

ENTERTAINMENT B

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DAVID BOWIE



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A mercurial star soars up, onward

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The lights go out and the lighters go on, a sea of flickering stars and screams, foot-stomping and deafening applause.

"Ladies and Gentlemen . . . David Bowie."

It's been several years since The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust, but David Bowie can still fill a concert with energy.

In fact, he's hotter than ever. And he proved that on Thursday night at the Scope in Norfolk.

Gone are the days of Ziggy Stardust, painted faces and dresses — here now are double-breasted Brooks Brothers suits.

The audience was there for one thing — to catch the Bowie experience. At 36, Bowie hasn't played in the United States in five years, and the fans knew this was not just another concert. They were not at the show for the sake of going to a concert. They wanted to be there because it was the concert.

That made the crowd anything but homogenous. Preps to punks. Shorts and dresses and camouflaged combat suits. All together for one thing: to listen and watch. Drugs: yes, but not a lot. Few were going to miss out because they were totally messed up.

The stage line is lifted. A roar goes out and waves of bobbing heads surge forward. The Who concert stampede it's not. But the packed floor is mesmerized as they wait. The stage manager comes out, asks the quieted masses to take two steps back. The accent is irresistible.

"One, two, three." And the orchestrated throng dutifully moves back. The seated fans clap politely. They are as one.

Musically, Bowie always seems to be in the right place at the right time. For more than a decade he has performed some of the trendiest music in rock 'n' roll, even when it didn't work. But a big part of his success may be that his audience has always looked for him to be there.

But it's not just his audience that looks to him. Almost all singers from punk to New Wave to New Music are indebted to Bowie for his influence. And if the sales and popularity of his latest album are any indication, Bowie's influence is still a thing to be reckoned with.

Even with all the hype, Bowie seems reserved — even surprised and proud of himself when he gives the audience an extra shake. And the crowd reacts — screams and hoots and whistles — at each of the slightly sexual forays. It's part of the Bowie appeal: larger than life but still one of us.

Bowie is a show-stopper, but not a show stealer. The guitarists were definitely on something, frenetically hopping and running around behind Bowie like it was 1999, pumping up for several serious jam sessions while Bowie took a breather.

The back-up vocalists deserved more attention than they got, taking over for Bowie (when they could) during some of the high notes, which he admits he has a hard time hitting during a concert. Their expertise shone brightest during the famous "Fame" scale-down, high to low brilliantly executed.

The Scope is testament to why concerts should never be played in coliseums. The acoustics, well, weren't. During the first set, which featured newer songs (yes, including "Let's Dance," "Cat People" and "China Girl"), you knew the songs because you knew the songs, not because you could understand the words. Except for the fist-wavers near the stage, the rest of the 11,600 were almost subdued. But "Rebel, Rebel," "Fashion" and "Golden Years" set off the crowd, preparing them for what would be a visual and musical feast during the second set.

Though popular songs like "Suffragette City" and "Changes" were missing from the two hour-plus concert (apparently because of the high notes required of Bowie), "Fame," "Young Americans" and "Scary Monsters" more than satisfied the Bowie-hungry fans.

"Modern Love," the final encore song, was disappointing at best. Bowie, the backup vocalists, the drummer,

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Ziggy's gone, but Bowie's back. With an all-new image, David Bowie returned to the U.S. after five years of self-imposed exile to play at California's US Festival in May (above). At the Norfolk Scope last Wednesday and Thursday nights (right), Bowie played to crowds of 8,694 and 11,600.

Curtained pillars spouting smoke and multi-colored lights provided the backdrop to a Greek temple set, a scene suggesting the deity which many have made of the late Ziggy.



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