

LIVE!

U2/PIXIES

HAMPTON COLOSSEUM, VIRGINIA

OH Lordy, they're crawling out of the woodwork tonight, from a 200 mile or so radius, as if drawn by magnet to the centre of this dinky college town. "You know, if you breathe really deeply, you might take in some of Bono's air molecules," says one bouncy bimbo outside the arena, before bounding to the locked backstage entrance to paste her head against the wall in the hope of hearing even one note of U2's soundcheck. "U2, U2, U2," shrieks another, before inquiring "Who are the Pixies?" I hate stadium shows.

That Pixies are even sharing the same stage as U2 is utterly perplexing. Across Europe, where Pixies are genuine rock stars, it might seem completely natural. But in America, a country that's so ass-backwards they celebrate Jesus Jones and EMF while virtually ignoring Ride and Lush, Pixies are a relatively new phenomenon. Hell, they're so ass-backwards here that the announcer introduces the band as hailing from California. I really do hate stadium shows.

So, it seems, do Pixies. Everything about the band is absolutely anti-rock. Beyond that, they're completely perverse. The easiest thing in the world for them would have been to play all their singles: "Monkey Gone To Heaven", "Alec Eiffel", "Here Comes Your Man", "Subbacultcha", "Where Is My Mind", and "Hey", and then walk away with several guitar cases full of new fans.

But, of course, they don't do that. Pixies prefer to push limits and shatter expectations, making everything as challenging and difficult as possible. When they headlined Washington DC a few months ago, they were lifeless and boring. The crowd wanted power and fury. What they got was lethargy and disinterest. Black Francis hardly raised his voice, let alone howled, and the rest of the band acted like jaded rock stars, simply going through the motions without the least hint of emotion. It looked like the end of the road.

Here, however, where the audience don't know what to expect but are hoping for something tuneful, Pixies unleash some of their weirdest, wildest stuff, starting with the chaotic punk rock of "Vamos", which Joey Santiago flavours with a helter-skelter, feedback-enriched solo. "Your daddy's rich/Your mamma's a bitch," screams Black, and the crowd shift uneasily, unsure exactly how to react.

Pixies look absurd standing beside U2's extravagant video monitors, and they know it. But they sound monstrous, skewering their way through a tormented set that makes all other indie bands sound mainstream, that makes U2 sound like easy listening. How could I ever have doubted them?

"Mr Grieves" flails with carefree rebellion, "Gouge Away" slips from a gentle caress to skull-chipping fury, and "Planet of Sound" pounds in mock metal triumph, Santiago wrenching angry wails of protest from his battered guitar. All the while, Francis stands sedentary, wide-eyed, baying like a caged beast. Somehow, Pixies manage to gain about the half the crowd's favour. Perhaps the kids appreciate the band's disdain for Poppacultcha. Maybe they respect their self-determination. Whatever, when Black shamelessly yells "Oh kiss me c***/Oh, kiss me cock" ("U-Mass"), even suburban U2 fans that don't even get MTV can't help but smile. Pixies exit just as they

began, awkwardly and unexpectedly, leaving the believers and visionaries hungry for more.

It's wonderful to have your faith restored in truly great rock 'n' roll. I'm referring to Pixies, of course, but also to U2 - and I arrived this evening fully prepared to trash U2 for predictable rock posing, uninspired musicianship, pulpit preaching, living in the past, and poor taste in clothing.

Also, I'll not forgive U2 for severely jeopardizing the future of rock's most innovative band, Negativland. Because of a potentially damaging lawsuit which found Negativland guilty of releasing a satire of "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" with deceptive cover art that made the record look like a U2 product, Negativland and their former label SST are now \$70,000 in the hole.

But, alas, I cannot be negative about U2 tonight. Their "ZOO TV" show is visually stunning, musically unparalleled, downright moving and, dammit, truly entertaining. Everything about this band is absolutely rock 'n' roll. Unlike Pixies, U2 love arenas, and take full advantage of the showbiz value of a large venue.

The futuristic gimmicks and gizmos on hand range from the simple (videos, disco balls, and lasers) to the unfathomable (automobiles with blinding headlights that dangle from the light rig and a walkway that reaches halfway through the floor seats, so fans can gawk close-up at their messianic hero).

But all the glitz and glimmer never overpowers or distracts from the band's performance. Their musicianship is way too strong for that. To state the obvious, U2's live set is as tight and powerful as their recordings. True, they don't rework any of the songs, so they actually sound just like they do on disc, but hey - if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Unlike so many popular bands that make a name for themselves one decade only to become trapped in that image the next, U2 have vision. They're already looking to the future, preparing for the year 2000. The "ZOO TV" tour begins tonight with eight songs from "Achtung Baby", and the band never play anything from before "The Unforgettable Fire". That, of course, means "Sunday Bloody Sunday", "New Year's Day", and "I Will Follow", are right out, which is a shame, but it does show an admirable commitment to disengage from the past. That was then, this is now, and it's time to move on.

Musically, visually, and philosophically, the U2 of the Nineties are more in touch with technology than ever. Many of their newest songs vibrate with digital effects and futuristic rhythms, and at times Edge's guitar sounds as steely and computerised as Young Gods, especially when juxtaposed against Bono's warm, impassioned vocals.

"Zoo Station" sets the mood of the evening with lightweight industrial percussion, and cold, rigid guitar riffs, Bono gesturing clumsily but powerfully as he slinks his way across the stage. A huge screen descends from the sky during "Even Better Than The Real Thing", displaying a flickering montage of image from C-SPAN news and the Home Shopping Network (an ingenious cable TV station where viewers can purchase fake jewellery and chintzy appliances without leaving the comfort of their living rooms). There's a definite sense that U2 are trying to warn us that technology and the media are getting out of hand - that if we

continue with our lazy, apathetic TV lifestyle, our eyes will envelop our heads and our limbs will become but vestigial organs.

In their own way, U2 are still quite political, but they've given up on sermons and diatribes, allowing the kids to find the "truth" by following their hearts (and Bono's lyrics) down the path to wisdom and enlightenment. The band remain disturbed by all the environmental and political problems in the world, but they're filled with hope for the future. They feel we're gonna pull through - that mankind is basically good and loving, and that love will sort out all our differences in the end. During "One", the song's title flashes across all the screens in many different languages, illustrating the idea that, deep down, we're all cut from the same cloth. It's truly touching.

The only slow point in the show occurs after the beautifully reverent "Angel Of Harlem", when the band settle comfortably, eyes closed, into a string of tender, impassioned numbers. The problem with tender, impassioned numbers is they don't rock, and in the lovely concrete ambience of a rock 'n' roll arena, they lose any impact or immediacy, becoming, gently put, boring. By the time the group are halfway done with "All I

Want Is You" my eyelids get heavy and I start to yawn uncontrollably. And we still have to sit through "Running To Stand Still".

But just as I think I might have a chance to rip on U2 after all, they get their shit together with a devastating series of classics. "Where The Streets Have No Name", "Pride", and "Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" follow in rapid succession, each brimming with enough sentiment to fill a swimming pool with salty tears. "I hope you end unemployment, and get out of your recession, and feed the homeless. I hope you find what you're looking for," says Bono before leaving the stage. If he ran for president he'd be a shoo-in.

Still searching for something really nasty to say, and finding absolutely nothing, I have to concede that U2 are the best band in popular rock 'n' roll. They've already accomplished so much, yet they continue to lock their eyes on the road ahead, they've learned to apply social relevance without ramming it down our throats, and they have some of the most emotive, enticing songs anywhere. Tonight's performance leaves me with the conviction that nothing compares 2 U2. God, I'll probably hate myself in the morning. JON WIEDERHORN

The "ZOO TV" tour begins tonight with eight songs from "Achtung Baby", and the band never play anything from before "The Unforgettable Fire". That, of course, means "Sunday Bloody Sunday", "New Year's Day", and "I Will Follow", are right out, which is a shame, but it does show an admirable commitment to disengage from the past. That was then, this is now, and it's time to move on.

THE BONO GOD HOO-HAA BAND



PICTURE: KEVIN WESTENBERG