

The Who's last tour is a remarkable musical feat

By ROBERT PALMER

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NEW YORK — The Who, one of the most successful and widely admired groups in rock, arrived in New York last Friday for three concert dates on a mammoth tour that its members insist will be their last.

Not a ticket is available. More than 180,000 were sold in four days for the three shows in the metropolitan area — at the Brendan Byrne Arena in East Rutherford, N.J., Saturday night and at Shea Stadium on Tuesday and Wednesday.

The shows at Shea mark the first use of the facility for rock since a Jethro Tull concert in 1976 and the first time tickets have been sold for unreserved seating on the field.

The entire tour has been sold out, a remarkable feat at a time when the rock-concert business is in a severe financial slump and fewer groups are finding it profitable enough to go on the road.

The tour began Sept. 22 in Largo, Md., and by the time its first leg of 20 shows is over, the band will have played to about one million fans at \$15 to \$17 each, grossing about \$15 million from ticket sales alone.

After a brief vacation in England, the band will return to the United States at the end of next month for the second leg, which is being put together. By the time the entire tour is over, its entire success may rival that of the Rolling Stones' 1981 American tour, the largest-grossing tour in rock history.

In addition, there will be a number of profit-making spinoffs, including video cassette and disk versions of one of the concerts, a cable-television special and another special taped for commercial television.

The tour is being underwritten by Schlitz beer, which does not share in proceeds but gives the band money in exchange for advertising. Although it is a new phenomenon, corporate sponsorship for rock tours is becoming

increasingly common as inflation drives up the cost of mounting, promoting and maintaining tours and consumers show resistance to higher ticket prices.

The Stones are said to have received several million dollars from Jovan Fragrances in exchange for the use of Jovan's name on tickets and in promotion. The amount of Schlitz's support for the Who has not been announced, but it is thought to be even larger. Schlitz advertisements will be prominent at all concerts on the tour.

Reports that this would be the last Who tour were initially greeted with skepticism in the music industry.

The band is at least as popular as at any time during its 18-year history, and a new album, "It's Hard" (Warner Bros.), is selling briskly. But reviews of the album have been mixed, the members of the Who have been involved in more and more outside projects during the last few years, and many critics believe the band has broken little new ground. Despite some fresh uses of synthesizer technology, the Who's music is still rooted in the mid-1960s.

It seems that the Who really is disbanding. Pete Townshend, the group's guitarist, principal songwriter and driving force, has announced that "the Who will cease to exist" after the group makes two more albums that it owes Warner's under its recording contract. He said that while the Who may follow its American tour with a few farewell concerts in Europe, "This is the end."

It was Townshend who wrote "Hope I die before I get old," one of the most quoted lines in all of rock, in the Who's 1965 hit "My Generation." For the last several years, the 37-year-old guitarist has seemed increasingly sensitive about his age and profession.

A number of recent Who songs have dealt with aging: "I know you, middle age, same song, different page," Townshend wrote in "It's Your Turn," and a song on the "It's Hard" album

that seems to be about stepping down, passing on the torch to younger performers. When he was asked recently why the Who was quitting, he said, "It's time for us to step aside, time for the new people to come in."

Foremost among the "new people" are the Clash, the band that is opening most of the larger shows on the Who's tour. The Clash were one of the original spearheads of the British punk-rock movement and have remained a politically oriented band while ex-

panding their musical range to include reggae, rapping and strains of American blues, soul and country music. They have won a substantial following in the United States, but not among the mainstream of rock fans that supports the Who. And they have never played to audiences as large as they are encountering on the Who tour, audiences that have been as big as 95,000.

The Tobacco Pouch in the Executive Inn, Home of King LeRoy.

"The Who believe that the Clash represent the wave of the future," a Who spokesman said recently. "Pete and the other members of the Who were instrumental in getting the Clash

on their biggest shows." The Who's show, which runs between two and a quarter and two and a half hours, covers every phase of the group's career.

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