

Buzzcocks: Live at Shepherds Bush Empire 2003

Contributed by Brent Simon

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The Sex Pistols remain the sneering, anarchic posterboys of the great, British punk movement of the late 1970s and early '80s, but it was the Buzzcocks who were more often straddling the line between perfectly balanced, driving guitar work and crisp song structure — they just didn't have quite the same bad-boy quotient as their more famous English counterparts. Before Green Day helped cement the term "pop-punk" in the American vernacular, though, the Buzzcocks were trading in some of the same throbbing power chords and wistfully barbed lyrics.

A product of Manchester, the band was built around singer-guitarist Pete Shelley, joint vocalist-guitarist Steve Diggle and Howard Deveto, and was definitely a product of the times of societal turmoil in which it was born. The group peaked and flamed before 1980, kicking out *Spiral Scratch*, *Love Bites* and *A Different Kind of Tension* before breaking up in early '81. The 1990s brought reconciliation and a new lineup, with bassist Tony Barber and drummer Philip Baker (not Hall) joining Shelley and Diggle. Sporadic touring, 1993's *Trade Test Transmissions* and 1996's *All Set* saw release, but it was a self-titled set for Merge Records in 2003 — powered by superlative tunes like "Keep On," "Jerk," "Sick City Sometimes" and "Up for the Crack" — that pushed the group back onto the college-radio charts.

That's the most remarkable thing about the Buzzcocks — how strong their late-career tunes are. Listening to their music, if you were under 20 years of age, you'd likely never know of their esteemed insider status as "the godfathers of punk." You certainly wouldn't hear it in the tunes. Punk — akin to horror movies — is sort of looked down upon as a genre, the place where musical reprobates go to work out their screwed-up and abusive childhoods. That may be true for many, but it doesn't diminish Shelley and Diggle's songcraft prowess, as evidenced here on this recent concert disc.

From first single "Orgasm Addict" to "Promises," "I Don't Know What To Do With My Life" and "Something's Gone Wrong Again," 32 charged tunes anchor *Buzzcocks: Live at Shepherds Bush Empire 2003*, recorded in front of a raucous, appreciative crowd in April of that year. Striking, for the most part, an artful balance between material old and new, Shelley and crew power through an inspired set. Only complaints: the absence of the aforementioned "Sick City Sometimes" and the band's cover version of "The Other Side of Pain." Otherwise, this is a fine show, both for old-time fans and newcomers alike.

Extras on this release are ample, with afternoon concert sound check footage that's still artfully shot, a tour photo gallery, biography and footage from the road, including of a video shoot in France. A lot of this material has a certain shapeless, lazy man's captured appeal — goofy, off-the-cuff, camcorder hijinks loosely shaped into a narrative. There's also an interview, conducted by Jet Martin, with Shelley and Diggle, the latter of whom candidly reveals at one point, "I don't really remember that, but I was doing a lot of cocaine and girls at that point, because when you're young you think you really have to get out there and enjoy the perks of the job." **B (Movie) B+ (Disc)**

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