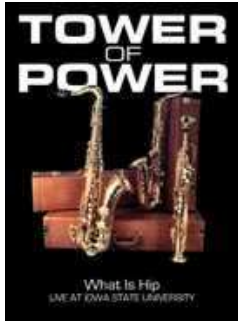




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Case Number 15288: Small Claims Court



Tower Of Power: What Is Hip? Live At Iowa State University

[MVD Visual](#) // 1985 // 104 Minutes // Not Rated
 Reviewed by Judge Victor Valdivia // December 20th, 2008

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Judge Victor Valdivia frequently tells women he has a famous horn section, after which they usually scream and call the cops.

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Scales of Justice

Judgment: 60

Perp Profile

Studio: [MVD Visual](#)

Video Formats:

- Full Frame

Audio Formats:

- PCM 2.0 Mono (English)

Subtitles:

- None

Running Time: 104 Minutes

Release Year: 1985

MPAA Rating: Not Rated

Genres:

- [Concerts and Musicals](#)
- [Performance](#)

Distinguishing Marks

- Interview
- Discography
- Biography

Accomplices

- [All Music Guide: Tower of Power](#)



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The Charge

"What is hip?
 Tell me tell me, if you think ya know."

-- "What is Hip?"

The Case

While watching this DVD, one can't help but be struck by a fundamental question: why is it so stupefyingly dull? Tower of Power was one of the most thrilling R&B bands of the '70s, and their horn-driven brand of funk was so influential that artists as diverse as Billy Preston, Elton John, and Public Image Ltd. would not only write songs in their style but actually hire the legendary TOP horns to play on their records. So it seems inexplicable that a band that was responsible for some of the '70s' best music is so boring and generic here. That's until you realize that the incarnation of Tower of Power that plays here isn't the same one that recorded all their classic hits.

What is Hip? was filmed in 1985 at a concert at Iowa State University. The lineup includes: Sax: Emilio Castillo. Vocals/Keyboards: Ellis Hall. Baritone Sax: Stephen "Doc" Kupka. Guitar: Willie Fulton. Bass: Francis Rocco Prestia. Sax/Lyricon: Richard Elliot. Brass: Mike Adams and Mike Cichowicz. Keyboardist: David Matthews. Drums: Mick Mestek. Here is the setlist:

- "Down to the Nightclub"
- "This Time It's for Real"
- "Can't You See"
- "Squib Cakes"
- "Don't Change Horses in the Middle of the Stream"
- "So Very Hard to Go"
- "What is Hip?"
- "You're Still a Young Man"
- "Soul Vaccination"
- "Can't Ya Feel It?"
- "Only So Much Oil in the Ground"
- "If You Move You Lose"

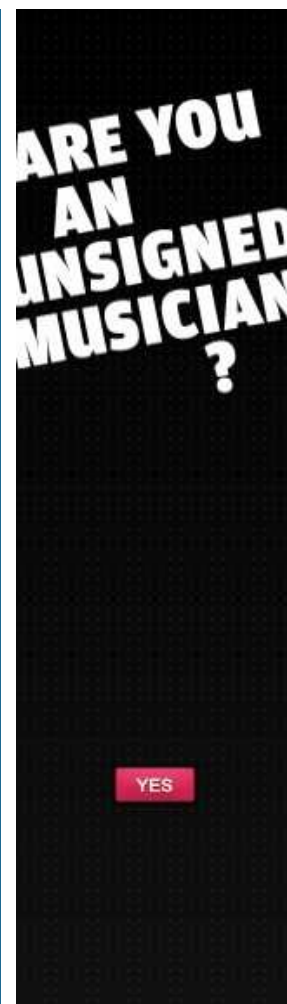
- "Credit"
- "Ain't Nothing Stoppin' Us Now"
- "P.T.A."
- "Back on the Streets Again"
- "Oakland Stroke"
- "Drop It in the Slot"
- "You Ought to Be Having Fun"
- "Knock Yourself Out"

By 1985, only a handful of Tower of Power's original members, including Castillo, Kupka, Fulton, and Prestia, had remained with the group. The remaining players are all hired hands, and the lack of chemistry and interplay amongst them is noticeable. They don't seem to be connected to either to each other or the music they're playing, and for music as reliant on groove and energy as Tower of Power's is, that's a deadly failing. Hall is especially flat. He has a decent voice, but he doesn't have much of an onstage presence and he does little to endear himself to the crowd. Unlike previous TOP singers like Rick Stevens and Lenny Williams, he lacks the forceful charisma to be frontman for such an exciting band. These so-so accompanists help explain why on this DVD, Tower of Power sounds more like a mediocre bar band playing Tower of Power hits with a decent horn section. It's not a truly terrible performance but it doesn't add much to their legacy either.

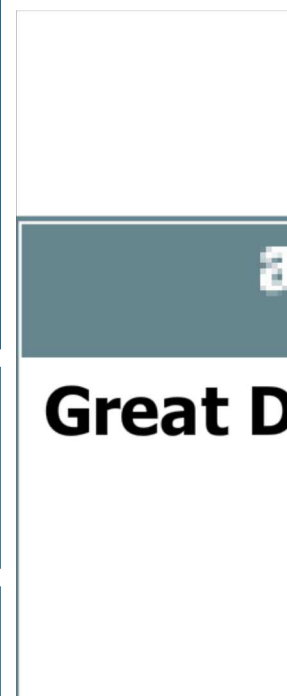
The '80s were a bad time for TOP in other ways as well. By their own admission, both Castillo and Kupka, who founded the band and wrote the bulk of the songs, were ensnared in drug addiction for much of the decade. Accordingly, their leadership of the band was lax, resulting in pedestrian performances and collaborators, clearly evident here. It's also not surprising that the one '80s song the band plays in this concert, "Credit," is little more than a pale rewrite of their earlier, better hits. Tower of Power also fell victim to the plague that affected many '70s funk bands in the '80s: synthesizers. Too many of the songs here, such as "Only So Much Oil in the Ground," are laden with shrill, tinny '80s synths that make the show sound more dated than it needs to. It doesn't help that new member Richard Elliot also interrupts the concert to play several solos on his lyrico, a synthesized sax-like instrument that makes him sound uncomfortably like Kenny G. This slick '80s synth sound, which is the exact opposite of TOP's greasy, horn-driven funk, will make this DVD even harder to watch for fans.

Technically, the DVD is no great shakes. The concert was shot on video and apparently broadcast on ISU's TV station, so it looks hazy and washed-out even by '80s TV standards. The PCM mono mix is OK, but really doesn't do justice to the band's rich sound. The only extras are a discography and text biography (both of which are incomplete) and a brief interview snippet (1:21) with Castillo recorded just after the concert. The sloppiness of the extras is mirrored in the DVD packaging; the setlist on the back of the DVD case is hopelessly out of order and will confuse more viewers than it helps.

All of which means that there's little reason to buy this DVD. Tower of Power's best music remains worthy of respect, but this is not the place to hear it. A subpar performance in second-rate quality with slipshod packaging isn't going to entice even the most die-hard fans, and newcomers will be even less interested. **Tower of Power: What is Hip? Live at Iowa State University** is guilty of not doing justice to a band that deserves better. Ignore this DVD and seek out the two-CD anthology **What is Hip?** instead.



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