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Jammed for All Time by ROBIN A. ROTHMAN SEPTEMBER 24, 2002

at the sales figures. Music magazines dis- miss the bands as go-nowhere noodlers and the fans as drugged-up dreadies. But as it turns out, so-called jambands, a gaggle of

Radio and television insist the songs don't fit their formats. Record companies cringe

related giggers not typically labeled as such, and the loyal audience that lumps them together collectively form the most pervasive underground movement in music today. On October 2, approximately 3000 jam fans and 50 musicians (most of whom wear on their figurative chests that scarlet J) will gather at Roseland Ballroom for the third annual Jammys—an awards show that, according to the event's executive producer Peter Shapiro, celebrates "excellence in improvisational music." Or, as he proffers even more vaguely with a knowing chuckle, "It's an awards show for a genre you can't define." Says bassist Marc Brownstein of self-described trance-fusion quartet the Disco Biscuits. "I don't mind that people call [us] a jamband so much anymore. We are a

band, and boy do we jam. But the term doesn't tell even half of the story."

last June in Tennessee was not only the most high-profile multi-band concert the jamband scene has ever staged, it was the largest American music festival of the summer. It was the best coordinated as well, suffering no major incidents while packing more than 70,000 attendees, more than 50 bands, four stages, a movie tent, an arcade, and other diversions onto about 600 acres of farmland. Three months earlier, 60,000 tickets (available via Internet only, without Ticketmaster's

involvement) had sold out in only 19 days. Both stunned and thrilled by the response,

promoters Superfly Presents and A.C. Entertainment scrambled to acquire additional

The folks behind Bonnaroo say ditto. This three-day music and camping event held

land. On May 18 they released 10,000 more tickets, sold out within 24 hours, then capped it. It's impossible to guess how big Bonnaroo could have been. Organizers soon found that they had less control over the event's image. Carefully positioning the festival as "American grassroots rock," they emphasized the diversity of the lineup, which also included moe., Gov't Mule, String Cheese Incident, the Blind Boys of Alabama, Ween, Norah Jones, Ben Harper, Jack Johnson, Jurassic 5, and a bevy of DJs. Reporters took one look at the crowd, noted Widespread Panic and Phish guitarist Trey Anastasio's solo band as the headliners, and all event coverage defaulted to "jamband." "The word actually has so many different meanings when you really dig into it," explains Bonnaroo publicist Ken Weinstein, "but most people don't dig into it. It just has a very flat, one-dimensional connotation."

and hair metal and teenpop act that ever resented its "File Under" destiny—some have been reluctant to cop to it. "Please write about us in *Relix* and on Jambands.com, and please have us on your radio show Jam Nation," mocks Jambands.com writer Jeff Waful. "But don't call us a jamband." Ranging from consistently high-grossing, arena-sized tour stars to up-and-coming local unknowns, jambands share something, but it's not a sound. They're a stylistically disparate bunch, rooted in bluegrass, blues, rock, jazz, techno, country, and funk, but

all connected by an invisible, indefinite thread. Online community, open taping

Some of the above, usually.

Year and Studio Album of the Year.

performances.

name," Medeski says.

appreciation.

policies, intricate light shows, long songs, varied set lists, constant tour schedules?

At this year's Jammys, Miles Davis and Jimi Hendrix are up against Phish and the

Grateful Dead for Archival Album of the Year. Pedal steel guitarist Robert Randolph

and electro-funk quartet Particle are vying for the New Groove award. Widespread

Panic is nominated in five of eight categories—competing with turntablist DJ Logic

for Live Performance, New Orleans funk outfit Galactic and the Triple Threat DJs for

"Jam band" began as a simple jazz phrase describing musicians who got together to

improvise, free from the rules of everyday gigs. Today it refers to about 200 artists.

Many are acutely aware of a bizarre backlash against the term and—like every emo

Tour of the Year, jazz-fusion trio Medeski Martin & Wood for Studio Album of the Year, bluegrassy Leftover Salmon for Live Album, and pre-scene veteran Phil Lesh for Fan Web Site. On the one hand, the Jammys originated to acknowledge music that mainstream award-granting bodies tend to neglect. While Phish did have the privilege of losing two Grammys in 2001—Best Boxed Recording Package prize (an honor if ever there was one) and Best Rock Instrumental—they won big in Jamland that year. Nominated in six areas, they earned bowl-shaped Jammy trophies for Live Performance of the

On the other hand, Shapiro confesses that he and co-founder Dean Budnick really

hatched the Jammys idea as "an excuse to throw a party." Other awards shows always

audience pans, and acceptance speeches. The Jammys throw in a few awards between

include a few musical highlights between red-carpet commentary, backstage visits,

Although the lineup for the 2002 concert reads almost as predictably as the award

nominees—moe., Gov't Mule, Robert Randolph—pairings like Rusted Root with DJ

Dozen Brass Band with the Tom Tom Club promise something different. Whether the

Logic and Scratch from the Roots, Particle with the B-52's, and house band Dirty

result is lame or legendary will be determined onstage. "The best way to illustrate the power of live music is to do something that's of the moment, that forces musicians to play raw and not something rehearsed," Shapiro says. "And the best way to do that is to put them on stage with another musician that they've never met before." Guitarist Al Schnier of moe. points to a live experience shared with fans as key: "It never happened before and it'll never happen again and everybody is there experiencing that one thing."

Sometimes it works; sometimes it doesn't. "Some people are more comfortable going

out on a limb in front of people," John Medeski admits. "It's scary. If you're really

improvising, it's like dancing around naked and doing intimate things in front of

that invite criticism. "That's the shit that's giving the more quality side of it a bad

somebody." It's the bands "just doing the same old jingle-jangle comfortable thing"

The jamband audience is, in Medeski's words, "genuinely enthusiastic and warm and

basically accepting, maybe to a fault." As a result, the scene has spawned a generation of wannabes whose priority is length over depth, and ignorant youths who look to Phish (as opposed to, say, Parliament-Funkadelic) as the impetus of psychedelic funk. At its worst, the jamband world is too self-contained. First-time showgoers may have a hard time "getting" a group without background knowledge or a veteran guide, and not everyone wants to work that hard to enjoy a concert. Listeners can be lemminglike and undiscerning, and bad bands sometimes garner huge followings. At its best,

though, the milieu is a wide-open haven for collaboration and a community for social

The jam philosophy is frequently and rightly attributed to the Dead's model of genre-

created by Blues Traveler frontman John Popper and then manager Dave Frey in 1992,

crossing, improvisation, and hard touring. However, it was the H.O.R.D.E. tour,

The seven-year summer tour began as a practical means for a few too-tiny-for-

amphitheater acts to escape stuffy clubs during the hot summer months. Gathering

that first introduced a cohesive scene to the public.

foundation for the blurred lines of today's scene.

Morphine guys and Leftover Salmon. It was incredible."

alternatives to a Clear Channel-owned concert regime.

publication's online administrators to add a jam-specific link.

Blues Traveler, Spin Doctors, Widespread Panic, Aquarium Rescue Unit, Phish, and Béla Fleck and the Flecktones—like-minded folk with similar improv-friendly fan bases—H.O.R.D.E. unknowingly provided a new subcultural blueprint. As it expanded in its final years to include simply "good bands that play well live," it increasingly attracted less scene-identified performers: Sheryl Crow, Primus, Wilco, Beck, Smashing Pumpkins. "Would hanger-on hippies get bummed out by all the

negative energy?" Entertainment Weekly asked. "Would purple-haired skate kids pelt

peaceniks with Hacky Sacks?" Some believe the festival was ruined by its newfound

"We got the H.O.R.D.E. gig and it was like, 'That's kinda like this hippie thing, isn't it?"

"Primus bassist Les Claypool recalls. "In the back of our minds [we] were thinking,

'Wow, we might freak these people out.' And then we got there and they had the third

stage going. I got to jam with all these people . . . Medeski [Martin & Wood] and the

inclusiveness. But if nothing else, that eclecticism established a wide and sturdy

Meanwhile, Phish held the first of four festivals in 1996 on air force tarmac in upstate New York, and by 1999 were single-handedly attracting over 80,000 fans to an Indian reservation in Florida for New Year's Eve. Smaller bands like the Big Wu, Strangefolk, moe., and the Disco Biscuits now coordinate their own successful self-indulgent shindigs, playing multiple sets on multiple days, and inviting people they want to meet, hear, and jam with, and sometimes luring over 5000 fans to sundry remote locations.

Forced to fend for themselves over the last decade, the bands behind these festivals

independent label. Properly nurtured, they offer a world plagued with file-sharing

"Based on e-mail response . . . there's a lot of interest in jambands," says Jay Smith of

the concert trade magazine *Pollstar*. Exhaustive touring, an increasing number of

bands, and the impending end of Phish's two-year hiatus recently prompted the

"The economics in the music industry aren't great to begin with," Relix magazine

publisher and Wall Street executive Steve Bernstein reminds us. "The one thing that is

doing well is these tours. Bands in the jamband scene make money on their touring.

are now the best example of DIY spirit since every '80s punk band started an

witch hunts, outrageous ticket prices, and mergers the prototype for realistic

The fact that they're doing well proves something." Perhaps it proves that being considered commercially unsavory is the luckiest break a subculture can get. "To an extent, the jamband scene is becoming sort of the anti-pop-culture scene for now," explains categorically elusive Claypool. With Primus he was labeled everything from thrash-funk to grunge, but having now formed the power trio Oysterhead with Trey Anastasio and the Police's Stewart Copeland, toured the jamband summer

festival circuit, performed at both previous Jammys ceremonies, and beaten the

just calls himself "the new guy on the scene."

than the style of music you play."

supplied by the bands.

unannounced.

Allman Brothers Band and Widespread Panic for Live Album of the Year in 2001, he

"If you'd have asked me a couple years ago what did I think of the jamband scene, I

It seems like it's evolved quite a bit even since I've become involved. It seems like

would have just said, 'What is it, Phish and the Grateful Dead?' That's all I really knew.

more of a hub than a scene at this point. It's more about your approach to your music

He means the approach to *making* music, but he could easily include production and

encouraged taping and trading of live concerts. Among the diversions at Bonnaroo

was a Music Sharing Village, where almost 6000 attendees created and burned free,

personalized live-music compilations culled from tracks, sets, and entire concerts

distribution. One of the most vital aspects of jamband success has been the

"The Disco Biscuits made a whole CD book, they were so excited," says Annabel Lukins, project manager for the attraction. "It was interesting dealing with the labels because they didn't want to give away anything for free, but it was easy to convince them that this was a good thing. Gateway helped to promote the bands' Web sites too, which in turn promoted album sales. It was a win-win situation for everyone." So while the mainstream scrambles to capitalize on the next big thing, the jamband scene, driven forward by events like Bonnaroo and the Jammys, quietly enters a new

era. An insufficient African American presence is slowly correcting itself, and two of

the scene's most sought-after guest musicians, DJ Logic and Robert Randolph, are

paving the way for jam-based hip-hop and gospel. Gov't Mule keep about 20 of the

"As much as we can get away from choreographed, overproduced music the better,"

rather than just being considered a niche, the easier it will be for the scene to grow."

Shapiro declares. "The more the jamband term can be associated with good live music

world's greatest bass players on speed dial, and Kid Rock might just drop in

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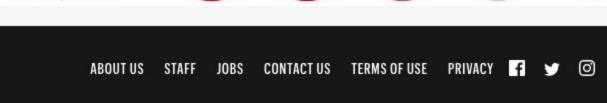
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