

CRITICAL TIMES: FISHBONE'S HEN HOUSE SESSIONS

Fishbone

MVD Music Video Distributors, 2004



Review by: Christopher Thelen

Originally published: January 27, 2005

Fishbone is the kind of band that deserved a better hand than they were dealt. After scoring a blip on the musical radar with songs like "Party At Ground Zero," "Skankin' To The Beat" (which was featured in the movie *Say Anything*) and "Sunless Saturday," the group seemed to disappear back into obscurity. I remember listening to the CD *Give A Monkey A Brain...* from 1993, and thinking this stuff was pure genius.

Yet the group -- featuring original members Angelo Moore, Norwood Foster and "Dirty" Walt Kibby III (who has since left the group, along with guitarist Spacey T) -- has trudged forward, trying to re-establish themselves among the industry. Their sessions in 2001 at Hen House Studios were captured on film as Fishbone went through a re-evaluation process of themselves as a band, and came up with some incredible music. *Critical Times: Fishbone's Hen House Sessions* captures the band as they go through the aches and pains of this re-adjustment, as well as candid interviews with members of the band.

Full disclosure alert: Apparently, Fishbone had not agreed to either have the full songs from these sessions released or an entire documentary on their experience at Hen House released. Fishbone has officially distanced themselves from this release.

Memo to Fishbone: With all due respect, I'd advise you to swallow your pride and reconsider. Watching the band go through the creative process was a fascinating experience, warts and all, and made me question just why Fishbone never became a bigger success. If more people were turned onto songs like "In The Heat Of Angrrr," "Frayed Fucking Nerve Ending" and "Premadawnutt," consumers would be beating down the doors of major labels demanding that Fishbone be given a second, fighting chance.

While not nearly as cathartic as Metallica's recent experience as captured on *Some Kind Of Monster* (which I should be getting from Netflix in the next few days, thank you), Moore and crew do deal with stylistic disagreements as they fine-tune the six songs presented here. It is interesting to see Foster try to explain to Moore why using a theremin on a specific song may not be the wisest choice, as Moore struggles to get the notes just right. However, scenes like this never become ugly; if anything, the friendships and music become tighter.

And this is where *Critical Times* has its greatest strength. Fishbone's music always seems like it's a party teetering on the brink of losing any semblance of control. What I learned in the course of 80-plus minutes is that Fishbone puts a lot of work into crafting that sound, and it is not without blood, sweat and tears. In the end, though, the final result is well worth it.

Complaints? I have but one -- namely, that the full versions of these songs aren't featured. Granted, the songs were basically in "demo mode," and I need some incentive to head over to Best Buy and demand that they order some of these discs for me. But if these featured songs were merely demos, I shudder to imagine how much power the final versions have.

While I respect that Fishbone should have the final say on how their music is released, *Critical Times* is too good of a documentary to be merely swept under the carpet. If it had painted the band in a negative light, I'd understand some hostility towards it. This, however, is the kind of musical document that, in a fair world, would give Fishbone another shot at the spotlight. Here's hoping they get that chance.

RATING: A-

© 2005 Christopher Thelen and "The Daily Vault." All rights reserved. Review or any portion may not be reproduced without written permission. Cover art is the intellectual property of the record label, and is used for informational purposes only.