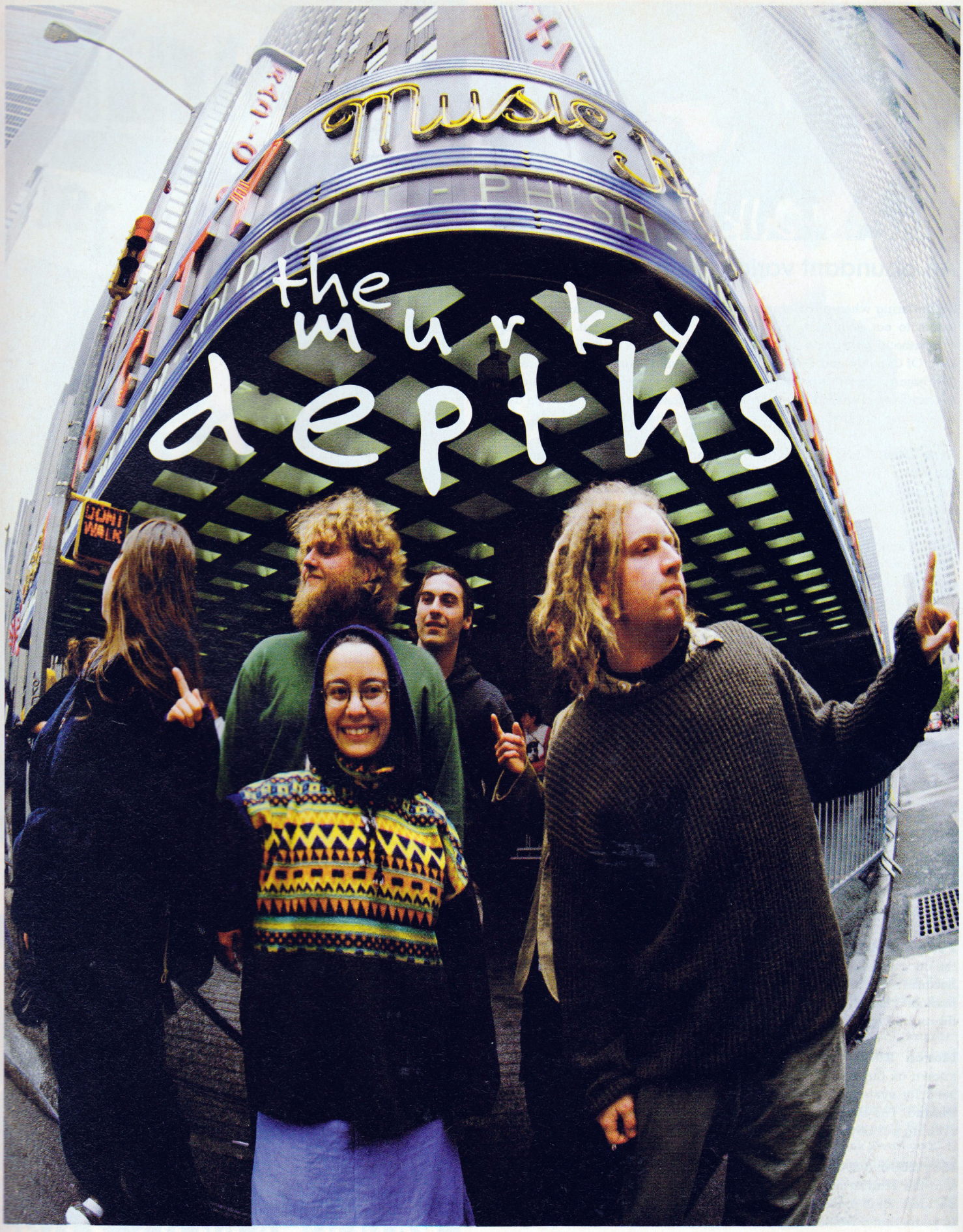

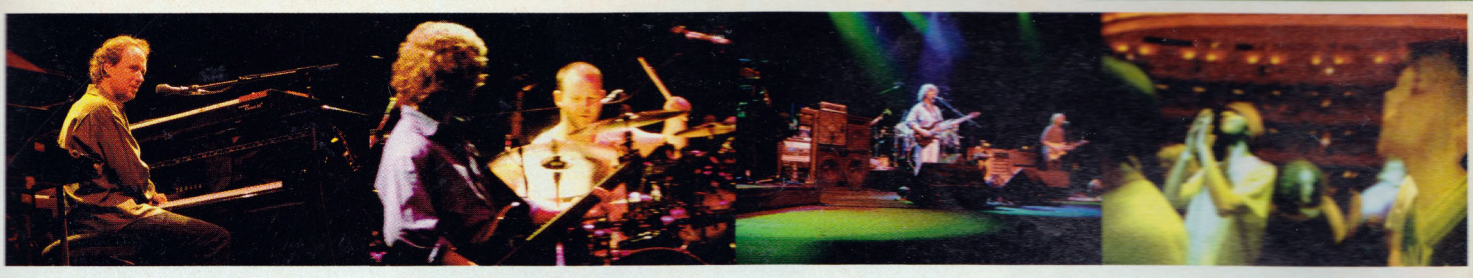

Part the dreadlocks, and you'll find Phish fans are more than just pot and patchouli.

STORY: **ROBIN A. ROTHMAN** PHOTOS: **BRENDAN MORAN**

"The scene that has evolved around the four of us is just incredible and we talk about it all the time," announces Phish guitarist Trey Anastasio from the stage of New York's Radio City Music Hall, where the band is celebrating the release of its new album, *Farmhouse* (Elektra). He's quelling any concern that the 15-year-old band's constant touring is wearing them down: "Every night it really is just a total joy."

The following evening, white spotlights rise to the third balcony of the grand old theater, illuminating the multitude's response writ three bedsheets wide: "Thank U."

As they queue up outside a concert venue, you might think Phish fans look like young Deadhead wannabes; dirty, nappy hippie slackers who showed up for a musical excuse to smoke pot, drop acid and ask for handouts. And you wouldn't be entirely wrong. But from the inside, Phish's fanbase is a hippie Whoville, an anti-establishment ant farm—in other words, the following has developed into a microcosmic society with its own evolved social structure.

Sure, it's got its Dead-like lot of peddlers selling homemade clothes and jewelry, veggie burritos, grilled cheese, every drug imaginable, beer, Jäger shots, glass bongs, T-shirts, stickers, patchouli and incense. And that other Deadhead tradition: the nomads who follow the band from city to city. But there's more than one way to follow the band. "One of the things that sets Phish apart is that so many of their fans want to make a contribution, want to leave their mark on the scene and enhance everyone else's experience," explains Andy Bernstein, editor (since 1995) of the fanzine *Pharmer's Almanac*.

Look to the Web for clues, and you'll find the Phunky Bitches, phemales who distribute feminine hygiene products, condoms and fliers with contact information for rape crisis centers and the like. The Phellowship, another camp, provides a haven for the teetotaler, offering "support and information to those who seek the comfort and camaraderie of other clean and sober people at shows." Soundboard lobbyists People For A Louder Mike began as a call to turn up bassist Mike Gordon's volume, and succeeded. There's even a special-interest contingent for lighting director Chris Kuroda, the group known as CK5: As co-founder Hassan Wahid tells it, "Since the band had already acknowledged Chris as the fifth bandmember, we decided to spread the word that there is in fact a human being that controls the lights."

The Phamily is the most recent sub-bunch, distributing shirts, bubble pens and lighters paid for out of the group members' own pockets. According to Annabel Lukins, a pixie-like, glitter-laden group member who can always be spotted sporting a Phamily temporary tattoo, the group is simply "trying to spread positive vibes and keep the scene full of sharing, love, friendship and happiness." Adds co-founder Aaron Schimmel, "We ask nothing in return except that you are all kind to each other."

"There are so many different sects," notes fan Bryce Carlson, a long-haired, T-shirt-and-jeans-clad 20-something who's seen upwards of 70 shows since he first caught the band in 1993. "From tapers to vendors to set-list writers who call in [to Website operators] right after a show, to tour rats, to the fan who has a real job and doesn't follow but sees them when they come to town, to picky music ones who say, 'Trey missed the change,' to frat guys who talk the whole time and spill beer all over—to represent every single one is a mighty task indeed."

Drummer Jon Fishman remembers, "It used to be just college kids. Now there are a lot of younger kids and some older people, a wider range of social groups, although it is primarily a Caucasian audience, probably because it came out of the hippie subculture."

Peace and love are admirable ideals, but the Phish subculture is built around a more practical hidden logic: A lot can go wrong when so many controlled substances collide in a confined space, and somebody's got to keep the fun coming. Phish's subcultures are out to casually protect their own carefree good time, where balloons and glow rings whiz past you while you lose yourself in dance, a lost dog can find his owner four cities later, someone on a bad trip can trust a stranger to keep him from turning into a glass of orange juice and a stranded girl can feel safe hitching a ride to the next show.

"That has been a big goal of ours in terms of the environments at the concerts, to make it safe for people to cut loose," Fishman says. "That was what was so ultimately amazing about New Year's," he adds, referring to the recent millennium event at Big Cypress Indian Reservation in Florida, for which fans waited in traffic on I-95 for literally half a day to camp for three days and witness five sets of songs, including a marathon seven-hour set that lasted from midnight 'til dawn. (Phish draws upon a repertoire of more than 500 tunes, keeping 150 songs in current rotation.) The affair was a cop-free city unto itself, complete with two Ferris wheels, a post office, first aid, a general store and street names with addresses. Reported as the largest New Year's event in the world, it attracted almost 80,000 and grossed second only to Barbra Streisand, who charged $1000 a head to Phish's $150.

But numbers are the last thing Cypress represents to the band and fans. "Isn't it wonderful," reflects Fishman, "that all of those people, including ourselves, got to go there and experience this sort of moment of utopia where you could come away from it and say, 'Well, yeah, the world at large is not like this, but at least it could be'? And you can carry that with you and live your life in a way that tries to encourage that sort of environment wherever it is that you are. That was by far our peak musical experience of all time. From a social standpoint it finally achieved everything we ever idealized." NMM

"Well, yeah, the world at large is not like this, but at least it could be."