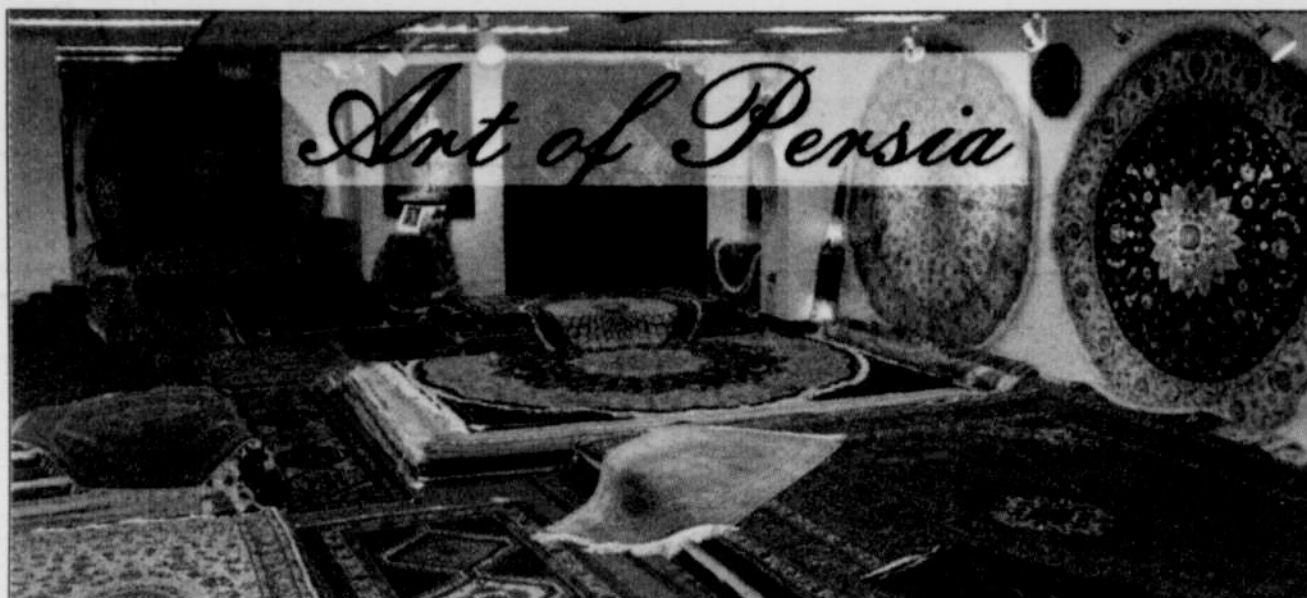


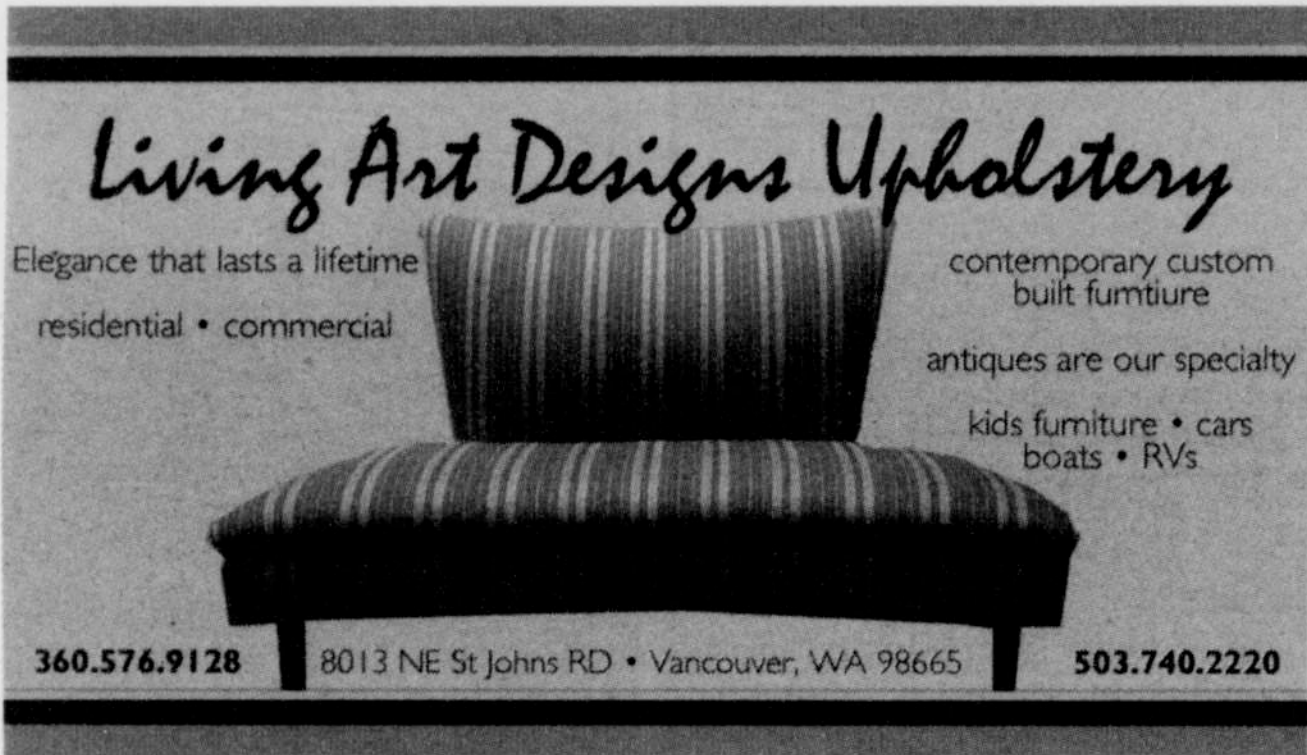


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Bittersweet Symphony

Appetizing music fest hits some sour notes

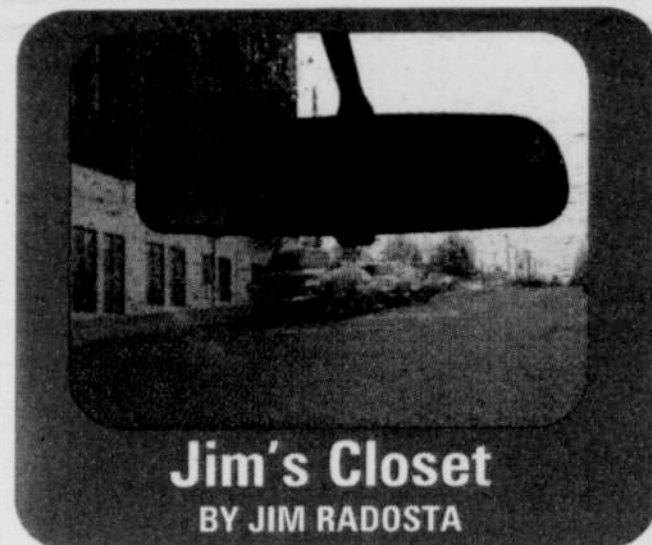
I'm scribbling this column on the back of a map while zooming down Interstate 5. I know I shouldn't drive distracted, but I'm trying to inject some excitement into a butt-numbing road trip (in between stops at the gas station to clean dead bugs off the windshield).

I'm on my way home from the Coachella Valley Music Festival, an annual two-day concert staged in the desert near Palm Springs, Calif. All of my friends had to work or care for kids, so I made the 2,178-mile round trip solo.

I arrived the day before the festival to pitch a tent in an enormous field for campers who were brave enough to compound the oppressive heat with cramped conditions, overflowing outhouses and a laughable no-drugs-pretty-please policy. That night we were treated to a screening of *Coachella*, a documentary featuring stellar sets from years past (including queer performers Morrissey and Fischerspooner). One segment hyped the fest as a communal experience, because its middle-of-nowhere venue requires fans to come from far and away, thus placing everyone on equal footing as an outsider.

Yeah, right. Much in the same way that the Astrodome was a communal experience for all those Hurricane Katrina refugees. Collective misery does not qualify as "community."

And there's nothing quite like a weekend with



Oh yeah, there was one other short-but-sweet set that let me forgive Coachella for all of its trespasses: Madonna. You might be familiar with her work.

This was her festival debut (a moment in pop culture history that ranks right up there with Julia Roberts' Broadway debut) as well as a preview of her upcoming Confessions tour. The dance tent was overflowing with diehard fans (myself included) who staked out their positions early in the day to take advantage of this rare shot at a close encounter with a living icon.

Madonna arrived fashionably late (natch) but made up for lost time by cramming more energy into 30 minutes than all of the other acts combined. Her stage banter was alternately flirty ("Everybody,

does my ass look OK?") and bitchy ("Do not throw water on my stage, motherfuckers!").

The most gratifying moment came during "I Love New York" when she changed the lyrics from "Just go to Texas...isn't that where they golf?" to "...and suck George Bush's dick!" The crowd ate it up. (My, how far we've come since 2001, when I saw Madonna get booed by her own fans in Los Angeles for making a quick plea for peace three days after 9/11.)



See that hand reaching up toward Madonna's guitar? Mine.

young (and often shirtless) folks to remind you how out of touch (and out of shape) you are. Throughout the festival many of these kids seemed more preoccupied with documenting every moment with their digital cameras instead of, y'know, listening to the music.

But let's not dwell on the negative. After all, the diverse lineup was like a pageant of today's hippest musicians—from queer-inclusive (Scissor Sisters, Sigur Rós, Sleater-Kinney) to queer-friendly (Depeche Mode, Franz Ferdinand, Kanye West) and even a few hetero faves (Tool, Common, Damian Marley). Also, for an event that attracts about 100,000 people, the vibe was still slightly counterculture, with a funky interactive sculpture exhibit and a freaky bicycle circus to entertain us between bands.

Before I knew it, the show was over. Like some sort of glitter-ball tornado, Madonna breezed out of there, leaving me feeling exhausted and exhilarated.

Later I read that a few festivalgoers were walking around wearing T-shirts proclaiming, "Madonna Killed Coachella." Good thing I didn't see them, because I probably would've launched into a diatribe along these lines: "Listen here, Mr. Hipster. Half of the bands here stole their sound from the '80s new wave, and the only thing that makes them 'indie' is that they have low record sales. Don't knock pop!"

Music makes the bourgeoisie and the rebel come together? I don't think so. ☺

Arts and Culture Editor JIM RADOSTA needs your feedback. Write to jim@justout.com.