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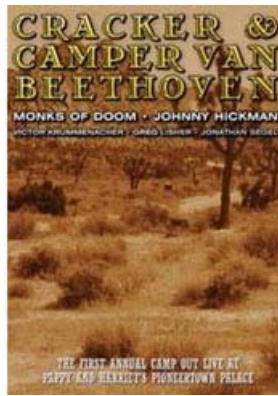
Cracker and Camper Van Beethoven: First Annual Camp Out Live

starring Cracker, Camper Van Beethoven, Monks of Doom, Johnny Hickman, Victor Krummenacher, Jonathan Segel and Greg Lisher

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Recorded over two September days in 2005 at a campground in Pioneertown, California, the *First Annual Camp Out Live* is a musical family affair, a gathering of the reformed Camper Van Beethoven and all the side projects and descendants it eventually spawned. So in addition to CVB, a band that helped lay the groundwork for an entire genre, there's that other popular (perhaps more popular than CVB ever was) David Lowery-fronted and country-tinged outfit, Cracker, as well as an assemblage of low-profile bands and solo artists whose names are better known among college radio hipsters and obsessive types: Monks of Doom, Cracker's Johnny Hickman and CVB's Victor Krummenacher, Jonathan Segel and Greg Lisher.

Understandably, headliners Camper Van Beethoven and Cracker eke out the majority of the stage time, a total of twelve tracks to the others' eleven. CVB opens the DVD with three songs from *New Roman Times*, 2004's official "reunion" album, another three (two of which are the two-part "Eye of Fatima") from their nearly twenty-year-old major label debut *Our Beloved Revolutionary Sweetheart*, and then the requisite overplayed classic "Take the Skinheads Bowling." Cracker bookends the event with "One Fine Day" from *Forever* (2002) and then the greatest hit staples "Teen Angst," "Movie Star," "Big Dipper" and "Low." If you've seen Cracker perform live at any time during the past decade, you've already witnessed all or most of these songs – which, this being a DVD clearly targeting longtime followers rather than the casual buyer, might strike potential viewers as less than thrilling. Though I suppose we just ought to be grateful that CVB chose to include the ironically exotic "Tania" instead of, say, their eight millionth performance of "Pictures of Matchstick Men."



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The two major bands' stage presence is about as inspired as their featured setlists. As always, Johnny Hickman has an amusing and good-natured rapport with the audience, especially the wannabe rock heroes among them who still play air guitar to the screaming fans in the bathroom mirror, but Lowery and the rest aren't exactly riveting to watch. They're far more preoccupied with simply turning out their songs than getting a rise out of a crowd that could easily have been downing record amounts of sedatives with their toasted marshmallows. This subdued stage presence and limited audience interaction isn't necessarily a fault; ideally the music itself should always take precedence over empty showmanship. But as a frontman Lowery's vapidness and self-alienation can still be a tad disengaging, even when he tries to compensate for his restrained charisma during the CVB set (and conspicuously absent from Cracker's) with a backdrop of slideshows streaming from his trusty Apple laptop. Tame camerawork and by-the-book editing don't help to liven matters, but at least those responsible didn't go in for the nauseatingly jumpy, fast cut approach that aims to make everything from chess to knitting look like an extreme sport. And besides, anything too slick or flashy would miss the point of the entire event. It's not a stadium megastar experience; it's a cozy outdoor sleepover with a running live soundtrack.

When it comes to the lesser-known and solo sets, the *Camp Out DVD* is a mixed bag. Johnny Hickman's three songs, all acoustic renditions from his 2005 solo debut *Palmhenge*, round out the disc beautifully, but Greg Lisher's voice isn't as nimble as his guitar playing, and he's guilty here -- like Victor Krummenacher, both solo and with Monks of Doom, and Jonathan Segel -- of writing lyrics that read like awkward high school poetry and weigh down otherwise decent music. (It could also be a badly pressed disc, but on my relatively pristine copy, there are some sudden skips in the footage of the best song from Krummenacher's solo set, the aptly titled "Bittersweet.") It would have been a nice bonus if Krummenacher had included some teasers from his newest album, *The Cock Crows at Sunrise*, but maybe the material wasn't captured on camera or simply wasn't ready by this time. CVB multi-instrumentalist Segel only gets one song in the spotlight, his very tentative and jam-heavy "Little Blue Fish," and that's probably for the best.

The good to excellent quality of the 5.1-channel audio track does redeem this DVD on many counts, notwithstanding its shortcomings on the spontaneous "Porchstock" bonus footage, an improv guitar-and-mandolin jam captured on a handheld nightvision cam (and which is still pretty good considering), and Lisher's indoor set, when his wobbly vocals aren't helped by the guys running the soundboard. Generally the various instruments -- everything from voice to violin -- have real clarity and life to them, making it just as easy to enjoy this two-hour disc with the TV turned off and the sound running through stereo speakers. Whether or not that's enough to make up for a routine parade of greatest hits from the major acts and

uneven performances from the minors could lead to a long and fruitless debate, but the inclusion of a few songs buried deeper in the Cracker and Camper Van Beethoven catalogues in lieu of the less impressive solo numbers wouldn't have been unwelcome.

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