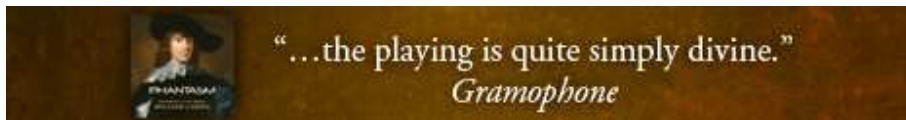


CD+DVD Reviews

Van der Graff Generator – Live in Concert at Metropolis Studios, London – Convexe [2 CDs + 1 DVD]

A progressive rock reunion continues with a distinctive live presentation.



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Van der Graff Generator – Recorded Live in Concert at Metropolis Studios, London – Convexe CVX902139 [2 CDs + 1 DVD], CD 1: 52:06; CD 2: 34:29; DVD: 88:48 [6/12/2012] (Distr. by MVD) *1/2:**

(Peter Hammill – synthesizer, electric piano, guitar, vocals; Hugh Banton – organ, bass pedals; Guy Evans – drums, percussion)

Van der Graff Generator, which formed in 1967, is probably the only English progressive rock band which has influenced [David Bowie](#) and [John Lydon](#) (founder of post-punkers Public Image Ltd. and better known as the Sex Pistols' lead singer Johnny Rotten); inspired neo-psychedelic musicians such as Julian Cope; and whose impact is heard in material by The Fall, Radiohead and other alternative music artists. Van der Graff Generator was initially lumped in with other UK art rock/prog rock acts like [Genesis](#) or [Soft Machine](#) but was closer in spirit to King Crimson. The group's tone and sound was darker than their compatriots and the music less audience-friendly, while singer Peter Hammill's often oblique lyrics were enigmatic at best and also at times grandiose.

Van der Graff Generator was always in flux, with members coming and going. The group officially broke up in 1978 and publicly reunited in 2005 for the reunion project, *Present*, followed by *Trisector* (2009) and then last year's *A Grounding in Numbers*; the ensemble's lone all-instrumental release, *Alt*, came out earlier this year. Like most other art rock/prog rock outfits, Van der Graff Generator is best experienced in a live setting: no surprise they issued two live records since getting back together. And now here is another concert document, the 2-CD/DVD *Recorded Live in Concert at Metropolis Studios, London*. This chronicles a December 18, 2010 limited engagement at the media complex which has previously hosted [Paul McCartney](#), Amy Winehouse, Rihanna and many more. The trio of Peter Hammill (keys, guitar, vocals), drummer Guy Evans and Hugh Banton on keys and bass pedals (longtime saxophonist David Jackson was sacked soon after the 2005 reunion) perform in front of a select modestly-sized audience of fans and friends, and play a minimal amount of older favorites and chiefly newer material.

The set starts with the twin-keyboards-and-drums piece "Interference Patterns," one of the few highlights from *Trisector* (four other tracks from the same record are also presented), and shows the intricacy and rawness one

expects from Hammill, Evans and Banton. This has the theatricality of early Genesis but with more gusto and drive as well as a characteristically repetitive motif. That is just a warm-up for the boisterous barrage of “Nutter Alert” (taken from *Present*), which has all of the group’s fundamental elements in one tune: keyboard duets and duels between Hammill and Banton, spiraling percussion and punchy drums, and Hammill’s cascading voice which travels from high banshee to low rumble at the speed of an eyelash: unlike some of his aging peers, Hammill has not lost his tenseness or tonality, nor is there any rustiness or rasp. “Nutter Alert” segues convincingly into “Your Time Starts Now,” which at the time was unreleased (it was later part of *A Grounding in Numbers*: altogether four cuts were introduced at this gig, from that record). “Your Time Starts Now” is unquestionably one of the set’s most meditative songs, where Hammill reflects on living each day to its fullest before our sunny periods turn to ashy urns.

Longtime Van der Graff Generator followers will recognize “Lemmings” and “Man-Erg.” The 14-minute long “Lemmings” (originally offered on 1971’s *Pawn Hearts*) includes Hammill’s disconcerting vocals, which are placed against extended and sometimes torturous instrumental passages (Banton’s organ work has an unsettling mannerism), including perturbed keyboard and percussion interludes, and Evans’ expressive but odd time signatures. This is the kind of material which most closely resembles King Crimson (that band’s guitarist, Robert Fripp, guested on *Pawn Hearts*). The nearly 12-minute “Man-Erg” (which concludes the concert) has an almost traditional rock structure, where Hammill sings about the conflicting cycles of good and evil which permeate an individual’s personality: “The killer lives inside me: yes, I can feel him move,” Hammill melodically intones, “sometimes he’s lightly sleeping in the quiet of his room.” Later, Hammill admits, “The angels live inside me: I can feel them smile. Their presence strokes and soothes the tempest in my mind.” Chaos then commences: Banton and Hammill practically stab their keyboards with bashing notes and chords, while Evans supplies thrashing drum rolls and Hammill’s voice takes on a lunatic’s screech. The track ends, as it begins, with a melancholy contour, with Hammill observing he’s a doomed man with death solemnly hanging his head in the corner of his room.

The CDs are split into two portions so the entire 88-minute concert can be heard, which is why the second disc is just under 35 minutes in length. (80 minutes is the maximum on a CD or SACD; DVDs can hold more.) The finest way to experience the material is to watch the whole program via the DVD, which was filmed by Britain’s ITV crew and taped by the Metropolis’ superb engineers. The DTS 5.1 surround sound is exemplary, and captures every drum stick hit, the keyboard flourishes, and other musical nuances, although since the arrangements tend to be densely constructed, instruments often bleed together. There is also hum from the amps, although it is generally noticeable only during quieter moments. [Nobody seems to care about hum at live concerts. I was even at a theatrical film showing last week that had a loud hum all the way thru and the projectionist said he couldn’t hear anything wrong...Ed.] Despite the congested studio conditions, there are multiple camera set-ups which provide close-ups, medium shots and the occasional pan of the intimate audience (the front row is within hand’s reach of Hammill). However, due to the small room, there is also a claustrophobic feel through much of the filmed portions: the tight viewpoints mean there are distorted angles when the cameramen push in or pull out while trying to maintain focus. The boxed package includes a photo/liner notes booklet which outlines the band’s history; and the DVD has a bonus 16-minute interview segment where the three band members describe the process of setting up this special performance; the band’s evolution since the reunion and their possible future efforts; and an explanation of the then-forthcoming *A Grounding in Numbers*.

CD/DVD TrackList: Interference Patterns; Nutter Alert; Your Time Starts Now; Lemmings; Lifetime; Bunsho; Childlike Faith; Mr. Sands; Over the Hill; We Are not Here; Man-Erg.

—Doug Simpson

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