

U2 lives up to image, hype at Invesco Field in Denver

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When U2 first took the alien stage perched atop Invesco Field's grass at 8:45 p.m. Saturday, the packed crowd of 70,000-plus fans welcomed the Irish band with the kind of reception normally reserved for the venue's regular tenants: the Denver Broncos.

Synchronized foot-stomps and "the wave" and all-day tailgating led to that climactic moment, and for the next two hours, Bono, The Edge, Clayton and Mullen were more important names than Tebow, Moreno, Bailey and Dumervil.

And in Colorado, that's saying something.

The sheer scope of U2's record-breaking 360 Tour was undeniable proof, as if we needed it, of the group's continued North American appeal. Can any other band pull off a stadium tour in the U.S. right now? Nope. And oddly, U2 frontman Bono comes off better in a stadium than he does in an arena. The exaggerated movements. The two-fisted mike lean-ins. The outrageous struts and over-the-top plays to the camera. Bono was born for this job. And right now, he's the only cat making it happen on this level.

And just how did it happen Saturday? We'll start with the stage, which was set amid four towering, thorny, green-and-orange legs spread like a spider. It's an imposing, alien structure that houses most of the show's lights, sound and the circular LED screen.

The band played to the stage's titular in-the-round strengths, strutting the outer ring like cats on the prowl. There was plenty of call-and-response with the audience, and of course Bono had a couple of seemingly off-the-cuff monologues.

These guys are pros, and they make it look effortless.

They couldn't have started stronger musically. An impassioned "Even Better Than the Real Thing" filtered into an anthemic "I Will Follow," leading into a pummeling "Get On Your Boots." "Boots" is the lackluster single off the band's latest, 2009's "No Line on the Horizon," but its hook — courtesy of the Edge and his dizzying guitar tones — is a party-starter, and it fit right in with the older tracks.

Bono drew in the audience to help him kick-start "Elevation," and later he drew more from 2000's "All That You Can't Leave Behind" with an expectedly jubilant "Beautiful Day" and an elongated tribute to peace campaigns via "Walk On."

"Sunday Bloody Sunday" came off more like a polished rock anthem than a desperate call to action, but "Where the Streets Have No Name" was the hands-in-the-air rager it needed to be. "One" was quite moving while "Mysterious Ways" sounded like an out-of-place anachronism — because it is, not because of the band's note-perfect performance.

The fact that the world was supposed to end a few hours before show time wasn't lost on anybody — especially since U2 and Saturday's opener, the Fray, are both openly spiritual bands. But Bono capitalized on the coincidence by dedicating his "Until the End of the World" to Harold Camping, the reverend who called out Saturday as the day of rapture.

"To be taken up to the air, sounds like fun to me — just as long as Larry Mullen is with me," Bono said in a midsong sermon. "God is in the house."

And then Bono and the boys did something crazy. Bono, standing on a stage bridging the core stage with the outer ring, started shaking and spazzing while the group indulged into an almost-violent instrumental breakdown. Maybe it was Bono being crazy Bono, or maybe it was his simulation of what the rapture would look and feel like — with an assist from tweaked lighting and choppy video work.

That we couldn't quite tell says it all. U2 knows how to entertain like nobody else, and few left Saturday's show feeling they didn't get their money's worth.