

The Who: Truly a show to remember

By Ken Tucker
Inquirer Popular Music Critic

The Who's new album is titled "It's Hard," and it's hard, indeed, to get very enthusiastic about it. It wasn't hard at all, however, to enjoy the Who's performance at JFK Stadium yesterday.

The Who has been a top-ranked rock band for almost two decades. This English band has survived an array of changing musical trends, the death of one of its founders (drummer Keith Moon, in 1978) and

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the recent bout that songwriter-singer Pete Townshend fought against liquor and pills, a tale he has told many times in recent interviews.

What the Who has survived most impressively, however, is its own fame. It is all too easy for successful bands to grow sluggish and arrogant, to become distant from their fans.

And on its recent records, the Who has seemed a bit disconnected from its audience, turning out music obsessed primarily with growing old, becoming mature and facing up to life — topics that describe the almost middle-aged members of the Who, perhaps, but not the young audience that adores them.

By noon yesterday, JFK Stadium was almost full. The day was warm, and there was already a crush of people against the stage as the Hoot-

ers, a popular local act, bounced its way through a set of rock 'n' reggae.

Not far behind was Santana, a legend from Woodstock presently enjoying a fresh hit single and, thus, a renewed career. Leader-guitarist Carlos Santana led his band through his usual amount of salsa-rhythmed hard rock and earned a big cheer during encores for covering the old Richie Valens hit "La Bamba."

The next act, the Clash, has been compared with the Who for the position it holds in the rock world. Like the Who, the Clash is a British band that began its career as a bunch of upstarts (during the first year of punk rock, 1977) and became a more complex, unpredictable band.

The Clash received a roaring welcome, slammed into its harsh, powerful songs and then proceeded to lose the crowd's attention as its set became thick with slow reggae rhythms. The Clash's performance lasted less than an hour, and the band didn't do an encore song. It was impossible, however, to know why they didn't, because the audience remained friendly, if not wildly enthusiastic.

By the time the Who took the stage at 3:55 p.m., the security guards in the front of the stage area were pulling up young people who had passed out or had been crushed by the steady pressure of the audience to get close to the stage. These fans were hustled onto stretchers or walked to safety backstage — all typical occurrences at a Who concert.

The Who, however, wasn't typical at all. Townshend has said this might be the band's last tour, and the quartet played as if it were their very last performance anywhere. Tough, passionate and vehement, they tore through all their best-known songs.

Though drummer Kenny Jones and bassist John Entwistle supply a firm rhythm section, the drama of the Who is played out in the contrast between Townshend's rough, jittery lead guitar and Roger Daltrey's sharp, high vocals. Both Townshend and Daltrey are artful primitivists: Townshend doesn't play so much as strum, violently; Daltrey doesn't sing so much as yell, eloquently.

The result, when combined with Townshend's uncommonly vivid, astute lyrics, is a harrowingly aggressive rock sound that is instantly recognizable. From "Substitute" as the show's opening tune to "Won't Get Fooled Again" as its climax, the Who made each song sound vital; the band's vigor was equal to that of the wildly cheering crowd.

Even the rather desultory material from "It's Hard" sounded better wafting over JFK Stadium; the flimsy melodies benefited from the broad gestures that stadium-sized performances demand. It was a Who performance to stand with some of the best of them.

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