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The BellRays @ The Barfly

Picture: B- Sound: B Extras: C+ Main Program: B-

Music nowadays seems consumed with all-encompassing labels. A band is indie-math rock, or emo folk, or gypsy punk rock, or country rock, or rap rock, or Jewish hip-hop. The parade of self-applied tags bands use to at once make themselves accessible to radio yet a very narrow audience is seemingly endless.

But there are bands who are straight-ahead musicians, in one genre or another. The BellRays are such a band; balls-to-the-wall rock with soul influences that aim to blow the roof off of audiences in their live shows. And judging by their raucous, energetic set prior to The Pixies concert in Pittsburgh last summer, The BellRays are more than capable to attain their goals.

Bringing together years of individual music experience with over a decade of service in The BellRays, the band's members, lead singer Lisa Kekaula, guitarist Tony Fate, bassist Bob Vennum, and drummer Todd Westover, have put together seven full-length albums and an impressive, devoted fan base, which, amazingly, has a large contingent in Britain.

The BellRays @ the Barfly chronicles a BellRays show in England, playing to their most rabid fans. And at over two hours, disc is the perfect introduction to the band for the uninitiated and a decent record of a pretty good performance for old BellRays fans.

Unfortunately, at its epic length, the show overstays its welcome.

That's not to say, though, that the performance is bad. Not in the slightest. Kekaula's got a set of pipes on her that would make Aretha Franklin jealous, and her vocals are on hyperactive display here. Together with the searing guitar work and thumping rhythm section, The BellRays show at The Barfly, recorded on April 29, 2005, is one of the best, pure rock shows put on by a band you've probably never heard of.

When it comes to watching the show, however, the disc doesn't — and can't — replicate the vibe permeating the English crowd. There is no substitute for live music, but there is something to be said for filming a concert with a dynamism that makes you want to watch it on your television.

This disc sorely lacks such vitality.

Camera angles are all fairly basic, going in for close-ups on the individual members of the band between two-shots, full shots of the band, and shots where The BellRays are framed by the basic lighting schemes of The Barfly. But the club is so confined that there isn't room for much else and the camerawork implies there wasn't much effort made to distinguish this effort from other, similarly boring, band video pieces. It looks great, though; clean and sharp, the video presentation is wonderful to look at. Of course, that doesn't matter if, after 35 minutes, you don't want to watch it anymore.

On the audio side, though, the concert is fantastic. The BellRays are in top

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form, and listening to the show makes owning this disc worthwhile in itself. The two-hour show covers a wide range of their catalogue and, as noted before, the musicianship is spectacular. When I saw The BellRays with The Pixies, I was impressed with Kekaula's vocal abilities, especially since I was unfamiliar with the group before seeing them live. I dare say, though, that she, and the band as a whole, is even better here, playing for a crowd of BellRays fans rather than a group of Pixies fans that got to the show early.

The only extra on the disc is a 20-plus minute interview with the members of the group shot either before the show at the Barfly or after, it's hard to tell which. It's an interesting look at the group, a kind of mini oral history of The BellRays. But at 20 minutes, the interview isn't nearly substantial enough. It might be a proper introduction to BellRays newbies, but for fans of the band the information presented will surely be old news.

The BellRays @ The Barfly is worth picking up if only for the spectacular concert that the disc presents. But as DVD is a visual medium as well as aural, to lackluster video presentation of the concert must be taken into account. For music fans, this is a worthwhile purchase. Just turn the television off and crank up the volume on your home theater to get the most out of the disc.

- Dante A. Ciampaglia