



Words About Music
From
Greg Burk & Friends

Vanilla Fudge, “When Two Worlds Collide” (ABC DVD)

Even though on the surface everything seems f*kt about this Vanilla Fudge Meets the San Fernando Valley Symphony Orchestra vid, it’s a genuinely wonderful hunk of entertainment.

What’s wrong? Well. It’s got only two original members -- drummer Carmine Appice and bassist Tim Bogert. The booklet notes are meager to the point of insult -- the recording musta been made in some year and some place or other; I’m guessing from the copyright date in the credits that it was in 2004 or earlier, and from the name of the orchestra that it was here in L.A. There is no song list on the box. The music has already seen CD release in three different forms. Though this is in essence a live DVD, it was laid down on a soundstage with no audience -- each track piles to a mighty crescendo followed by tomblike silence, and when the guys want some crowd interaction, they hilariously resort to call-and-response with the symphony. Most of the band’s parts appear to be overdubbed; dunno about the orchestra’s.

Get over it. The substitutes -- Bill Pascali for organist Mark Stein, Teddy Rondonelli (brother of drummer Bobby) for guitarist Vince Martell -- are awesome. The performances kick major tail. The symphonic arrangements, by bowtied hippie conductor James Domaine, are glorious. The video editing is pro, with plenty of camera angles. The 5.1 sound option rocks, or it least it did when I figured out the only way to access it was via the Audio button on my remote control. The bonus features are well worth checking out: track-by-track Appice-Bogert commentary, a band-history interview, gallery of vintage photos with commentary, even a silly but revealing doo-wop/symphony cover of the Backstreet Boys’ “I Want It That Way,” improvised at some outdoor festival for a handful of clueless sunbathers as some band friend dramatically jerks the zoom on his handheld digi-cam.

Perhaps you know that Long Island’s psychedelic soul cheeseboxes were an incredibly influential band, without which keyboard-bolstered heavyweights such as Deep Purple, Uriah Heep, Grand Funk and Spooky Tooth, for instance, would not have existed. Ritchie Blackmore has observed that London’s big 1967 revelation wasn’t Jimi Hendrix but Vanilla Fudge, and that Purple deliberately set out to imitate them. Appice brags that Led Zeppelin’s John Bonham precisely copied his double-kick setup, and that the Fudge’s clothing designer was snapped up by Hendrix. The guys claim that George Harrison shoved their first album, featuring the hit epic reconstruction of the Supremes’ “You Keep Me Hanging On,” into the faces of Eric Clapton and everyone else he knew. It was no accident that when the Fudge split in 1970, Bogert and Appice immediately hooked up

with one of the world's hottest guitarists, Jeff Beck -- a project delayed only because Beck got busted up in a car wreck.

Vanilla Fudge's genius lay in snatching gems from the Motown and Beatles songbooks and personalizing them with bronto-beats, acidic guitars, head-smashing dynamics, classical flashes and distinctive multipart vocal harmonies. I remember, though, dismissing them somewhat when I was a kid because they didn't write enough original material, and a lot of other dumbsh*ts felt the same way.

For all their lysergic currency, these East Coast wops and Jews did not come off as Frisco-hip, and indeed they were not; they were just very creative musicians. At age 60 and 60 pounds heavier, the third-millennium Fudgemen are even less cool in their sparkly togs -- Appice and Pascali looking like the mustachioed sleazebags who run the local strip bar, Bogert (as always) squinting like a bespectacled schoolteacher, Rondinelli spilling out of his tight snakeprint trousers.

But they sure do rock. Appice slams richly tuned skins and sings good too, taking the lead on "Do Ya Think I'm Sexy?" (the 1978 disco hit he co-wrote with Rod Stewart) and helping to pour a ton of deserved concrete over the wretched Stewart sellout. Bogert croons beautifully -- better than the old days, praises Appice -- and he's a regular Stanley Clarke on his five-string bass, on which he contributes a fuzzy, radical, thumb-popping solo. (Watch for the big spider that's trying to build a web in his headstock.) Rondinelli's vintage Les Paul Junior is just on fire, and what a gorgeous tone; he says he got complete freedom to play what he wanted, and he uses it. As for Pascali, I'm no fan of photocopying, but jayzus, he executes Mark Stein's soul-choir vocal style EXACTLY on "Take Me for a Little While" while churning excellent organ, an old piece of furniture he muscles into a Jon Lord-style 45-degree tilt.

Every song swells with classic Fudge majesty, but I'd single out the monstrous build of Curtis Mayfield's "People Get Ready," the extended mystery of Donovan's "Season of the Witch" and the testifying soul of N'Sync's "Tearin' Up My Heart," which Appice says he heard back in the '90s 'cause of his daughter. The band glow with teenage enjoyment; it's sweet to see the interview footage of Appice and Bogert, who plainly still love each other like brothers, and when the improbable subject of "Me and My Shadow" comes up during the commentary, they chirp out a snatch of the wistful Prohibition skip-stepper. Just like that, without thinking about it. Together. In harmony.

A lot of care went into the making, if not the packaging, of "When Two Worlds Collide" (the two worlds being rock band and orchestra). So it's too bad that the folks who funded it undoubtedly lost all their money. But call it a mitzvah; a reward awaits in rock & roll heaven.

SINCE THERE'S NO EXTERNAL TRACK LIST, HERE'S ONE:

Orchestral Intro
Good Livin'

Take Me for a Little While
Ain't That Peculiar
People Get Ready
Shotgun
Tearin' Up My Heart
She's Not There
Keep Me Hangin' On
Season of the Witch
Do Ya Think I'm Sexy?
Need Love
You Can't Do That