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Cracker, Camper Van Beethoven

First Annual Camp Out Live [DVD]

(Music Video Distributors)

by Glenn McDonald

Email Print Write to the editor

Seemingly the band for which the term “college radio darling” was created, Camper Van Beethoven released a series of critically praised, commercially ignored albums in the mid-to-late ‘80s. The band best reflected the early spirit of nonformat college radio, gyrating wildly from countrified rave-ups to Middle Eastern music to garage-punk to psychedelia to ska—often within a single song.

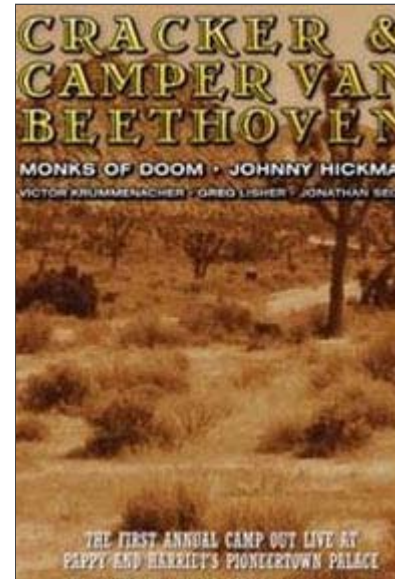
They’re best remembered now for the goofball yet perennially intoxicating single “Take the Skinheads Bowling”, which addressed typical Camper Van Beethoven subject matter for that period: praying to Jah, bowling alleys, sleeping next to plastic, etc. That is to say, nothing at all. Early-era Camper Van Beethoven records tended to regard coherent lyrics, like most every other convention of pop music, as dubious advice, best ignored. And that was the genius of the band: they were cut-up artists in every sense, but because they were such surpassing musicians, they always pulled it off.

The band grew tremendously over their last two major-label albums, both on Virgin Records. Their swan song, the beautiful *Key Lime Pie*, featured their last salvo toward mainstream acceptance (the still-kicking cover of Staus Quo’s “Pictures of Matchstick Men”) and today sounds like songwriter David Lowery’s bittersweet goodbye to the gilded cage of the alternative rock scene he helped to invent.

The band broke up, rather spectacularly by most accounts, over the old “creative differences”. But in the years since, that initial musical cluster has gone on to spawn a family of Camper Van Beethoven-related bands and side projects. Lowery’s Cracker, essentially a duo with the Nashville guitar savant Johnny Hickman, made the biggest splash, scoring a string of minor alt-rock hits in the post-Nirvana ‘90s (“Teen Angst”, “Low”, “Get Off This”). Original guitarist Greg Lisher, bassist Victor Krummenacher ar drummer Chris Pedersen put out several records as Monks of Doom in the ‘90s, and seeming everyone and their roadie made a few solo records.

All of this history comes to bear on the new DVD release of *Cracker & Camper Van Beethoven First Annual Camp Out Live*. Essentially a homebrew DIY concert video, the DVD documents performances by all of the extended Camper Van Beethoven family as they perform at a micro-Woodstock annual gathering in Pioneertown, California. Adequately filmed, badly edite and indifferently packaged, the DVD is still a goldmine for hardcore fans. Even casual listener will appreciate the ace musicianship (ably recorded to stereo and 5.1 surround sound) and general bonhomie. This here’s an old-school concert film, where it’s still all about the music.

Good thing, too, because David Lowery remains the world’s most disinterested frontman, and the rest of the players display little showmanship beyond the typical jam-band intensity. The notable exception here is Johnny Hickman, Cracker’s other half, who alone seems to enjoy th occasional rock star choreography. A rudimentary lights-and-back-projection system provide:

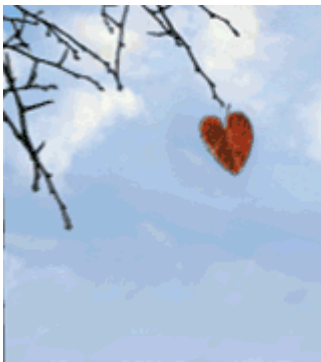


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the only technical bells and whistles—the Pioneertown affair is a deliberately low-wattage affair (it really is a campout; tents and everything).

But, man, does this thing *sound* good. As the various lineups and bands drop in and out, there might be seven or eight guys up on stage at any given time. The sound is invariably crisp—even with two or three guitars, mandolin, bass, pedal steel, violin, keys and drums. Then the guys step up on a vocal harmony, and one of them busts out a harmonica. Seriously—somebody give the sound engineers a raise. The range of tones conferred is flat-out impressive.

Take for example Cracker’s delicate “Big Dipper”, a fan favorite off 1996’s *The Golden Age*. Wry, weird, and heartbreaking, the song is a paean to lovesick summer days of youth in a sleepy college town. Lowery’s raspy lyrics might keep an ironic distance (“Hey, June, why’d you have to come around so soon? / I wasn’t ready for all this nature”), but it’s the anguished pedal steel and delicate piano flourishes that tell the real story. Performed live here, it sounds even better than the album version; warm, intimate, and crystal clear.

On the other end of the scale are the full-on rockers. Monks of Doom sound particularly muscular, with Kruppenacher on vocals and big, loud, mean guitars. Cracker’s “Movie Star” also bristles. It’s always fun when you can feel a song staying just this side of going completely off the rails. The Camper Van Beethoven set is the real highlight, with everyone digging in on old classics like “Eye of Fatima” and “Tania”—still the world’s first, best, and on song dedicated to the ennui-dispelling powers of Patty Hearst.

There is, finally, a convivial home-movie vibe to the entire affair. The crowd is small, relative to multi-band festival affairs, and there’s the sense that these are the old-school fans. One bonus feature, called “Porchstock”, is little more than a handheld camera documenting the various musicians jamming on acoustic guitars and mandolins backstage. It doesn’t look much different than what you might find in at any given college-town house party around 3am, but sounds a whole lot better.

There’s no glitz here, very little glamour, and a pervasive sense of casual rock ‘n’ roll authenticity. The DVD is a cool little document of a family of musicians doing what working musicians do: playing their songs to the people who want to hear them. Nothing wrong with that.



Camper Van Beethoven -- Take the Skinheads Bowling

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