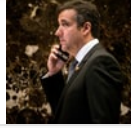


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Black Crowes Heat Up

Reunited rockers back in stride at secret gigs

By Robin A. Rothman

March 21, 2005

According to the Black Crowes' official tour schedule, Tuesday night will mark the end of their almost four-year break . . . but their official tour schedule is wrong.

What began with the announcement of All Join Hands, a five-night stand at New York's Hammerstein Ballroom, has quickly evolved into an all-out tour -- including two more nights at Hammerstein and stops in Canada and at major summer festivals like the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival and Bonnaroo. But the tour has also quietly grown on the front end as well, and Tuesday will not be the Southern bluesy rockers' first performance since Halloween 2001. For the past week, Chris and Rich Robinson, Bill Dobrow (drums) and Crowes alumni Eddie Hawrysch (keyboards), Marc Ford (guitar) and Sven

Pipien (bass) have been hitting small northeastern venues and performing under the pseudonym Mr. Crowes Garden -- the name the Crowes chose when they formed in 1984.

The run began Tuesday, March 14th, at the Staircase in Pittston, Pennsylvania. The next night the group traveled to Burlington, Vermont, to play at the Higher Ground. The venue is well-known as one of Phish's early haunts, and former Phish frontman Trey Anastasio joined the Crowes during a two-song encore. Thursday found the band at Toad's Place in New Haven, Connecticut. They performed at the Chance Theater in Poughkeepsie, New York, on Friday and then ended the pre-tour at Pearl Street Nightclub in Northampton, Massachusetts, on Saturday.

It was in Poughkeepsie -- where Bob Dylan also got in shape last summer for his tour of minor-league baseball parks -- that we tracked the Crowes down. As the lights dimmed shortly after 9 p.m., the audience immediately burst into boisterous applause, leaving no doubt this band has been missed, even by those who had seen them the night before. Incense wafted toward the balcony, the fragrance mixing along the way with intermittent puffs of pot smoke. The band members entered from the Chance's backdoor straight onto a stage so crammed with equipment the two backup singers were practically pinned to the back wall.

Surely it was no coincidence that this Friday evening show opened with the Floyd-twang psychedelic harmonica drawl of "Good Friday." And for the next couple hours, the Brothers Robinson and gang guided a tour through the group's career -- from *Shake Your Money Maker* (1990) to *Lions* (2001), skipping only *By Your Side* (1999) in the process.

The crowd enjoyed the crunchy guitar rock and high-pitched chorus of "Nebakanezer," the slow-burning angels and devils of "Thorn in My Pride," and covers of Crosby, Stills and Nash's "Pre-Road Downs" and Delaney and Bonnie's "Coming Home." The single-set show peaked and ended with the rousing triple hit parade of "Twice as Hard," "Jealous Again" and "Remedy."

All the while, the band members themselves could be seen feeling the same wallop this music still packs. The backup singers bobbed heads to tunes they were sitting out. Chris Robinson -- with his faded patched jeans, Captain Lou Albano-esque tie dripping from his scruffy beard -- revealed his vulnerability to the boogie groove with the occasional spastic hand clap or foot stomp.

Returning for an encore, the Crowes powerfully delivered their best-known ballad, "She Talks to Angels," and finished the evening somewhat anticlimactically with a cover of Bob Marley's "Bend Down Low."

Over the course of all five pre-Hammerstein shows, the group has been careful to practice as many songs as possible, the set lists indicating very little overlap. Still, as the Poughkeepsie performance proved, it would be unfair to label these as "warm-up gigs." There was no sense of rusty musicians feeling their way back. This felt more like a time warp to the days when the Crowes were first coming up in the club scene. And they didn't miss a beat.

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