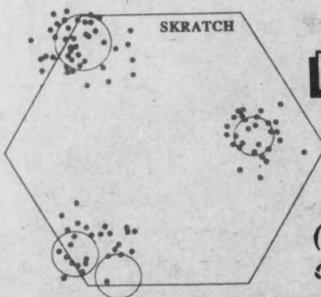


MEAT



IN DEFENSE OF LIVE CONCERT ALBUMS

(The first in a two part series commenting on the state of the medium).



RETROPRaisal

I've had this idea rumbling around in my head for the last few months that as the 80's close out, a review of some of the decade's best live albums might be in order. Why specialize in live albums? Well, I happen to like live albums . . . a lot. I bet a lot of other people do, too (although no one I've ever talked to on the subject has admitted this). You can imagine my consternation then, when I noted that the most recent edition of *Rolling Stone* saw fit to include only one live album in their "One hundred greatest albums of the

80's". That album? Lou Reed's *New York*. Now wait, before you protest, this was technically a live album (and a very fine one). It was recorded live in the studio. This strategy has largely fallen by the wayside in recording technology and it's a shame, too. Reed wrote and scored his music with this approach in mind and the result is a powerful, gritty statement about life in the Big Apple.

This exception notwithstanding, live concert albums get short notice and, seemingly, no respect.

The article stirred me to action. I saw the deluge of reviews of the Eighties (news, books, movies, fashion, etc.) was upon us and I opted to get my kick at the can before the inevitable apathy sets in by the

first week of January. More importantly, the omission of live albums from the list made me realize how important, now more than ever, is my concept for recognizing the value of live concert albums. Onward to slay the dragon of prevailing opinion . . .

Live albums are perhaps the best format for placing an artist's or band's work in focus. Not only do they reveal much about the relationship between the artist(s) and the audience, but they can sometimes serve as historical documents of the time in which they were made in a way that studio recordings cannot. The Sixties are about as far back as we can reasonably go to explore this assertion.

Consider one of the greatest and more influential bands of all time: The Beatles. It's hard for younger people of today to fully appreciate the excitement that The Beatles generated in the music world not only in terms of sales, but also in influence. And yet while the studio recordings (yes, the earliest were recorded live in the studio) still exude vitality today, they can't really express the emotional impact the Beatles made. For that you need *The Beatles Live at the Hollywood Bowl*, which fills a gaping hole in the Beatles discography. Despite the primitive conditions under which it was recorded, it documents the deafening screaming that could render their music at many concerts almost inaudible. The performances are sparkling, electric, and John Lennon is at his glib best, while Paul's performance at introducing songs is so pathetically amateurish (Wow . . . wow . . . thank you . . . wow . . . our next song is . . .") that it alone could have been, but wasn't the reason why, in 1966, after only three years at dominating record charts worldwide, they were to be the first recording act to be able to forego the need for concerts to promote their act. This development meant the Beatles would be the first recording act to "live" in the studio. The attendant recording innovations they popularized were probably the single greatest change in recording technology. It also meant no live concert albums from The Beatles until the Hollywood Bowl recordings were released in 1978.

The second example from the sixties is the album *Woodstock*. This much ballyhooed "event" was in fact a mismanaged affair that occurred near, but not in, Woodstock, NY. That it wildly exceeded anticipated attendance at least ten-fold, turned huge dairy fields into a churning sea of mud and hippies, and became a logistical nightmare to organizers seems to have blown the importance

of the event out of proportion. The music? (Cough) Ritchie Haven and oddly enough, Sha Na Na provide the two highlights of lasting musical value of the entire three days performances. But don't but the album to hear these. The album sound embarrassingly dated (like wow, man, Catch the film instead and see how quickly Haven's frenetic guitar style erodes his guitar's top into toothpick (and in so doing outshines Jim Hendrix).

Most live albums can't qualify as "historical documents", however. And this doesn't lessen the value of recordings in the least. They still can provide startling insight into the character of the artist(s). This implies risk, and ultimately, danger to a career if it's not done right. It is perhaps for this reason that many bands don't produce live concert albums or, do so with some trepidation. What other reason could there be?

Feasibility? Even admitting that most of today's music is electronically complex, and difficult to reproduce live, it should be no hindrance, as Depeche Mode's *Depeche Mode 101* demonstrates.

Opportunity? Every artist performs at some time. Many enjoy what can be both and exhilarating and a draining experience. Most are "forced" to go by dint of contractual obligation and/or financial necessity. The point is, every act has the option to record and release at least one live concert album in their career, and even in each phase of their career (eg. the Rolling Stones).

Profitability? Granted that concerts are complex enough to produce without the added constraints posed by toting along mobile recording facilities and granted that live albums typically don't sell well (fools?), the added expense and logistical support for recording concerts shouldn't hinder profitability. In fact, it would be poor business strategy for the record companies not to engage in this activity. As noted above, most artists have to perform, so the recording opportunities are there for the taking. By careful selection of the "best" moments culled from many performances, a little "cleaning" up in the Studio (as long as the overdubbing is kept to a minimum and doesn't affect the integrity of the performances) and you should have a recording that reveals something of the audible experience of attending a live performance.

The real reason lies in accountability. The entertainment industry is built upon illusion, unreasonably high expectations and idolatry. Some bands don't translate well in the live-to-recorded medium. They may give a spectacular show, which aided by costume, pyrotechnics, smoke, lasers, etc, and inflated by hype, may impress a devout (and malleable) audience under the influence of various legal and illegal substances. These peripherals create an emotional and sensory distraction from the center of focus, the music. The music may seem great, and the effects entertaining; everybody has a good time and the whole point of the performance is realized. Remove the props, as the recording inevitably does, and sloppy vocals, timing that is just slightly off, and a host of other technical problems, appear. These needn't necessarily be a death knell

reasonable imperfections in performance to little to detract from a truly inspired outpouring approaching religious fervor. Conversely, sterile performances that mechanically reproduce studio versions of songs suggest and act maybe no more than wigs and make-up. The perfection as musicians, that the recording studio can create, melts away even though the entertainment value of the concert may be unaffected. It's this sometimes brutal collision with reality that makes live concert albums so compelling to me. They round out the artist, and expose previously hidden cracks and feet of clay . . . and sometimes unsuspected genius.

A number of recording acts meet or exceed the high standards they have set for themselves. *The Who Live at Leeds* is a near perfect masterpiece that enabled The Who to confirm their place in Rock legend. But perhaps the best example of a top band exceeding already very high expectations is *Get Yer Ya Ya's Out (The Rolling Stones in Concert)*. Recorded and released in 1969 at the apogee of their career when the Rolling Stones were crossing over the R&B to a rock format, it affirms their reputation as "the greatest rock and roll band in the world". Each song on the album surpasses its studio-recorded version of style and emotional impact. Jagger parts his pouty lips to bare fangs and Taylor and Richards trade killer guitar work whose nasty sting is rivaled only by Wyman's volcanic bass and Watts' inspired pounding. From the opening *Jumpin' Jack Flash* to the closing *Street Fighting Man*, it never drops below city-leveling intensity. In fact, with *Midnight Rambler*, they may have created the best live cut of all time.

Then there are those "artists" who may best be regarded as mediocrities but who appeal to a particular segment of the record buying public. Ted Nugent (is he still around?) springs to mind. I never though much of his talents and always suspected his hunter/wildman persona was a contrived sales ploy. In fact, he probably epitomizes the artist who is more performer than artist. The confines of the more "cerebral" studio environment just don't suit his temperament. *Double Live Gonzo* is an appropriately titled work that showcases his inspired wacky singing and guitar-weapon and reveals Nugent to be a madman extraordinaire. An album and force of epic proportions (no pun intended)

that illustrates how life-giving the exceptional live concert album can be.

Next week: continuing our retro-praisal fun-fest, the best live concert albums of the 80's. Plus, a special feature: the worst live concert album of the 80's (and perhaps of all time!)

PETER FERGUSON



"Look . . . I can see right up his nose!" Ronnie astute as ever reminds Bill that he was once a rhinologist

STEVE GRIFFITHS

MUSIC ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

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