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NRBQ and the Whole Wheat Horns

Derbytown: Live 1982 [DVD]

(Music Video Distribution)

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by **Will Layman**

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NRBQ—the “New Rhythm and Blues Quartet”—has been the best rock band in the universe for almost 40 years.

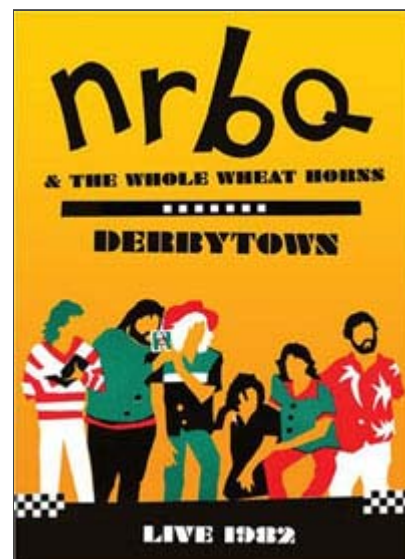
The best rock band? Huh? If rock is a mad gumbo or styles, if rock is eccentrically fun, if rock is kick-ass guitar solos and a sloppy backbeat, then: yeah. The greatest ever.

They never really had a hit song, of course, and their fans—a group that includes the likes of Paul McCartney, Keith Richards, and Elvis Costello—are famously intense but sadly few. But that, perhaps, is what has kept NRBQ so wonderful. Playing clubs and bars and very small theaters forever, NRBQ became known as “the best bar band in the world”, and they forged an insane bond with their audience, playing a glorious mix of rockabilly, blues, Beatlesque pop, out-jazz, and general spirit music just feet away from the folk who love them. But they’re not a cult-like jam band—they are very opposite of mystical or weed-based or noodly-guitar-solo-stained. NRBQ is rock without any of the pretensions or distractions of stardom. ‘Q music has always been the center file of good times in American music.

This DVD captures part of a legendary show by the ‘Q—a concert at the Phoenix Hill Tavern in Louisville, Kentucky on November 16, 1982 (referred to in ‘Q circles as “Derbytown” because of a song that was played). The show was broadcast on the radio, but the footage that surfaces here contains only about half the show: 13 tunes of typical ‘Q diversity, including several straight blues, a beautiful love ballad, some novelty tunes, and plenty of good-weirdness. The quartet—the longstanding line-up of Al Anderson’s guitar, Terry Adams’ piano and clavinet, Joey Spampinato on bass, and Tom Ardolino on drums—is supplemented here by the “Whole Wheat Horns”—Terry’s brother Donn on trombone, and tenor sax player Keith Spring. Classic NRBQ from the middle of the band’s feverish touring career, this is loose, glorious music—the kind of goodtime music that so many of us want rock to be but that it rarely is anymore.

As a film, it is rudimentary stuff. The long-shot camera is unfocused, and the editing is weak. The “extra features” amount to a laughably amateur music video and soon goofin’-around video. The main program itself is only 45 minutes long.

Yet there is something *just right* about the way the casual/sloppy nature of the video here fits the music of NRBQ. The band tosses off songs like they were jokes at a keg party—sloppy but great, messy but oddly nailing things. Unlike the legions or more “popular” or “successful” rock bands that have been their contemporaries, the ‘Q always communicate directly to a real audience before them—and that’s what you get here. The camera shows you some close-ups,



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sure, but mostly you see the whole band on stage, with a gaggle of dorkily 1982 fans dancing and laughing just two feet away from them. It's not communion, like when worshipful fans *finally* get to see Springsteen or The Stones live, but more like a conversation.

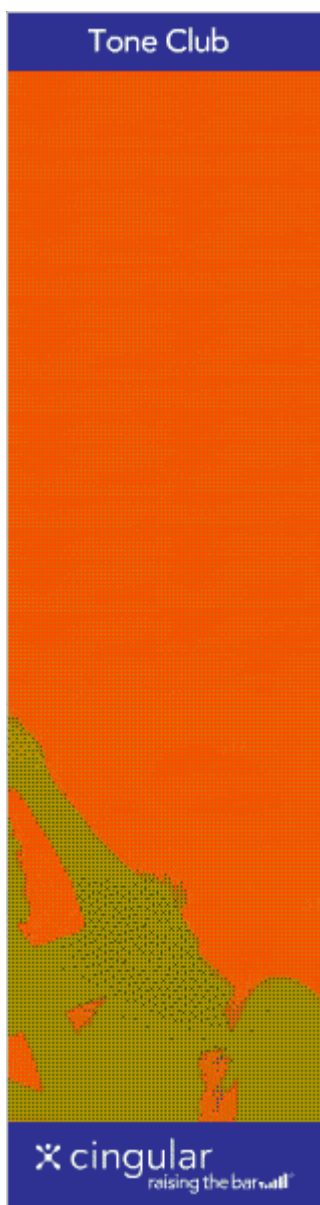
The sense of anarchic joy is best exemplified by pianist and head madman, Terry Adams. One of the founders of the band way back in 1967-68. Adams is a rocker like no one else—capable as both a barrelhouse blues player and an out-jazz free spirit with a serious taste for Sun Ra. In this concert you get ample doses of Adams' remarkable virtuosity on piano and—uniquely—on the Hohner Clavinet. On piano, Adams slaps and twirls and pounds and tinkles, channeling Jerry Lee Lewis and Thelonious Monk into a single act of invention. (In a great twist on the cliché of a keyboard player using more than one instrument at the same time, Adams plays an upright and a toy piano in unison on one tune, crouching to reach both at once.) On Clavinet, Adams is simply supreme. Usually restricted to limited use in specialty situations (Stevie Wonder's "Superstition"), the clav typically sounds like a crackly thing—an electric harpsichord maybe. Adams seems to treat it like a mound of pizza dough to be massaged into music. He slaps it, smears it, chops at it, wipes it, stabs it. The result is magic.

The other force of nature in the band is guitarist Al Anderson, who Telecasters with blues abandon and sings with blue-country ecstasy. The truth is, since Al's 1994 departure from the band, its light has shone a bit less bright. Here, Big Al is sweaty and fired up, impossible to deny. He tears into "That's All" like it was born in his throat, then tears off a guitar solo that puts to shame all those Clapton wannabes in so many other bands. When he sings the Louvin brothers' tune "My Baby Came Back", he's sweeter, the distinctive country nasal twang in his voice sounding charming in a way that the Hat Cats of Nashville wouldn't even understand. Big Al, the band misses you . . .

The additional pleasures of this concert include the impeccable Spampinato pop tune "I Love Her She Loves Me" and the color and drama of the small horn section. The truth is, this is slicker music than it might seem. Joey's gems make you wonder why the 'Q didn't manage a more traditional form of success, but they also make you glad that these pleasures are kind of private. What with the spontaneity and chaos on the stage, Joey's tender sentiments seems that much more charming, cutting any sense that they're too poppy. NRBQ packages their craftsmanship with enough bad craziness to keep things in balance. And they handle the audience with some care, molding an evening of ups and downs.

The downside, DVD-wise, remains the meager production values and length. The camerawork is rudimentary and the show is partial, certainly robbing the viewer of the sense of exhilaration that a real concert produces. The limited "extras" are barely worth the thumb strength it takes to click over to them: a 1981 (pre-MTV) video for "Me and the Boys" that garners a chuckle for the way Adams plays a guitar, and two snippets from some promo material of the boys in a kitchen, goofing around and then singing about eight bars of doo-wop.

But what do you want from a group that was DIY before any punk kid ever thought to color his hair? What do you expect from a bunch of itinerant rock veterans who love their audience but never really hit it big? Like a pair of old Chuck Taylor sneakers or your favorite sweatshirt from high school, NRBQ is a low-tech, raggedy-ass joy. Slip 'em on and enjoy.



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— 8 January 2007

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