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Cracker & Camper Van Beethoven Present the First Annual *Camp Out Live* DVD

By **EI Bicho**

From out of "California's High Desert" comes Cracker with Camper Van Beethoven and friends filmed at "The first annual camp out live at Pappy and Harriet's Pioneertown Palace." Where ever the hell that is? To be perfectly honest, I don't care. For you see, joining these mavericks of alt-country are the side projects and solo outings by the likes of Johnny Hickman, Victor Krummenacher, and the ominous sounding Monks Of Doom. Along the way a few other band members get shine time of their own. Connecting all the offshoot bands together, besides their involvement with one of the two core bands, are their alternative country/ cow-punk sound.

The disk kicks off with CVB launching directly into "The Long Plastic Hallway" and moving quickly into "Tania" and that's when things get good. "Tania" is where the sound of CVB is captured best, described as a band of gypsies (not the Jimi Hendrix band) meets the Charlie Daniels Band. Fiddles and mandolins soar as the solid rhythm section keeps time with lead singer and co-founder David Lowery's vocals. The momentum keeps going as the band slides smoothly into "Eye Of Fatima Pt. I-II" and, as with most two-part tunes, this one turns into and ends as a raucous jam.

The last two songs are truly where it's at for CVB. The thundering country rocker "51-7" is where the band comes together and lets it all roll. "Take The Skinheads Bowling" is the cult classic that is seemingly a solution to a social concern, yet it's not. In fact it's pretty much a little ditty about nothing at all. But it sure is fun to sing along with when you can find it.

The second act on this DVD is a complete change of pace: the acoustic set by Cracker's guitar-slinging, songwriter Johnny Hickman. Accompanied only by his guitar and harmonica, Johnny captivates the audience with three tunes written in a Dylan-esque style. "The Great Decline," "Beauregarde's Retreat," and "Little Tom" are awesome tunes that showcase Hickman's writing style and his "tuff" baritone voice. "The Great Decline" is a remembrance of things past and contains a good line about our politicians being drunk with greed.

While "Beauregarde's Retreat" is his happy song about the simple things in life and not being distracted from the light. I say "happy" because as Hickman himself points out, his songs have a tendency to be a bit on the darker side of things. A good example is "Little Tom" about those who fall through the cracks. With this review and my previous one on Cracker, I am now a real Johnny Hickman fan and must search out his solo work

On to CVB's Victor Krummenacher who punches in with his three moody alt. country numbers: "Not Coming Back," "Bittersweet," and "Questa Sunset." The drums are steady and heavy, adding to the gloom as the steel guitar gently weeps behind the guitars. Victor's dark country baritone carries his tunes easily to your ears and leaves you wanting to hear more than is given on this disc.

Krummenacher returns to team up with original CVB member Chris Pederson and checks in with their band "Monks Of Doom," where things are sent spinning. Their heavy blues-rock meets alt-country stands out from the other bands on this disc. Krummenacher leads the band on "Poison" while Pederson takes vocal duties on the Stevie Ray Vaughan-inspired "Riverbed." Drums crash and guitars flash as the Monks tear through the two songs. Too bad that's all they have is all I've got to say.

Rounding out the solo performances is Jonathan Segel, who chimes in with his ten-minute long, southern-rock jam "Little Blue Fish," and Greg Lisher who has an average country sound. Lisher's vocals are a bit shaky and soft but pleasant, while his three numbers seem to blend together making it not a bad performance, just one that seems drowned out.

Lowery, Hickman, Krummenacher and Pederson get back on stage and the stomping is kicked into overdrive, as Cracker hits with the force of Mack truck, fueled by their energized punk/country sound. The band begins by ripping through "One Fine Day" and "Movie Star," slowing only for "Big Dipper," then it's on to the explosive "Teen Angst" and "Low." Booming drums, steady bass lines, and Hickman's solid guitar are complimented by the piano and even an accordion. The wild "Teen Angst" and "Low" are as powerful as ever; the boys show that after all these years they have lost nothing. Somewhat sadly the only thing missing from the DVD is the crowd favorite "Euro Trash Girl," yet it only takes away slightly from the overall excitement of the disc.

Closing out this must-have DVD for fans of Cracker, Camper Van Beethoven, and especially Johnny Hickman is the "Porchstock" footage. Which is an after-hours back-porch performance captured on a home camera, of Hickman and two unidentified guitarists. It's cool to see Hickman freely and very loosely playing tunes that he admits he hasn't played in years. This last segment is only flawed by the fact that now and again some drunk guy wonders in front of the camera to sing and curse along with the boys. Very reminiscent of a bad bootleg CD you pick up where throughout, a drunken girl can be heard talking and screaming way too loud.

All in all not a bad way to spend just over two hours enjoying a couple of familiar bands and getting a sampling of a few new ones. Presented with that overall Cracker/CVB vibe of no gimmicks or flash, just sass and kick ass! Now turn out the lights!

Written by Fantasma el Rey

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