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Cactus Comes Alive!

Fred Mills
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Hard rockers Cactus—who thrilled a certain teenage future HARPster many a time in concert back in the '70s with their brawny brand of blues-based boogie and cosmic jazzadelica—reunited for the first time in 30 years in June of 2006 for a concert at B.B. King's Blues Club in New York City. A warmup for a subsequent European tour, it was filmed for posterity, and the revamped Cactus also went on to record and release a new album, *Cactus V*, that same year. Now, MVD Visual is set to drop a DVD (due December 11) chronicling the event, *Cactus Live*.

According to a press release from MVD, "The original Cactus rhythm section of bassist Tim Bogert and drummer Carmine Appice, two names often celebrated more than the actual groups they were members of, live up to expectation. Original Cactus guitarist extraordinaire, Jim McCarty (Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels) rounds out the rock engine. The now deceased lead singer Rusty Day has been replaced with the more buoyant but still bluesy vocals of Jimmy Kunes, and Randy Pratt has been added on the harmonica. Performances include many of the classic Cactus songs such as 'Evil,' 'One Way or Another' and the high energy 'Parchman Farm.' Cuts from the *Cactus V* include 'Muscle and Soul' and 'Cactus Music.'"

See the full track listing below. The DVD release seems pretty timely: Cactus' estimable legacy has seen both an upswing in attention and an expansion of late, and one could argue the point that neither today's crop of hard rockers (Wolfmother, Back Door Slam *et al* nor the heavier breed of jambands (Gov't Mule, Oysterhead, etc.) would exist in quite the same form had it not been for the blueprints laid down earlier by Cactus, Free, Savoy Brown, Humble Pie and others. Cactus has also been cited by members of Van Halen and the Black Crowes as having a direct influence upon their songwriting and approach to stagecraft.

The group's first two albums, 1970's *Cactus* and 1971's *One Way... Or*

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Another, have been reissued twice in the recent past, first as part of the Rhino Handmade collection of studio recordings *Barely Contained* and more recently as individual CDs from the Wounded Bird label.

Rhythm section Tim Bogert and Carmine Appice (both late of Vanilla Fudge, eventually to partner with Jeff Beck) were joined by former Amboy Dukes vocalist Rusty Day (a harp-blowing, agile screecher of the Robert Plant tradition) and powerhouse ex-Detroit Wheels guitarist Jim McCarty. That incarnation of the band lasted for the two aforementioned albums plus 1971's *Restrictions* before dissolving at the end of 1971, at which time Bogert and Appice rounded up a new vocalist and guitarist and added a full-time keyboardist for the final Cactus album, 1972's half-studio/half-live *'Ot 'n' Sweaty*. To be honest, the "blues" tag for Cactus wasn't entirely off-base as evidenced by such tracks as the hi-octane reworking of Mose Allison's "Parchman Farm," the extended 12-bar workout "No Need to Worry" and the testosterone-fueled boogie "Oleo" (all from *Cactus*—which, not so coincidentally, sported an outrageously phallic clump of cacti on the LP sleeve), or the swaggering, strutting hard thud of "Rock N' Roll Children" (from *O.W.O.A.*). Here was a band well versed in—per the hirsute demands of the post-psych/pre-prog early '70s milieu—the blues form.

But McCarty, Bogert, Appice and Day were no journeyman rockers. Cactus possessed a subtle but distinctive virtuoso streak, and in certain quarters the band was known as "America's Led Zeppelin." The aforementioned "Rock N' Roll Children" provides a good example: about halfway through, the singer drops out and the tune shifts into breakdown mode, Bogert and Appice revving up to triple-time as McCarty unleashes a series of astonishing fretboard runs, squalling, echoing volleys that sound like Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page squaring off. The same thing happens on the first album's "You Can't Judge a Book By The Cover": after dispensing with the Willie Dixon-penned verses (during which Day blows some seriously badass harp), the band makes a hyperjump to somewhere in the vicinity of Alpha Centauri and McCarty grabs the helm to start spraying freeform interstellar goo that'd make Hendrix blush and give Thurston Moore vertigo.

Rhino Handmade has also made available a pair of two-CD live packages, *Fully Unleashed* Volumes 1 and 2, and they both live up to the title. The first volume's first disc plus part of the second showcases a concert from Dec. 19, 1971, in Memphis. Included is a 16-minute demolition of Willie Dixon's "Evil" that makes the Faces' version sound like the Archies, the group in rare form, expanding fluidly upon its original studio arrangements. It's hard to believe that at this point Cactus was on the rocks; it was the last time the original quartet would play together. Rounding out Disc 2 is a handful of tracks that previously cropped up on various live rock festival compilations during the '70s (but now long out of print), a pair of unreleased cuts from a June 26, 1971 show at Gilligan's in Buffalo, and the live half of *'Ot 'n' Sweaty* with the five-man lineup — which, it's worth noting, was nothing to sneeze at, as the keyboards definitely added to the depth and texture of the basic Cactus sound.

Volume 2 contains the entire Gilligan's concert from June of '71. Recorded and mixed by legendary engineer/producer Eddie Kramer, it's 12 sprawling, brawling tracks o' hard rock fun. Watch for the December issue HARP for a full review courtesy our own Randy "Token Chokin" Harward. "Cactus," writes Harward, gives the people what they want: wild roadhouse stomps, proto-cock rock that one way or another makes them jeans fit a little tighter."

Indeed, my jeans feel tighter just thinking about all this.

Back to the DVD: all accounts have the newly revived Cactus firing on every single cylinder as if the members had simply walked out a door and come back in a few minutes later. So be prepared to kick out the jams, muhfuhs. In addition to the concert proper, the 95-minute disc also includes footage from a backstage rehearsal and a full photo gallery; the audio is in 5.1 Surround Sound.

TRACK LISTING:

- Long Tall Sally
- Let Me Swim
- One Way or Another
- CACTUS Music
- Bro Bill
- Muscle And Soul
- OLEO
- Part Of The Game
- EVIL
- Cactus Boogie
- Parchment Farm
- Rock N Roll Children