

# The Final Countdown

This might be the last time, but 'The Two' have found a new lease of life.

## THE WHO

WEDNESDAY APRIL 12, 2017

Birmingham Barclaycard Arena

**CRAMMED INTO** a small backstage room marked 'Hospitality', the aptly prefixed 'Irish' Jack Lyons is deep in conversation with several post-show revellers about, well, Pete Townshend's sock. Jack, as Who fans will know, was one of the earliest adopters of the band, a fact enshrined by his presence at their shows at The Railway Hotel in 1964, brief footage of which forms part of tonight's filmic stage backdrop. The story goes that, in late 1973, a well-lubricated Lyons ended up crashing in Pete's hotel room, waking to find a discarded burgundy sock, fragments of which he has, in recent years, taken to sending to fellow fans (Planet Rock now owns two pieces, enough almost to reconstruct a toe). "But it's nearly all gone now," chuckles Jack. "I might have to purloin another one..."

That Jack still travels over from Ireland to see his old muckers from Shepherd's Bush play live is testament to both his loyalty and the fact that, 53 years after he saw them as The High Numbers, The Who have spectacularly failed to go gently into the night, preferring instead to pack out arenas and stadia the world over.

When they announced their Who Hits 50 tour back in 2014, the then 70-year-old Daltrey described it as the start of a "long goodbye", and he wasn't kidding. That they're still at it three years later is partly due to the nasty bout of viral meningitis that pole-axed the singer in 2015, forcing the

group to reschedule a 30-date American tour; but one also suspects that this flurry of new dates, billed as 'Tommy & More', is further evidence that, like The Rolling Stones, the thought that they will never play live again seems a more terrifying prospect than suffering the rigours of performing a two-hour set of power-rock that would challenge a group half their age.

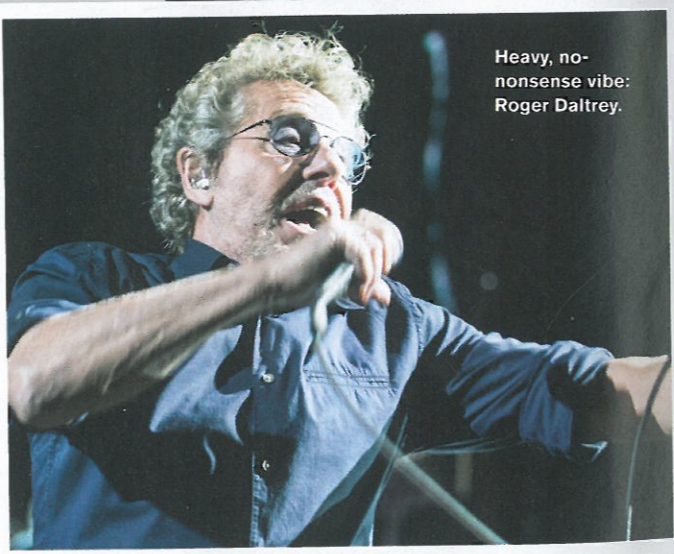
Aching joints are not something that should trouble support band The Standard Lamps, a youthful trio from Tunbridge Wells whose mix of sparky Jam-like ruminations on suburban life and rootsy rock have made them a favourite Who opening act in recent years. Frontman Mike Wilton's effortless command of an arena of 15,000 lively souls is impressive ("Shall we have a chat later, mate?" he banters with a persistent heckler. "I've got a gig to play").

Then, at 8.40pm sharp, said vast army of impatient Who fans, comprising mainly extra-large ageing mods squeezed into extra-small John Smedley jumpers, sinewy geezers who look a bit 'tasty', and loved-up middle-aged couples with their teenage kids, are rewarded by the sight of Daltrey, Townshend plus six-piece bandcasually taking their positions on-stage.

**LITTLE IS** made these days of The Who being, since John Entwistle died, just 'The Two' – a result, perhaps, of an understanding that you could never recreate the volcanic eruption of The Who in their Moon-propelled late '60s/early '70s prime – so why get



Who are ya?: Roger Daltrey and Pete Townshend



Heavy, no-nonsense vibe: Roger Daltrey.

isn't even present tonight, his role taken by the more-than-capable John Button from Daltrey's solo band. Thunderous versions of *The Seeker* and *Who Are You* follow, the sheer bloody-minded muscle of which underscores the fact that, though in the outside world it's a rainy Wednesday evening, in the confides of this arena The Who control time, space and fate.

This leg of the tour has been sold on its inclusion of an edited performance of *Tommy*, and it's during this segment that the music enters the dizzying realms of the magical and spiritual – as was the intention of the original 1969 album, of course. A rare rendition of *Christmas* makes way for a blistering *The Acid Queen*, though it's at the section in *Sparks* where Zak lets loose on drums and the

two Townshend brothers double up with telepathic synchronicity on the jagged riffing that one realises that, even in their sixth decade of existence, The Who are unlikely ever to be matched in pure rock voltage.

*Tommy* over, it's into a three-song celebration of *Quadrophenia*, the instrumental leitmotifs of *The Rock* accompanied on the screens of a film unspooling the lifespan of the group through evocative news footage, from the Swinging '60s, through punk, the '80s, and 9/11, the images of Keith Moon a poignant reminder of loved ones lost, and near-insurmountable challenges overcome.

With Pete often lost tonight in a rhapsody of concentration, and Roger locked into the heavy, no-nonsense vibe, it's a committed, punishing display, with but one moment of

light relief when Daltrey half-jokingly pause to clear his throat before attempting – and hitting – the high note that climaxes *Love Reign O'er Me*. And with an expected encore of *Relay*, and some heartfelt mutual compliments, 'The Two' are gone, off to take a short break before heading once more to the US for another run of dates.

After that, will the long goodbye finally end? Will this have been – gulp – their last ever UK performance? Hopefully not for those yet to experience The Who's twilight glory. *PAT GILBERT*

**BEST MOMENT:** when Pete and Rog emotionally pay tribute to each other – "We're here because of just one man..." says Daltrey; "We've known each other since we were 15 years old..."

Part of Pete Townshend's 1973-vintage sock.