

Feb. 8, 1987 ---

LAS VEGAS---Naked mannequin legs hang from the speakers like a seductive bass line. Garbage cans are filled with baby dolls and severed heads, while Cold Ethel tumbles out of the refrigerator as the ultimate in leftovers.

Alice Cooper is the kind of nightmare this town dreams about.

"When we did the 'Welcome to My Nightmare' show (in 1975), it was a lot glitzier than this with lots of dancers and it almost looked like a sick Vegas show," Cooper recalled in his tour bus after a high-camp, 90-minute performance at the Thomas & Mack Center here. "This one is a lot more state-of-the-art gore. There's a lot of high-tech splatter. Like the guy getting skewered. (Midway through the concert an annoying photographer becomes shutterbug shish-kebab.) That's all mechanical. Every night we have to check it to make sure it works. It wasn't like that before."

What also wasn't like before is Cooper's newfound sense of focus. His sadistic shtik for the '80s is considerably more sophisticated and carries more depth in production than previous Cooper circuses.

"I was out of focus for my last five albums, the (1979) 'Madhouse Rock' show and the (1981) 'Special Forces' show," agreed Cooper, thin and trim in a plain black T-shirt and black slacks. (Cooper will perform with Megadeath on Thursday at the UIC Pavilion.) "The audiences still loved the shows, but the records didn't do well and I didn't understand why until I got sober.

"Then I listened to the records and the songs sounded OK, but they were scattered. They were all over the place. I can really tell the difference with the punch of 'Constrictor' (his new album) compared with my last five records. 'Constrictor' is miles above those last five albums, because it is in focus. And the show is certainly in focus. I didn't figure that out until halfway through this tour (which began in mid-October)."

The "Constrictor" tour is a trip Alice had to make. He discovered an inner need to reclaim his niche as the wunderkind of rock 'n' roll wonderland. Back in the mid-70s, Alice Cooper set the stage for today's heavy metal mavens.

"I had to prove something to myself," said Cooper, who was born in Detroit 41 years ago as Vincent Furnier. "I drank through 16 years of Alice Cooper. I was anesthetized for all

my shows. It was pretty much a blur because we toured constantly, I drank constantly and they went hand in hand. In 1983 I stopped drinking. It was either stop or die. (In '83, Cooper was up to two bottles of whiskey a day).

"When I did that, I had to make up my mind to see if I could play Alice straight. Was it possible to play this character - who was born out of alcohol - and play him straight? Did I have enough skill to do that? See, the alcohol fools you with self-confidence. You give all the credit to the alcohol, and you don't give yourself any credit for knowing how to do this stuff.

"So it took me two years to decide I was going to do it," Cooper said. "I saw all these bands out there doing watered-down versions of Alice Cooper. Then what really got me was when I mentioned I was going out on tour again and two or three people said, 'It's 1987, you'll never be able to shock the audiences anymore.' My blood pressure went up about 400 percent. Ozzy Osbourne? You think that's scary? Get me my guillotine maker!

"So that's what this show was built on. Me daring myself to do it, and then proving it. For the first time in my life, every night I feel I have to prove something. It's like a boxer trying to regain his throne. I've got to knock everybody else out or I don't win." As a warped connoisseur of Blackie Lawless of W.A.S.P. (who ate raw meat on stage), Kiss (spitting blood), Wendy O. Williams (who used to blow up cars with the Plasmatics), Dean Martin (you name it) and other musical ghouls, I'd say Cooper is ready to recapture his reign of pain.

While Cooper was rock's sickest schlockmaster in the '70s, he fell into too comfortable a groove where the theater often steered the music. Cooper's entire presence became a classic case of the tail wagging the dog. The "Constrictor" tour offers a better balance between the mayhem and the music, and that's about the best compromise Cooper can strike. He'll certainly never be remembered for his Drano vocals.

Like an Alfred Hitchcock classic, Cooper's theater is based mostly on anticipation. With the exception of the speared photographer and a splendid guillotine illusion, Cooper's 90-minute roller coaster revue is about not what happens, but what you think might happen.

The gruesome goings-on take place on a smoky-gray set that is sort of a perverted Pirates of the Caribbean. There's an imposing dungeon, a guitar-rifle and lots sharp

swords. Completing the funky atmosphere in Vegas on a recent visit was an audience that included black-leathered nubile girls from the nearby Pussycat Lounge (where they have the purr-Tiest felines in Las Vegas).

Cooper provided considerably more sedate entertainment, such as the return of Angel the boa constrictor for a slithering appearance in "Be My Lover," along with creepy cameos by devilish splatter-film freaks and geeks such as Jason from the "Friday the 13th" series. During 'Elected,' which was Cooper's first encore in Vegas, the complete collection of misfits paraded around the stage tossing large confetti-filled balloons into the audience.

It reminded me of Chicago's St. Patrick's Day parade.

What was just as surprising was the amount of vintage music

Cooper played. Cooper and his five-piece band covered every hit from the pimple-powered hymn "I'm Eighteen" to "Under My Wheels," what remains as Cooper's best rock 'n' roll song.

'The last thing I want is to do a nostalgic show," Cooper said. "But I get letters every week that say, 'You gotta do 'No More Mr. Nice Guy.' The requests pretty much design the set. So we do about 70 percent old stuff, bringing it up to date. And the rest is new. I think people would be pretty disappointed if we did the whole 'Constrictor' album."

The "Constrictor" record is anchored by the double-edged assault of lead guitarist Kane Roberts, who plays with determined metal mettle, and guitarist Randy Piper, who brings a greater rock edge with Cooper than he had with W.A.S.P.

The roots of "Constrictor" were laid in Chicago after Cooper became sober. "It was inevitable that I had to stop drinking," Cooper said. "My problem is that I have a totally addictive personality. I drink 25 diet colas a day. If I did smoke cigarettes, I'd smoke eight packs a day. As it is, I go into a video place every day and rent five splatter movies, knowing I'll only watch one or two. I have 22 televisions in my home (now in Scottsdale, Ariz.). When I was drinking, I took it to the edge. My management didn't pressure me. I think they knew the time would come when I was going to get to the point of wanting to put it back together again. So finally I did.

"My manager, Shep (Gordon), said, 'If you think that it's not going to cause you to drink,

then I'm all for it. The first second you think it's going to cause you to start drinking again, I'm not involved.' My manager is my best friend in the world, so I understood that."

How difficult was Cooper's first straight road date?

"The very first night was in Santa Barbara (Calif.)," Cooper recalled. "We had rehearsed 2 1/2 months and I knew the show was good. But, again, I had never performed live as Alice Cooper straight. For the first time I was nervous - and I had nothing to anesthetize it. I paced back and forth in my hotel room for three hours, just psyching into the character. The minute I stepped on stage, it was right back. I knew exactly where I was."

Cooper is again in a position to consider films (which he and management rejected before) and other projects: "I still get lots of offers to do movies, but I think I'll wait until the rock 'n' roll thing is over. And that could be another 10 years. I think Alice is a timeless character. You can't put an age on Alice. He's like Jason (from "Friday the 13th"). You don't know how old he is. You don't know how old Dracula is. Alice is a character."

And Alice is a character ripe for right-wing groups such as the Parents Music Resource Center, which last year fought for labels on albums with suggestive lyrics. Cooper credits the PMRC for putting the danger back in rock 'n' roll.

"They're bringing our outlaw image back," he said, chuckling. "There was a long period of time if you were in a rock band you stayed in a suite, you didn't need a tie in a restaurant. Since when? It used to be, 'You're Alice Cooper? You're not staying here! There's a Holiday Inn down the street. There's a McDonald's down the street. Get outta here!'"

"I like the idea that rock 'n' roll is rock 'n' roll again."

"Although I still don't understand the music charts," Cooper said. "When disco happened, it took radio away from the kids. They stole radio from the kids and gave it to the 25 to 40 age group. All of a sudden, who do we have on the charts? Whitney Houston. Lionel Richie. What happened to AC/DC? Motley Crue?"

"What happened is the radio had to sell cars. They had to sell insurance. Their ads were for things only people between 25 and 40 could afford. Kids got left high and dry. And

that's who I play for and who I write for.

"I think I understand kids more than adults. Adults are much too complicated.

"Like this thing with devil worship and satan worship. I don't know anybody who's into that. Everybody knows I'm not into that, but they figure since you're AliceCooper you know bands who are into that. That's like asking me how many cannibals I know.

"Swearing and nudity - all that's too obvious for our audience," Cooper continued. "We would rather do it on a more scary level. I'd rather suggest it and let their imagination do the work."

With that, you can add another victory notch in the comeback belt rock 'n' roll's horror heavyweight.

Alice Cooper won big in a city where so little is left to be imagined.