

Concert shows a barrel of Monkees is still fun



The Monkees' Micky Dolenz gets off like a big dog playing his drums at the concert in the Smith Center Friday night

DTH/Janet Jarman

It was a real scream of a concert — the zany onstage antics, the way the audience reacted, the fabrication of everything from a recorded emcee's welcome to Micky's synthesized drum set.

But, man, it was fun. The Smith Center was the scene, and the Monkees' 20th Anniversary World Tour was the happenin'. A near-capacity crowd of about 12,600 people shrieked, smiled, swayed and occasionally cringed Friday to the snap-crackle pop of Herman's Hermits, Gary Puckett and the Union Gap, The Grass Roots and The Monkees. Or what's left of them.

The Monkees were the most intact, with three-fourths of the original members, and the group that used to upstage Jimi Hendrix when they toured together had no trouble captivating the crowd after the opening acts. The screams, from both the 1966-68 NBC-era and 1986 MTV-era fans, were deafening as Micky Dolenz, Davy Jones and Peter Tork appeared. You'd have thought the Beatles had just arrived from Liverpool.

The music, if not the musicians, has aged well. Peter picked his guitar, Micky tapped his drums and Davy tried to look spiffy behind a tambourine, the instrument that only he could play with such excitement (Tracy Partridge was a deadbeat in comparison). A back-up band included guitar, bass, keyboards, drums and four-piece brass section.

Together, they played and sang faithful renditions of the old favorites, opening with "Last Train to Clarksville" and romping through "A Little Bit Me, a Little Bit You," "I'm a Believer," "Valleri," "Going Down," "Shades of Gray" and others — an hour's worth of three-minute hits.

There were painful moments. Micky would bend and get stuck, ha-ha, or Davy would continue gesturing after a song had ended, ahem, or Peter would whine about how he never got to sing, awww. Then there was the line from "Stepping Stone": "The clothes you're wearing, girl, are causing public scenes." This coming from three middle-age men trying to look hip in their plastic fashion statements.

Two other songs came back to haunt the encore. First was "Listen to the Band," written by Michael Nesmith, the Monkee who isn't touring. Playing it accentuated his absence (attributed to a busy schedule), an uneasy reminder that somebody out there thinks he's

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above all this Monkee business. And the final song, "Pleasant Valley Sunday," accentuated another uncomfortable mix — words of social consciousness sung by a group resurrected in the '80s by commercial escapism, here in Status Symbol Land.

But the music, upbeat and melody-rich, mellowed the contrasts. Very few bands these days can get children, students and adults to stand together and cheer. Maybe it was hokey, a bit of a joke, but it was a very good joke, the kind that doesn't hurt anybody and makes people laugh in spite of themselves.

The opening act, Herman's Hermits (sans Herman and two other original members), fielded its own band with no backup. Included were original Hermits' drummer Barry Whitwam and lead guitarist Derek Leckenby, who actually jammed to "Henry the VIII" and "A Kind of Hush."

Gary Puckett belted out his hits — "Lady Willpower," "Young Girl" and "Over You" among them — with a voice as strong as ever, like a Tom Jones who can hold a note. And when he tossed off his shirt and jerked his hips, the crowd screamed.

Rob Grill, lead vocalist for The Grass Roots, didn't get a scream until he mentioned The Monkees. His set was refreshingly direct, and at 20 minutes, it was the shortest. Unfortunately, he had enough time after singing such hits as "Midnight Confessions," "Temptation Eyes," "Sooner or Later" and "Let's Live for Today" to shout: "Y'know, (insert town here), North Carolina, you always could throw a party."

Somehow, the sound system picked up such contrivances, whereas the music and lyrics often were muffled. It was as if another '60s pop phenomenon — producer Phil Spector's "Wall of Sound" technique — had resurfaced, dictating that some instruments be felt more than heard.

Still, the screaming was clear. And as it finally died down and the lights brightened, you could see that The Monkees no longer get the funniest looks from everyone they meet — just looks of fun.

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