5 on the Billboard 200, while fans went absolutely bonkers in Australia: *Hot August Night* spent 29 weeks at No. 1 there, and has re-entered the Australian charts several times over the years on its way to 10-times platinum certification. Reviews were stellar as well; even the taciturn Lester Bangs praised it in *Rolling Stone* as "a fine representation of the entire spectrum of the Diamond oeuvre" and "great, pretentious, goofy pop" – which he meant as a compliment.

Still, Bangs was among many who poked fun at the cover photo for *Hot August Night*, which found Diamond in a gesture that's more American Pie than Great American Songbook. (Bang suggested he was "whanging his clanger.") For Diamond, the image represented something else entirely: "I just like the picture. ... Matter of fact when I first saw the picture I said, 'Look how much hair that guy has!'" Diamond told Jimmy Kimmel in 2010.

"I think that's great. And I said, 'There'll be a day you don't have quite that much hair you'll rue this picture. But, you know what I thought – if you've got it, flaunt it.'"

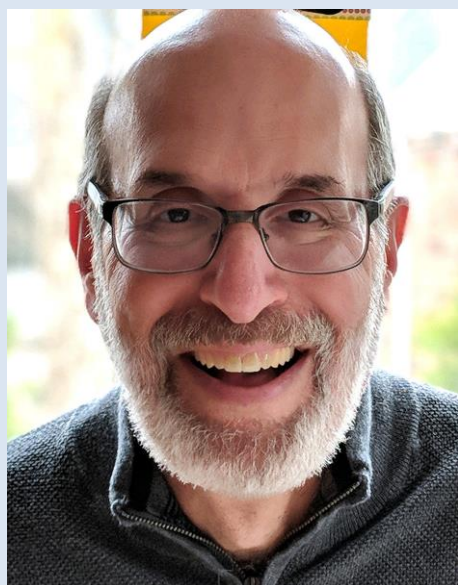
A great deal happened in the wake of *Hot August Night*. Diamond changed labels, moving from Uni to Columbia Records, where he remained until 2010's *Dreams*. Interestingly, he also chose to take a hiatus from touring, focusing instead on songwriting and family.

"I felt that I could take some time away," Diamond explained, "and even if it was year or two or more I would always have the chance to come back and play the Greek Theatre at least one more time, and I always had that in the back of my mind. So I was very secure stepping away from the stage and leaving the *Hot August Night* album to do my talking for me."

He eventually returned, of course, and this album became a brand of sorts for subsequent live releases. *Hot August Night II* arrived 15 years later, followed by *Hot August Night/NYC* in 2009 and *Hot August Night III* in 2018. Diamond also brought the recording truck back to the 6,000 seat venue in September 1976 for the Robbie Robertson-produced *Love at the Greek* album and NBC TV special.

Diamond's days as a touring dynamo ended with a diagnosis of Parkinson's disease, and one of the most successful live acts of all time left the road. He later actively supported *A Beautiful Noise: The Neil Diamond Musical*, presented at the Broadhurst Theatre on Broadway.

About the Author



Gary Graff is an award-winning music journalist based in metro Detroit. In addition to *Loudwire*, he contributes regularly to *Billboard*, *Ultimate Classic Rock*, *Media News Group*, the *Cleveland Plain-Dealer/Cleveland.com*, *Consequence*, *Music Connection*, *VenuesNow*, *United Stations Radio Networks* and others. He reports every Friday on music news with Bob & Brian in the Morning on *WHQG-FM* in Milwaukee and periodically with the *Drew & Mike* podcast out of Detroit. He is the co-founder and co-producer of the Emmy Award-winning *Detroit Music Awards*. He was the founding editor of the *MusicHound Essential Album Guide* series and has co-written and edited books about Neil Young, Bob Seger, Bruce Springsteen, *Rock & Roll Myths* and, forthcoming, *Alice Cooper*.