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The Jesus Lizard

Live [DVD]

(MVD)

US release date: 5 June 2007

by **Michael Keefe**

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I tend not to swear much in my reviews. Here, however, I will. It is necessary to dig deep and low into the English language in order to adequately convey the intensity of The Jesus Lizard, especially as a live band. When the Chicago quartet took it to the stage, they were fuckin' awesome. There. Got that out.

The *Live* DVD captures the group at the Venus de Milo club in Boston in October 1994. At this point, The Jesus Lizard were at the height of their powers, finishing up a great string of albums for a seminal indie label before jumping to the majors and, in many people's minds, selling out. The band formed in 1987, with singer David Yow and bassist David Wm. Sims reuniting after their days together in Texas' Scratch Acid. Guitarist Duane Denison and a drum machine rounded out the original line-up. In '90, after releasing the *Pure* EP (whose sound mimicked too closely that of producer Steve Albini's industrial-punk outfit Big Black), the Jesus Lizard brought in Mac McNeilly on drums. After gigging as this four-piece for the next few years, the group had become insanely good by the time the footage for *Live* was shot.

The music of the Jesus Lizard readily invites adjectives like "pummeling" and "feral", but trying to cram the group into the confines of a specific style is a greater challenge. They harnessed the primal post-punk fury of the Birthday Party, branding that sound with the Midwestern punk of the American Underground movement, but roping in this reckless energy with the kind of math rock-like discipline only a damn good trio of creative musicians could pull off. At the birth of the Alternative Era, the Jesus Lizard offered a hard-hitting alternative to just about everybody else. The bulk of the material on *Live* comes from their first four albums. They were touring 1994's *Down*, their final studio LP for Touch & Go and the weirdest in the Jesus Lizard discography. After three full-lengths of hard, taut, thunderous grooves, *Down* found plenty of room for slowing down to a creeping crawl, with extra open spaces for showcasing Denison's bent for avant-jazz phrasings. Live, these cuts feel more full-blooded, as evidenced by their more aggro readings of "Horse" and "The Associate" here.

The DVD kicks off with a track from *Down*, "Destroy Before Reading". A mid-tempo number, the band is just getting going, and madman lead singer David Yow has only begun to wind himself up. By cut number two, the slicing "Puss" from 1992's incredible *Liar*, the standard barrier between audience and performer has literally become blurred, as the camera tries to keep track of Yow's bouncing in and out of the front row. *Pure*'s "Bloody Mary" is a treat for fans of their older songs. Later, the guys drag out "Chrome" (from an '89 EP of the same name) and live staple "Killer McHann" (from debut full-length *Head*). Fortunately, 1991's excellent *Goat* receives three entries into the setlist: "Mouth Breather", "Seasick", and the fourth song on the *Live* DVD, "Nub".



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As Denison peels off some mind-bending slide guitar feedback, Yow strips off his T-shirt, revealing the lean muscles of a man who spends his working hours in a frenzied state of physical chaos, hurling himself across the stage and, just as often, off of it. If the crowd is the sixth man in basketball, then they become the fifth member of the band at a Jesus Lizard concert. It takes more than the precision pounding of his three mates to keep David Yow afloat. In "Seasick", he vacillates on his ability to swim; in this video, he proves again and again that he was a master of surfing the crowd, a microphone cable ensnaring his ankles and the undertow of the concrete floor threatening to drag him down. Yow didn't care what happened to his physical self, so long as he communicated the urgency of his band's music. He also didn't care about his audience's eardrums, at one point taunting the masses into tinnitus: "Who else has earplugs in? You, get them the fuck out of there. What the fuck's wrong with you?" A barrage of mushy, colorful projectiles then rains upon the stage.

I wish I'd had the good sense to wear earplugs when I saw The Jesus Lizard play. I also wish I'd had the guts to stand in the first few rows. The band was still awesome from 50 feet away, but I missed some of the kinetic energy that those more intrepid Lizard fans must've felt back in the '90s. This DVD doesn't drip with sweat or exude the hormones of a throng held in thrall, but, even with just the two cameras used, the intimacy achieved is incredible. As a fan of every member of the band, each of whom is an accomplished musician, I would've preferred a little more camera time on Denison, Sims, and McNeilly. But those three guys always knew who everyone was watching and never tried to grab the spotlight's attention. Although you could hear and feel the tight cuts and jabs of the rest of the band, it was Yow you watched. A smart guy who liked to unwind by playing Scrabble on the tour bus, he bore the charisma of a lunatic, but he knew exactly what he was doing. Combined with the hypnotic and unrelenting grooves of his band mates, Yow and company made for a riveting live band, and this DVD captures the Jesus Lizard phenomenon quite well.

The five bonus cuts captured at CBGB in August 1992 is of bootleg quality only. The audio is quiet and distant and the video grainy. Still, it's amazing to see how tight and powerful the band was at this earlier stage. And, hey, it's just bonus material. You were expecting masterful cinematography? Well, you won't find any of that artsy-fartsy stuff here. This DVD is a no-frills affair. Then again, The Jesus Lizard was a no-frills band, so a lack of bells and whistles isn't an issue. You *will* feel, when watching this, like David Yow is writhing and thrashing around your living room. And, really, that is all you could ask for from *Live*. If you can swim with The Jesus Lizard, then dive right in.

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