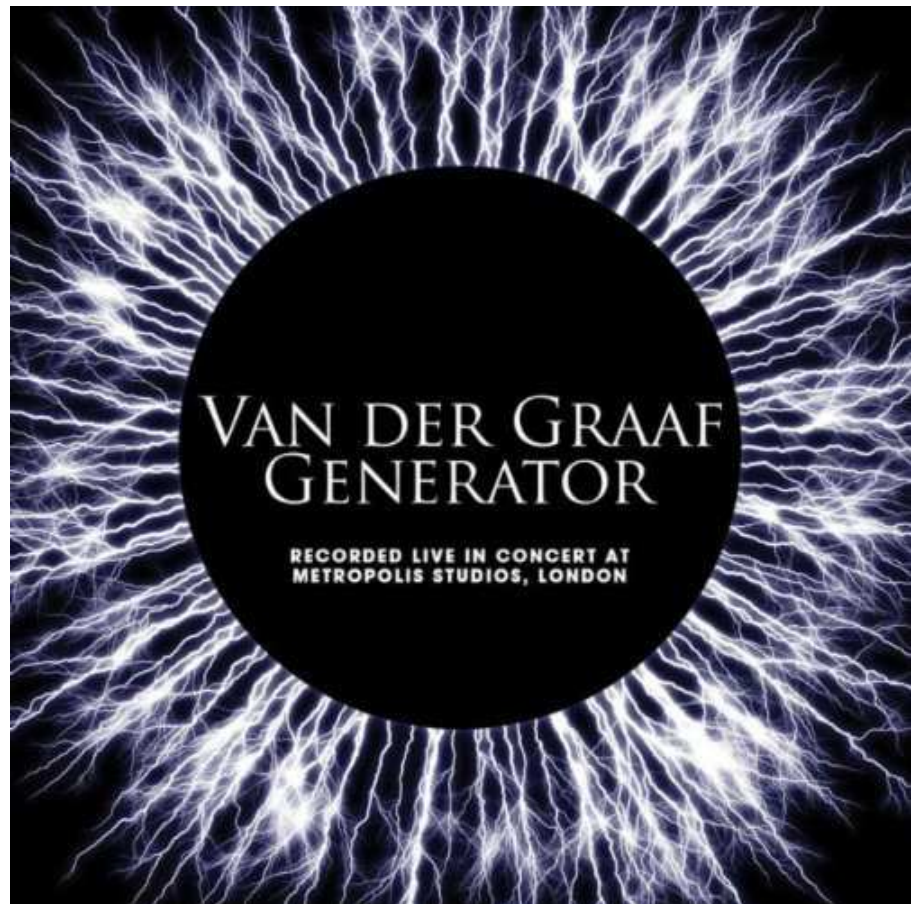


# Van der Graaf Generator: Live at the Metropolis Studios, London Review: Who Doesn't Love the Prog?

Van der Graaf Generator were one of those groups who could have only flourished in the late '60s English psychedelic scene. Their early days were a bit of a mess, with aborted singles and the like. But when they signed with Charisma Records (they were the first band signed to the label), things improved dramatically. Van der Graaf had a lot in common with early King Crimson, featuring a “hard,” approach to their progressive rock, with a strong emphasis on improvisation.

Another trait Van der Graaf Generator shared with King Crimson was a very low profile in the United States. Their fans tended to be very deeply into prog, and their music was not what one would call “radio friendly” in any way. The situation has not changed much over the years, and I thought they had given up the ghost decades ago. So when hearing that there was a new DVD/CD concert recording of them from London’s tiny Metropolis Studio, I was very curious.



As it turns out, they had been touring on and off to the faithful over the years, and this concert was recorded in December, 2010. There have been a number of different lineups over time, but they have now settled into the core trio of Peter Hammill (vocals, guitar, keyboards), Hugh Banton (keyboards), and Guy Evans (drums).

What surprised me the most about this 100-minute set is the fact that there is so little material from their heyday. Pawn Hearts (1971) is considered a definitive Van der Graaf album, and two songs from it appear here, “Lemmings,” and “Man-Erg.” As for anything else from that

decade, there is only "Childlike Faith," from Still Life (1976). The remaining eight are all from 2005-2011.

The audience does not seem to mind this, and the music is quite good. But I have to admit a bit of disappointment in the fact that they chose to exclude so much of their early work. I understand that artists do not like to live in the past, and want to prove that they are still making quality music. But I still think that their grey-haired audience would probably rather hear classics of their misspent youth more anything else.

So, with that bit of griping out of the way, let us plunge in. One thing that is undeniable is that whether the songs were written in 2005 or 1970, Van der Graaf Generator have not altered their particular brand of prog much. Their heavy-duty approach is there right from the beginning notes of "Interference Patterns." The song is one of four from their Trisector (2008) release. They have also included three from Grounding in Numbers(2011), which was actually issued after the concert.

So, seven of 11 tracks that make up the show were from their two most recent albums. Unfortunately, I had never heard any of this material previously. In fact, I was surprised that they were still releasing new music at all. Again, the stereotype comes into play. A band who has been around this long are usually doing the nostalgia bit. And if not, they should be.

Based on the quality of these songs however, I am going to have to check out these newer albums. Very good stuff, and the audience seems pleased as well. As I have made abundantly clear though, I wanted to see and hear them play some classic Van der Graaf. The opening notes of the fourth song are of "Lemmings." The instant reaction from the crowd says it all, and the trio offer us a great version of this evergreen track.

"Childlike Faith" is played shortly afterwards, and is another one I was very happy to see included. The full title of this song is "Childlike Faith in Childhood's End," which references the classic Arthur C. Clarke book. Their version here is everything one could ask for. Closing out this night at The Metropolis is "Man-Erge," which is another extended excursion from the Pawn Hearts album.

The bonus segment of the DVD is a recent 17-minute interview with all three members of the band, in which a wide range of subjects explored. The Live at the Metropolis series contains a single concert DVD, plus two CDs of the show. The package is definitely a bargain, considering the fact that it is a three-disc set. There is also an informative booklet included. Other artists included in this initial batch of Live at the Metropolis sets are Bill Nelson, Caravan, and Barclay James Harvest. Obviously they are designed to appeal to the '70s prog-rock fan in us all, and who doesn't love the prog?

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