

# Todd Rungren, Utopia do rock and roll magic

By MARK GALLO

## review

debt to Smokey Robinson.

FOR AN ENCORE (these things seem to happen at Pine Knob), the band did a song entitled "No Big Deal." Its performance was.

The near genius of Rungren and company cannot be overestimated. The show was an amazing array of visual and aural delights, from the witty stage set-up (especially the drum set, which was housed in the frame of a motorcycle) to the lighting and special effects, to the films, to the precision-perfect and electronically calculated music.

This was rock and roll perfection. Too much happened to relate. I felt that I was spending too much time squinting at my notes to take it all in as it was.

"Road to Utopia" opened with pre-recorded music, and the audience obviously knew that the band would be on-stage in a minute to replace it with live music, in a mesh so smooth as to be suspect.

Todd Rungren, famous producer and songwriter, took Pine Knob by storm. This is rock and roll for the connoisseur. Everything is meticulous, thought not to the point of overlooking the basic raw energy that is rock and roll.

TODD SPINS, bounces and jogs across the stage in a dervish, making sure everyone gets the chance to see him as clearly as seating position allows. He shows a lot of respect for his audience and seems very concerned that we felt we had our money's worth. I couldn't imagine anyone complaining. The music was much better than I'd expected. "Showtime" was an obvious crowd favorite. "Dye It Green" was my favorite and showed the versatility of the players. Roger Powell (formerly with David Bowie) worked with a portable keyboard strapped around his neck, while bassist Kasim Sulton moved to a fiery lead guitar, Willie Wilcox (formerly with Lionel Hampton) took up the bass and Rungren moved to the drum set. Wilcox took the vocal chores here and was bathed in green throughout this very new-wavish rocker.

Each player had his own visual statement to make as well. Powell's was the first and, technically, the most impressive, with the assistance of a computer at an earlier point. He began playing at a small console synthesizer, flipped it on delay and moved to his portable, creating a wall of sound. Smoke enveloped the stage as the band moved in to supplement him and then Rungren jumped from his station on the drum stand with a loud, bright flashpop explosion.

The audience gasped in unison. This was not flashy pyrotechnics to make up for a lack of musicianship but rather tastefully done and always appropriate.

ended to fall over from horse applause. Todd Rungren is an unquestionable master at his craft, but the ballads alone are worth the price of admission.

SULTON'S MOVIE had a Winnie-the-Pooh type of book, with pages being flipped to reveal a bouncing ball-and-wards situation to get everyone in the act. The movie culminated with the three other musicians singing some doo-wop choruses at the finale. Wilcox's movie was entitled "You Make Me Crazy" and was a sort of cross between "Rever Madness" and Frank Zappa's "200 Motels."

Next — will the surprises end? — was a wonderful electric rendition of "Maybe Tonight," from "West Side Story." Just great. Wilcox took a solo on his motorcycle drums, spinning slowly so that we could see how neat they were. No visible wires or lines of any sort. The whole set was that clean. Rungren used an electronic, wireless guitar and microphone throughout.

The biggie: "Do You Remember the Last Time" — and the audience thra-

He's given a rose, lots of notes and presents. A carnation is tossed from a few rows back. This is prime stuff. Just Todd on vocal and Roger on piano.

BEAUTIFUL. Absolutely fantastic. I've never experienced anything so moving at a concert in my life. The audience gave that song alone a strong, nonstop, unstopable standing ovation.

This was just for one song, mind you, not the end of the show. They wouldn't stop. It was as if they couldn't. It just got louder and louder. How to follow an act like that? With Todd's own movie, of course.

In four years of reviewing music for various publications I've never raved so shamelessly and I admit I feel more than a bit peculiar now. But, this was such a wonderful/unusual experience that I withhold all apologies. Wow!

Concerts strike me as particularly magical only rarely. Very, very good often; magical rarely. Todd Rungren and Utopia, in their recent Pine Knob Music theatre appearance, delivered the finest rock and roll performance I've experienced in years.

Steve Pack and his remarkable band, Ambrosia, opened for Rungren and Utopia in front of a large but surprisingly not sold-out audience at Pine Knob in Clarkston.

Theoretically an opening act should complement the headliner, not clash or detract. Ambrosia did admirably well in this respect.

Though only a six-man band, the group has the equipment of a veritable electronic orchestra, with electronic keyboards breezing everywhere.

Ambrosia seemed through a good 40-minute set that included "Nice, Nice, Very Nice" (with lyrics penned by Kurt Vonnegut), as well as their hit songs, "Biggest Part of Me" and "You're the Only Woman," both of which highlighted Pack's obvious vocal

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