With recent months having seen the Who set out on their first ‘comeback’ tour, the band’s live reputation is being re-established for thousands of fans — many of whom have seen for the first time the qualities that made the Who so great. Although the 1969 version of the group couldn’t be expected to surpass the tremendous standards of the past, younger fans will have found enough evidence at the recent concerts to understand the legendary status gained by the Who in the 1960s and 1970s — as the greatest live rock and roll band ever.

Rather than exploit this reputation to the full, the Who have been exceptionally sparing with their official releases of live material. While contemporaries like Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones have regularly issued live albums, the Who have restricted their output to two official live sets, with various odd tracks cropping up on compilations and soundtracks.

**FEEDBACK**

From their earliest days, the Who were always at their strongest on stage. The visual flair, auto-destruction, feedback and sheer violence of their shows between 1964 and 1967 established their awesome reputation. Unlike many bands of the era, they worked hard at their live performances, investing in huge amplification and spectacular lighting equipment. They played so loud onstage that the resulting distortion and feedback became a trademark of their sound. After their first three singles and the “My Generation” LP in 1965, they adopted a more subtle approach in the studio, with extensive use of multi-tracked acoustic guitars and keyboards; but they retained the sheer energy of their concert sound, and realised all temptation to expand the power trios and singer format until after the death of Keith Moon in 1978. To the uninitiated, then, witnessing the band for the first time could be a profound shock or a wonderful surprise: their records gave very little away.

Although the band wanted to capture their live set on tapes at a very early stage, problems were caused by the technical inadequacy of mobile studios at the time, and also the fact that their concerts were so visually oriented that the music played was sometimes imprecise and chaotic when heard out of context. So the earliest surviving official live tapes come from the soundtracks of film and television appearances.

The band’s set at the Richmond Jazz Festival on 6th August 1965 was filmed and recorded, and tapes also exist of an appearance in Stockholm on 2nd June 1966, which features a rare version of Stevie Wonder’s “Uptight”. Another official recording accompanied the filming of the band at the Monterey Pop Festival on 18th June 1967, where their shortened set comprised “Substitute”, “Summertime Blues”, “Pictures Of Lily”, “A Quick One”, “Happy Jack” and “My Generation”. Like most of the tapes from this time, however, this set failed to capture the excitement and power of the band, and so an official release was prohibited.

**TAPED**

In 1968, though, the Who decided to unleash their live sound onto the record-buying public for the first time. Concerts in the States were taped during April 1968, primarily at the Fillmore East in New York and the Fillmore West in San Francisco, where the band had established a good relationship with Bill Graham. As well as offering them a chance to take their rightful place alongside Cream and the Jimi Hendrix experience in the heavy ‘mind-blowing’ stakes, the live set would also give Pete Townshend a breathing space to develop the concept that would become “Tommy”.

The tapes from the Fillmore East on the 5th/6th April capture the thunderous glory of the Who in excellent quality stereo, and sound far removed from the delicate pop band that produced “Happy Jack” and “I’m A Boy”. In retrospect, the band’s live sound at this stage might be classed by the small-minded as heavy metal, though this term goes little way towards describing the intelligence and subtlety of the music itself.

Highlights of the Fillmore East shows...
included ten-minute jams on songs like "Relax" and "Shakin' All Over", where Townshend, Entwistle and Moon pushed their instruments to the limits of improvisatory power; tight hard rock covers of "Fortune Teller", "C'mon Everybody", "My Way" and "Summertime Blues"; energetic versions of contemporary hits like "Happy Jack", "I Can't Explain" and "Pictures Of Lily"; and, best of all, the cream of Townshend's songwriting transformed beyond the original recordings, on numbers like "My Generation", "A Quick One", "Tattoo" and even a rare reading of the unissued gem, "Little Billy".

**FLAWS**

But as was so often the case with the Who, the projected live album was cancelled for no clear reason, though the tapes do reveal some musical flaws, such as slightly out-of-tune guitars, and a vocal mix-up on "Boris The Spider". Various combinations of the shorter songs were considered for single and EP releases, but like the LP they never materialised. Inevitably, the tapes emerged as one of the first Who bootlegs on vinyl in the early 1970s.

The band's touring schedule in 1968 and 1969 produced a host of unofficial tapes which chart their stage act becoming longer, more dynamic and finally - with the live version of "Tommy" - unbeatable. Their musical power and theatrical dexterity won them a huge audience, and their raw, undiluted high energy sound proved more than a match for any of the burgeoning heavy rock acts like Led Zeppelin. The PA system devised by the band produced a sound so loud that many of the audience - even those accustomed to high-volume rock music - found their ears hurting.

The band made a second set of plans for a live album to follow "Tommy". Their show at Woodstock was recorded and filmed, but unfortunately it was below their usual standards. "See Me Feel Me" appeared on the first "Woodstock" soundtrack album in 1970, and it was joined by "Sparks" and "Pinball Wizard" on the 1979 double soundtrack LP "The Kids Are Alright".

The Who's tour of America in October/November 1969 was recorded in its entirety, and Pete Townshend found himself faced with over 80 hours of material to listen to back in England. He promptly lost interest, and the story goes that he ceremonially burned all the tapes in a huge bonfire to evade the bootleggers, although it seems more than likely that a few of the best shows were retained. In fact, several acetates were produced, and material is in circulation of various songs from these tapes: "Fortune Teller" (three versions), "Summertime Blues", "Shakin' All Over", "I Can't Explain" (two versions), "Heaven And Hell", "Young Man Blues" (three versions), "Tattoo" and "My Generation" (two versions). This material is exceptionally powerful and exciting, and it's very unfortunate that it has never been released.

Another show at the London Coliseum was filmed and recorded on 16th December 1969, and from this set "Young Man Blues" was issued on the soundtrack of "The Kids Are Alright". None of the other material from this show has been officially available, apart from "I'm Free", included on the video (but not the album), "Who's Better Than The Who's Best"?

By 1970, the Who's stage act had taken on a life of its own. Not only was the sound of the band radically different from their studio work, but the actual material they played often had no studio equivalent. "Tommy" still occupied the centre of the show, but the real body of the concert was the songs developed by the band on stage: "Heaven And Hell", "Naked Eye", "Young Man Blues", "Shakin' All Over", "Summertime Blues", "Fortune Teller", "Twist And Shout", "Water" - all of which were exclusively live favourites, though some did eventually get studio releases.

**MEDLEY**

"My Generation" during this period was an elongated medley that included "See Me Feel Me" and "Sparks", plus several improvised riffs and themes, linked by Pete's quiet passages of solo playing. The EP, which sold out of all available copies, was issued to commemorate the album; the tapes were all burned by the band to stop bootleggers getting hold of them.

The EP was for a live album that would showcase this material without duplicating "Tommy". After a few European dates in opera houses, two concerts were staged specifically for live recordings in the U.K. The recording equipment available here wasn't as sophisticated as in the States, but the band felt happier playing down-to-earth venues in the North of England.

Two shows were recorded at Leeds University on 14th February and Hull City Hall on 16th February, both taped on the Pye Mobile 8-track unit. A double album of these fine gigs was originally planned, but the Hull tapes were quickly found to be unusable because of a technical deficiency in the recording equipment.
The Leeds tape contained “Heaven And Hell”, “I Can’t Explain”, “Fortune Teller”, “Tattoo”, “Young Man Blues”, “Substitute”, “Happy Jack”, “I’m A Boy”, “A Quick One”, “Tommy” (20 songs), “Summertime Blues”, “Shakin’ All Over”, “My Generation” (a medley including “See Me Feel Me”, “Sparks” and many new riffs and improvisations) and “Magic Bus”. Pete Townshend mixed the tapes, added some echo to enhance the feel, and then edited some of the longer pieces. Then the band selected six tracks to form the album “Live At Leeds”, released by Track in 1970.

A proposed double album was rejected after the expensive “Tommy” set, and the live album was presented in a mock-bootleg sleeve with posters and reproduced memorabilia. From start to finish, it was dynamite, pure Who energy with the audience response mixed out. “Live At Leeds” was creative, inspired, exciting and fresh, and it set some new standards for live rock’n’roll.

Before long, the live album concept would become exploitative, predictable and useful only as stop-gap filler product. But the Who’s live set presented a new sound (on record, at least), and consisted mostly of new or unrecorded material. Like “Tommy”, it showed rock music the way ahead, though few could follow it.

“Summertime Blues” was taken from the album as a single, backed by a very disappointing studio version of “Heaven And Hell”. A great deal of superb quality material remains unissued from the Leeds show, although the version of “Happy Jack” here mysteriously turned up on the soundtrack album of “The Kids Are Alright”, incorrectly credited as being from the ‘Swedish tour 1966’.

CONTROL

The superstardom enjoyed by the band after 1970 meant they could now control and command their careers down to the last detail. From this point on, they could afford to record concerts regularly with the best equipment available, primarily for their own reference. Official live releases on vinyl, however, have been few and far between.

The band’s first concerts of 1971 were part of the “Lifehouse” project, and took place in April at the Young Vic theatre in London. Only one song from these experimental and largely successful shows has been released – “Bony Moronie”, which surprisingly appeared on the B-side of the 1988 reissue of “Won’t Get Fooled Again”. After 17 years in the can. As good as anything on “Live At Leeds”, this cover of Larry Williams’ rock’n’roll classic is somewhat under-rehearsed but is amazingly vibrant, and makes a valuable addition to the live Who canon.

The release of “Who’s Next” in 1971 added a diverse selection of new songs to the act. “Baby O’Riley” and “Won’t Get Fooled Again” utilised synthesiser tapes; “My Wife” and “Bargain” added to the manic hard rock quota; “Behind Blue Eyes” was a stunning ballad; “Pure And Easy”, “Time Is Passing”, “Too Much Of Anything” and “Baby Don’t You Do It” appeared in the stage act of the time, but not on record; and established stage favourites “Naked Eye” and “Water” remained in the set, though they were still unreleased on record.

Of all the acclaimed shows the Who played in late 1971, very little seems to have been preserved on tape except for one show. This was at the Civic Centre in San Francisco on 12th December, when the band were once again considering the release of a live album. The songs played at the concert were “I Can’t Explain”, “Substitute”, “Summertime Blues”, “My Wife”, “Baba O’Riley”, “Behind Blue Eyes”, “Bargain”, “Won’t Get Fooled Again”, “Baby Don’t You Do It”, “Overture”, “Amazing Journey”, “Sparks”, “Pinball Wizard”, “See Me Feel Me”, “My Generation” (again a medley of new riffs and improvisations, including a new song, “Goin’ Down”), “Naked Eye” and an 18-minute long “Magic Bus”.

SCRAPPED

Once again, the live album was scrapped, as the band felt it followed too soon after... and sounded too much like – “Live At Leeds”. Luckily, odd songs from the show have been given an official release, all of them superb. “Baby Don’t You Do It” appeared first as the B-side to “Join Together” in 1972; “Bargain” cropped up on the “Who’s Missing” LP in 1986; and “My Wife” and “Goin’ Down” appeared on “Two’s Missing” from 1987. I hope that more songs from this remarkable concert are released in the future.

The next major Who project was “Quadrophenia” in 1973, a massive, ambitious double album rich in ideas, music and concept. Although this marked the pinnacle of the band’s recording career, it did not translate too smoothly to the live act, despite the number of tough rock songs it included. It made the band even more reliant on synthesiser backing tapes, but unlike the “Who’s Next” songs, the complexity of playing along to these took the spontaneity out of the act.

The only official recording that has come to light from the 1973 shows is a King Biscuit Hour radio broadcast of the band’s set at Philadelphia Spectrum on 4th December 1973. Though it was a powerful concert, it wasn’t quite up to the band’s usual impeccable standards. The broadcast included “I Can’t Explain”, “Summertime Blues”, “My Generation”, “I Am The Sea”, “My Wife”, “Baba O’Riley”, “Overture”, “Amazing Journey”, “Sparks”, “Pinball Wizard”, “See Me Feel Me”, “My Generation” (again a medley of new riffs and improvisations, including a new song, “Goin’ Down”), “Naked Eye” and an 18-minute long “Magic Bus”.
The Who’s mid-Seventies shows saw them mixing a collection of hits and “Tommy” extracts with a sprinkling of more recent compositions.

“The Real Me”, “I’m One”, “Sea And Sand”, “Drowned”, “Bell Boy”, “Dr. Jimmy”, “Won’t Get Fooled Again”, “Pinball Wizard” and “See Me Feel Me”. Also recorded at the concert, but not aired on the broadcast, were “My Wife”, “Punk And The Godfather”, “5.15”, “Love Reign O’er Me” and “Magic Bus”. Four-letter words were also edited out of Pete Townshend’s stage announcements for the radio broadcast! The concert was originally pressed up on vinyl, and has since been made available on CD.

The next big live outing for the Who came on 18th May 1974 when they played at Charlton Athletic Football Ground. With no new material to offer, the set was a well-balanced slice of Who history which went down extremely well with the 50,000-strong audience. The band uncharacteristically consented to the show being filmed by the BBC, and also recorded for broadcast on Capital Radio. Pete Townshend mixed the tapes after the 21-song show, and wasn’t that happy with the results; but the planned broadcasts went ahead. The BBC2 arts programme “Second House” transmitted nine songs, while Capital offered fifteen on its late night “Rockpile” show. Several songs were duplicated on both, but each format offered some material unavailable on the other; and “5.15”, “I Can’t Explain” and “Magic Bus” were not aired at all. The Who did not consider any of this material good enough to appear on record, and repeats of the broadcasts have also been prevented.

When the band returned to touring in late 1975, they had regained much of their old energy and enthusiasm. The set they played didn’t feature much of the new material from the current “Who By Numbers” album, but was a strong selection of early hits, highlights from “Tommy” and “Who’s Next”, and permanent new additions to the set in “Roadrunner” and “Join Together” as part of the “My Generation” medley. A slow blues version of “My Generation”, first played at Charlton in 1974, was also included.

No live material from the tour was planned for release, but two U.S. shows – almost identical sets from Pontiac Silverdome on 6th December and Cleveland Coliseum three days later – were filmed and recorded. It’s not clear whether any of this material was aired at the time, but a segment from the Pontiac show was included in “The Kids Are Alright” movie, consisting of “Join Together /Roadrunner/My Generation Blues”. This selection made little sense as “My Generation”, the first part of this medley, was edited out. The band sounded strong, however, despite the fact that the sound quality
lacks the precision and detail of the 1970 and 1971 recordings. The Cleveland show was much better and featured a mesmerising version of “Magic Bus”, but nothing from this show has been released.

Although no new album was released, the Who toured with the same basic set in 1976. The three football stadium shows in Britain are probably the best remembered Who shows from this era, and the band apparently recorded all three. The Swansea gig on 12th June was taped on the Rolling Stones Mobile, and mixed by Glyn Johns for a Capital Radio broadcast.

An hour of the show was aired, featuring “Amazing Journey”, “Sparks”, “Acid Queen”, “Fiddle About”, “Pinball Wizard”, “I’m Free”, “Baba O’Riley”, “Squeeze Box”, “Behind Blue Eyes”, “My Generation”, “Join Together”, “My Generation Blues” and “Won’t Get Fooled Again”. As usual, the “My Generation” medley incorporated a new guitar riff, which the band only played on this occasion. The riff itself would have made a good Black Sabbath song!

EXCLUDED

The remainder of the set excluded from the broadcast consisted of “I Can’t Explain”, “Substitute”, “My Wife”, “Dreaming From The Waist”, “Magic Bus”, “Tommy’s Holiday Camp”, “We’re Not Gonna Take It”, “See Me Feel Me” and “Summertime Blues”. Swansea was not the best of the stadium shows, and the tapes sound rather too clean, lacking atmosphere.

The remainder of the band’s live career has been less happy and more inconsistent. Their massive popularity remained intact, but their creative energies became more diffuse. After the onslaught of punk in 1976, the Who seemed to be less of an ideal and more of a compromise. And the tragic deaths of Keith Moon, Kit Lambert, Pete Meaden and the fans at Cincinnati in 1979 changed their situation permanently.

Throughout 1977 and 1978, work on the “Quadrophenia” and “The Kids Are Alright” film – plus Pete Townshend’s reluctance – kept the band off the road. They played only two shows during this period, the last to feature Keith: at the Kilburn State Theatre in December 1977 and at Shepperton Studios in May 1978. Both these London gigs were filmed and recorded for inclusion in “The Kids Are Alright”; they featured a similar set list to the 1976 tour, with one new song, “Who Are You”.

The Kilburn footage was soon dismissed as sub-standard, with Keith Moon particularly off-form. But one song did emerge on the soundtrack to “The Kids Are Alright”, though not the movie: John Entwistle’s “My Wife”. The Shepperton show six months later was more successful, and produced decent versions of “Baba O’Riley” and “Won’t Get Fooled Again” for both the film and the soundtrack album.

That double album appeared in June 1979, and apart from the eleven live tracks mentioned above, it consisted of television appearances and alternate studio versions of some. The film itself contained slightly more live material than the album, with some extra instrument smashing, a few more minutes from “Woodstock”, and the Monterey version of “My Generation”.

After Keith Moon’s death in September 1978, the Who had recruited Kenny Jones and determined to re-establish themselves as a live act. They were re-launched in May 1979, playing a longer set that included newer songs like “Sister Disco”, “Who Are You”, “Music Must Change” and “Trick Of The Light”, while older numbers like “Drowned”, “$5.15” and “Long Live Rock” were also added. The bulk of “Tommy” vanished once again, and with the band adding a keyboard player and even sometimes a horn section, they were able to introduce such neglected material as “I Can See For Miles” and “The Real Me”.

Official recordings from 1979 include a complete concert broadcast on local radio from Paris on June 17th, a simultaneous videocast of a Chicago show on December 8th, two nights recorded at the Philadelphia Spectrum on 10th/11th December, and a set recorded and filmed at the Kampuchea concert at Hammersmith Odeon on December 28th.

One song from the Philly show on 10th December appeared on the 1988 12″ single reissue of “Won’t Get Fooled Again” – the band’s joyous version of “Dancing In The Street”, which actually segues into Pete Townshend’s improvised rap (uncredited on record) “Dance It Away”. Edited down to half its original length, it showed the band in great form.

PEAK

Both the record and TV presentations of the Rock For Kampuchea concerts featured live Who material when they surfaced in the U.K. early in 1981. The TV show featured the band on peak form with the intricate “Sister Disco”, a staggeringly dynamic “Behind Blue Eyes”, and a showstopping “See Me Feel Me”. The album, a double set on Atlantic, was less satisfactory, however. The first side of the album featured the above three songs plus “Baba O’Riley”, with a badly out-of-tune guitar. The inclusion of this track was pointless when one considered the brilliant material from this show that could have been used instead – like “Punk And The Godfather”, “$5.15”, “I Can See For Miles”, “Who Are You” and the show’s highlight, a 15-minute version of “Dancing In The Street”/“Dance It Away”, with Townshend’s inspired and amusing vocal improvisation.

The band played shows in North America and continental Europe throughout 1980, but nothing has emerged from these gigs. The release of the “Face Dances” album in 1981, and the band’s extensive British tour, brought them considerable criticism, though. Pete Townshend’s hatred of touring and lack of faith in the band had actually reached the point where he seemed not to care if they
played a good show or not. Fans, however, tend to agree that the concerts were as good as anything the band had done in years.

The set featured a chunk of new material, like “Another Tricky Day”, “Don’t Let Go The Coat”, “The Quiet One”, “You Better You”, “You Can’t Rock My Money”, “My Generation” segued into the Small Faces hit “Whatcha Gonna Do About It”, and the set finished with a revival from the past, as John Entwistle hollered out “Twist And Shout”. Although the band filmed and recorded some of these songs, only a live TV/radio broadcast presented by German Rockpalast TV (and the BBC’s Old Grey Whistle Test) from Essen on 28th March reached the general public.

In 1982, the Who played their biggest-ever tour of North America (preceded by two shows in Birmingham), and issued their final studio album, “it’s Hard”. As the shows continued at larger and larger stadiums, it was announced that this would be the band’s final tour. The concerts were smooth, professional and undemanding, and they were rapturously received by the young audiences.

UNUSUAL

Among the usual mixture of classic hits were five songs from the new LP, including the unusual “Eminence Front” which worked particularly well. Various shows were recorded and filmed, like Shea Stadium in New York on October 13th and San Diego a fortnight later. But despite the sheen hard work and consistency of the act, the band lacked fire and drive.

The final show in Toronto on December 17th resulted in a live satellite TV airing and radio broadcast. King Biscuit Flower Hour have pressed promo vinyl and CD versions of this show, and the same material has appeared on video as “The Who Rocks America”. A live album of the Toronto gig was expected soon afterwards, but it didn’t materialise. Then it was understood that the band would deliver a further studio album in 1983. When it became obvious this wouldn’t happen, the band negotiated to free themselves from their contract with Polygram in Europe, and Warners in the States, and the live album was shelved.

With the band now officially disbanded, nothing more was heard until late 1984, when MCA announced they were preparing a double live set for release before Christmas. With the Toronto gig already out on video, an album version didn’t seem that exciting. But MCA whetted many appetites when the Who Fan Club announced that Chris Charlesworth had written the sleeve notes for a set called “Who’s Last”, featuring an assembly of live recordings from different gigs.


This selection of tracks would have made for a potentially great, though admittedly off-the-wall, retrospective of the band’s live work over the previous decade, avoiding all the obvious hits and concentrating on their less familiar live material.

But when “Who’s Last” finally appeared in late 1984, all but two of those songs had been ditched. Of those who made the album included material solely from the 1982 tour, and the selection of songs was disappointing-ly pedestrian. All the famous hits were there, at the expense of the songs that were the best part of the act — “The Quiet One”, “Sister Disco”, “Eminence Front”, “Punk And The Godfather”, “Drowned” and “My Generation”. The only new song was included, the concluding “Twist And Shout”, which was also issued as a single.

ROCKABILLY

The album was by no means bad, but wasn’t as exciting as “Live At Leeds”. The most interesting songs were “Love Reign O’ My’self” and “Dr. Jimmy”, but far and away the best performance on the record was “Long Live Rock”, with a rockabilly reprise. The sound of the album was glossy and clean, and tapes were taken from the final leg of the tour, with songs from Toronto, Cleveland and elsewhere.

It remains to be seen whether any live material emerges from the 1989 tour. A live broadcast of the "Tommy" benefit show in New York on June 27th was certainly issued as a radio set, however, and there is once again talk of a live album. The Who have been playing a very varied, all-encompassing set nearly four hours long, so the prospect of an official live release is interesting.

But aside from their current activity, there is real need for a comprehensive retrospective as soon as possible. The following songs have remained entirely unreleased. Cover versions include "Johnny B. Goode" (Oakland, 10/10/76), “All Right Now” (various shows between 1970 and 1980), “Pretty Vacant” (MSG, 17/9/79), “Sweets For My Sweet” (also 17/9/79), “Maybellemie” (Wembley, 21/10/75), “Gloria”, “You Really Got Me” and “Big Boy Man” (all MSG, 13/6/74). Then there are Pete Townshend’s improvised songs, all of which are good. They include “Blue Blue Blue” (MSG, 14/9/79); “Take A Fool Like You” (Philadelphia, 10/12/79); “You Belong To Us” (L.A. 23/6/80); “I’m London” (Pittsburg, 2/12/79) and “You Stand Naked” (St. Austell, 31/1/81). And there are eminently reasonably different versions of “Who Are You” (Toronto, 21/10/76), “Cats In The cupboard” (New York, 13/9/79) and “How Can You Do It Alone” (various venues 1979/80).

Without having access to the Who’s official tape archives, it’s probably fair to say that this is merely the tip of the iceberg. The Who were at their live peak from 1970 to 1976, and too little material from this era is available on official releases. Unofficial concert tapes and bootleg EPs abound, but they cannot do justice to the remarkable in-concert work of this most important of bands.