

# DIGITAL deSTRUCTION



## BACK ON TARGET:

### DEVO LIVE IN 1980

*By Hollis James*

Video artist Joe Rees founded Target Video in 1978 to capture what he correctly saw as an “alternative musical movement” that was steadily overtaking album-oriented rock. From punk royalty such as the Ramones and Talking Heads to sadly unrecorded “might-have-beens” like the Dils and the Screammers, Target began documenting every cutting-edge band playing clubs, bars, parties, Joe’s art studio (known simply as “Target,”) and even venues that defy logic—such as the Cramps’ 1979 show at Napa State Mental Hospital. In the pre-MTV years, the good people from Target captured sublime historical documents of now-indisputable musical legends. Even a cursory glance at Target’s recorded roster is intimidating, boasting Iggy Pop, Bad Brains, Minor Threat, the Cramps, Dead Kennedys, the Stranglers and even GG Allin. Unfortunately, once Target disappeared, many of us could only track down these gems as tenth-generation bootlegs. Luckily the digital age has been kind to the once VHS-only company. No longer the ROIR of the home-video market, Target—with the help of Music Video Distributors—has put care and (finally!) money into preserving its library of rare video-concert footage on DVD. The Target closet is full of worthy candidates for analog-to-digital transfers, hopefully with retooled sound that at least approaches today’s standards. But of all the important acts whose Target concerts are slowly emerging in DVD form, only Devo combines the visual punch equal to—and at times superceding—its sonic gifts. In short, this band anticipated, was designed for, and hence thrives in the digital age.

For the uninitiated, the difference



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underground

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ART ATTACK

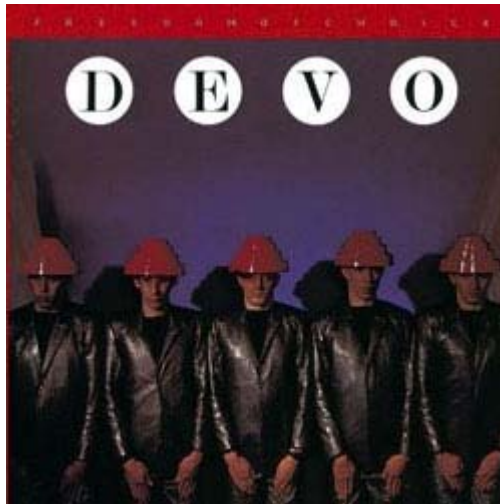
SONIC  
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between Devo and those other denizens of the man-as-machine microcosm, Kraftwerk, is that Kraftwerk are men whose *raison d'être* has been to musically document their systematic evolution from instrument-playing men into the highest non-life-forms: music machines. But while Kraftwerk pursued a higher automaton existence, Devo "de-evolved." Devo's name and inspiration were derived from Oscar Kiss Maerth's, *The Beginning Was the End*, an oddly learned yet hopelessly bent thesis, which posited that the rise of man was, in essence, an evolutionary accident caused by a mutated group of brain-eating, nymphomaniac apes. Hence the devolution began. This metaphor is carried throughout Devo's work as a commentary on the dehumanization of modern society. Devo were childlike in the most commercially dangerous way, pushing their luck in whichever direction ensured the most resistance—sonic art-terrorists spoiling for a fight. Devo has always worked from the starting point that the beginning was the end. Quite frankly, from a creative standpoint, where could that possibly lead? Luckily, Devo wouldn't have to choose for a few years yet.



Long available only on out of print VHS or on harder and harder to find vinyl, this brand new DVD release—with the help of the right distributor, MVD—looks and sounds better than ever before. To give you an idea of the Devo that's captured live here, on tour in support of their breakthrough album, *Freedom of Choice*, the band opens the show with "Whip It." A few of you may say, 'Oh, sure, their

hit.' But the fact that they open with their "one hit wonder," proves that, at that point, "Whip It" was not yet a hit, let alone a wonder. The band had no idea that "Whip It" was about to become the one song that would overshadow all others (including better ones!) they would ever write. But by the time this tour ended, "Whip It" was coming out of every radio and TV in America. Even Casey "Reach for the Stars" Kasem would be forced to utter the name of Devo. Unfortunately the band's visual appeal was so intriguing it cast a wider shadow, at times, than their music. What's forgotten by most, is that this was a band widely respected by their peers, who were quick to "get the joke" a lot sooner than the public or critics. Most people don't know that Brian Eno produced their debut record, *Q: Are We Not Men? A: We Are Devo!*, or, even more tellingly, that Warner Brothers only signed the band at the insistence of both David Bowie and Iggy Pop. Each championed the band after seeing Devo's short film, *The Truth About De-Evolution*. In fact, Bowie was originally supposed to produce their debut album until a scheduling conflict forced him to bow out and Eno came onboard. Nice "fall-back" producer, huh? Devo had already been playing gigs and paying dues since 1974, veterans of both the straight punk scene (such



as Max's Kansas City and The Crypt) and the same art-rock circuit that spawned fellow envelope-pushers Oingo Boingo. By the time of this concert—at the Phoenix Theatre in California, August 17, 1980—Devo were road-tested, self-assured and tight.

For a band that took an almost militant stance toward conformity—(What other band has had members called Bob I and Bob II?)—Target's DVD provides a rare glimpse at the individual talents of Devo's members. We see not only the obvious contributions of main songwriters Gerald V. Casale and Mark Mothersbaugh, but the further musical and vocal contributions of Devo's unsung three—both Bobs (Casale & Mothersbaugh) and drummer Alan Myers. Oh, I suppose you knew that guitarist Bob I sang lead on "Secret Agent Man?" I thought not! One happy discovery made during the viewing of this DVD, is that Devo's Alan Myers was one of the best drummers around. Since a rock drummer's greatest gift is considered the ability to keep precise time and hit hard, why didn't this dynamic human metronome ever get his due? Well, for a band that used so many technical doohickeys and self-made instruments to achieve mechanized mutant-ear candy, perhaps many just assumed that the drums were made by machine. Today we're so spoiled by the disposable shortcuts of the P. Diddies of the world that it's hard to remember when drummers could achieve such perverse pounding precision on their own. Regardless, Myers—not unlike fellow spitfire skin-sizzlers Stephen Morris (Joy Division) or Kevin Haskins (Bauhaus)—impresses not only for the organic groove he creates but also for the non-robotic raucousness he manages to assimilate into the rigid musical borders given him. In fact, this visual document will act as proof to anyone who believes that these stiff-limbed pseudo-clones are not *feeling* the music they're playing. One need only witness Bob Mothersbaugh play his smoking guitar solos (especially in "Be Stiff" and the cluster-fuck transition in "Smart Patrol/Mr. DNA")—rapt in his own world, his body helplessly jerking back and forth in very (un-Devo) spasmodic convulsions—as proof positive that beneath the five matching jumpsuits (and matching T-shirts and, I assume, matching pectorals) beat five very real hearts. De-evolved mutated hearts, to be sure, but hearts just the same.

The concert features a killer set list (roughly 20 songs!), delivered with whiplash aggression. Devo's greatest breakup song, "Snowball," their attempt at teen angst, "Girl U Want," and their puzzlingly earnest attempt at homage, "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" are imbued with an infectious

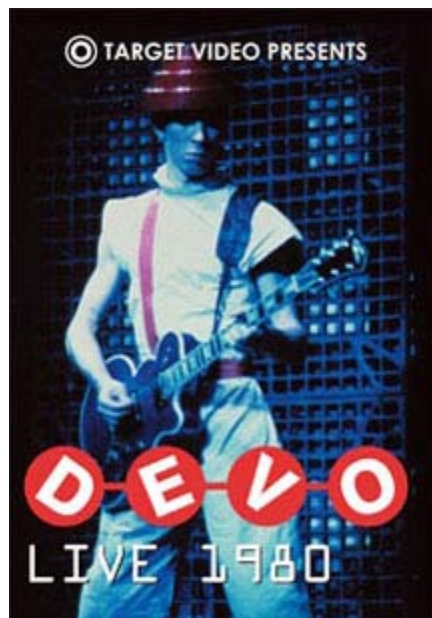


sense of vigor in concert that their album versions couldn't capture. "Be Stiff" alone is played at almost twice its earlier recorded speed. The bass line to "Mongoloid" almost lays down the blueprint for the hardcore scene about to explode across America. Keep in mind that by the time of this concert Devo had been touring for roughly six years. Unknown to the teenage fans



at the Phoenix, the “overnight sensation” they’re observing is a band who, having shaken off the dead skin of art-rock, seem to be cherishing the freedom their newfound choice of hook-laden power-pop affords them.

From Devo’s disastrous Halloween 1975 gig opening for Sun Ra, where they easily cleared the room (and Sun Ra played one of his best sets ever to an auditorium of empty chairs), to this triumphant night merely five years later shows a massive evolution for these de-evolution zealots. To think, only two years later Devo would be playing their televised hearts out on the “Muffy’s Bat Mitzvah” episode of *Square Pegs*, while—in between verses of “That’s Good”—Jami Gertz and Sarah Jessica Parker played out the sickeningly saccharine plot of their acne-drama. Now that’s what I call ‘crossing over.’ This concert DVD is a rare glimpse of a band being born—and, in some respects, creatively peaking—almost before our eyes. It is both the finish line in Devo’s long race from ironic art-project freak show to professional, touring band, as well as the beginning of the end for a band whose burgeoning success would inevitably nudge them out of the controlled playing field they carefully regimented for themselves. Where once Devo dared—or *forced*—audiences to simply react (positively or negatively) to their art, Devo’s new object was merely to entertain...and they revel in it. As will you.



#### **DEVO 1980:**

**Gerald V. Casale** vocals, bass, synthesizer bass

**Mark Mothersbaugh** vocals, keyboards, guitar

**Bob Mothersbaugh** (Bob I) vocals, lead guitar

**Bob Casale** (Bob II) rhythm guitar, keyboards

**Alan Myers** drums

#### **DVD EXTRAS:**

\*The biggest joke Devo ever played on audiences would have truly made Andy Kaufman

proud. The band would occasionally don matching leisure suits (& sun visors!) and perform as their own opening act: a Christian soft-rock outfit named “Dove: the Band of Love.” This disc boasts a rare clip of Dove in concert, performing two early Devo favorites, “Praying Hands” and “Shrivel Up.” As a sun-visor-clad Gerald says before Dove launches into their first song, “Praise Jesus! Praise God!”

\*Another great idea, which I hope we’ll see done more often, was to make this disc a flipside (one side video-concert DVD; one side audio-concert CD). The folks at MVD knew that a concert disc with sound quality this good (yes, techies, it’s in DOLBY) should



not only also be playable on iPod, car stereo, boom box and discman, but easy to burn into your own mix CDs.

\*Though technically not an "extra," the opening *Star Wars*-style exposition crawl amusingly takes us back to the night of the concert, 25 years ago, when these "five young men from an industrial wasteland known as Akron, Ohio," traveled thousands of miles to "make their presence known in a city by the water." It's odd to recall that back in the halcyon days of punk's hardcore elite (Dead Kennedys, Bad Brains, Husker Du, Minor Threat and, of course, Reagan Youth, to name a few), the word *Reagan* became an appellative among bands—both figuratively and lyrically—to symbolize all that was wrong in the world. That's why I laughed aloud when I read the words, and again I quote: "The reign of President Reagan seems in retrospect like a ray of sunshine compared to the present day rule of Emperor "W" and his fellow fundamentalist enemies around the world." DE-EVOLUTION IS REAL.

\*After the concert, the cameras keep running (Good old Target!) to record the post-concert film their audience was treated to, a surrealist video for the song "Tunnel of Love." When "Tunnel of Love" ends the "Devo Corporate Anthem," which would surface on their album *New Traditionalists*, plays while Devo (clad in matching yellow overalls and sunglasses) pledge allegiance to some unseen and distant flag. It's nice to know that after three decades of playing music together, Devo is still pledging allegiance to a flag that, for most of the world, remains unseen.

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