

Caught IN THE Act

H.P. Jungl

by Jim Farber

UTOPIA

Todd Rundgren & Utopia's show in N.Y.'s Central Park was a testimonial to the virtue of modesty and how "progression" can lead you absolutely nowhere. During the two and a half hour marathon set, when the band stuck with more modest pop, things pumped along with joyful ease. Fortunately, this element dominated. The latter third of Utopia's concert, however, was horribly indulgent, what some people insist on calling "progressive music" (i.e. the sort of purposeless kitchen-sink riffing you'd hear from Rush or recent Jeff Beck).

Thankfully, the less-ambitious first part of the show was devoted entirely to Utopia's brand of heavy metal pop, mostly from the band's **Adventures In Utopia** album. The real achievement in translating this material live is in capturing Rundgren's trademark vocal rushes. The other three members of the band, Roger Powell (keyboards), Kasim Sultan (bass) and John "Willie" Wilcox (drums), have voices strikingly similar to Todd's, making for a tight integration of sound. They proved that the best Utopia

material approaches a level of suburban soul we'd associate with The Rascals or Hall & Oates. Numbers like *Love In Action* or *Rock Love*, the show's high points, have built-in ascent-to-heaven vocal lines that top notch soul singers could translate into something transcendent: Rundgren's emotionally limited falsetto hardly reaches those celestial heights, but within the simple realm of lightweight R&B, it lifts us high enough.

The biggest, crashing thud of the evening came with the opening of the latter part of the concert, with circle-jerk showcases (drum solos), followed by what Rundgren called "some real Utopia music", aimless chunks of heavy metal riffs which proved nothing except how many chord changes musicians can make per minute. However, the rat squeal synthesizers, the arena-rock fog machines, and the clumsily integrated *Bolero* tapes did not outweigh all that was good about the show, leaving room towards the end for songs like *Couldn't I Just Tell You*. The believable innocence of numbers like this make it the only music this night which one could conceivably place under the bloated title, Utopia. □



Mike Kagan

ALICE COOPER

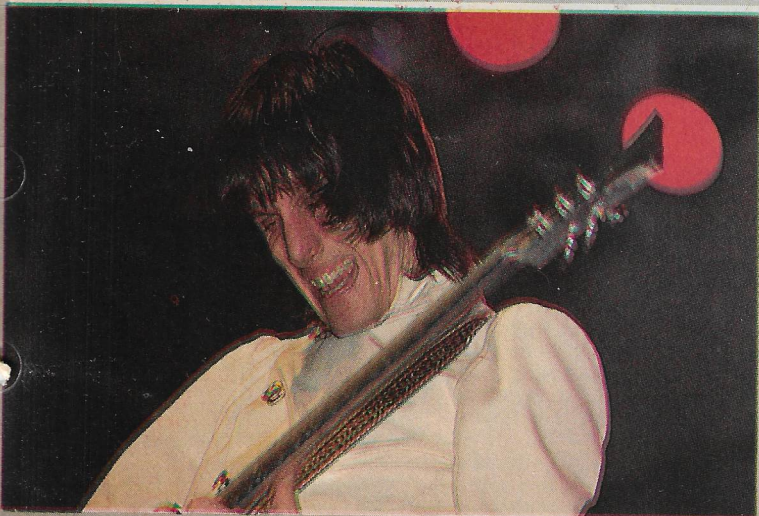
Where do you go after you've been a Hollywood Square? When he appeared on that show, Alice Cooper achieved the apex of absurdity in his career. It was final proof of his point that the MacDonaldland of America will take any weirdness to its heart so long as you imply in your attitude that you don't really mean it. (Conversely, they will accept nothing without this safety clause.)

Alice has enough love of the ultra-American trash aesthetic to still create mildly witty, if self-indicting music. His albums since the breakup of his original band, however, have reduced themselves to lame, dead baby jokes. It's not that we expect his work to still be threatening (it really never was), but the disgusting-chic theme should at least have joyous conviction. Unfortunately Alice's recent **Flush The Fashion** tour was rote "there's-a-tarantula-in-your-soup" role playing all the way.

He offered few theatrics during the show (yes, we saw the snake. zzzzz), laying naked the irrelevance of his newer

material. There were some dull heavy metal numbers (*Talk, Talk*), and the equally dull *Mademoiselle Magazine* humalongs, like *Only Women Bleed*. One of the better new numbers is the catchy *We're All Clones*, a neat parody of all the Kraftwerk rip-off bands. Still, the audience had come to hear the oldies, and Alice's clumsy back-up band created a very mixed bag, turning the bright power pop of *I'm Eighteen* into heavy metal slop. Some of the brilliant joy of *School's Out* came through, but more interesting was *Elected*. When Alice repeatedly yelled "God Bless America", one had to wonder if the audience's cheers contained less sarcasm than audiences seven years ago. These are, after all, patriotic times.

Strangely, what remains Alice's most convincing tool is his naturally grotesque look — here seeming like a combination of Judas Priest leather and Joan Crawford butch (in her decline). Other than this shock, the show seemed like a K-Tell stroll through Alice's past — almost an act of self-exploitation. But, then again, perhaps that's what success in Hollywood is really all about. □



Gary Garshoff