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download central

# A Phish Buffet

Phish, widely regarded as kings of the jam band scene, treated fans to free downloads of their live concerts earlier this month

**M**ARCH HAS been a bonanza for fans of the band, Phish. For not only did these kings of the jam band scene reunite after breaking up nearly five years ago, for those who couldn't make it to their three-day marathon concerts (the venue was at Hampton in the US state of Virginia, after all), they put up the three concerts, held on March 6, 7 and 8, in their entirety on the Internet for free downloads. If you're a diehard Phish fan then I assume you've already downloaded the freebie shows – all ten hours, twenty-seven minutes and forty-four seconds of them.

The free downloads were mp3s, which is a bit of drag as the compressed format leads to some (albeit negligible) sound loss but the band was gracious enough to put up tracks straight from their soundboard so you got well-mixed, exactly-as-it-was-at-the-shows sound. That is, if you were alert enough to download them within a week. For that was the window they offered for free downloads. In case you missed pulling them off and into your computer by March 12, you can still get them (at [www.livephish.com](http://www.livephish.com)) but have to fork out a price.

Phish is hardly a new band, having been formed in 1983 at the University of Vermont and quickly amassing a following of devoted fans who'd throng their concerts in a phenomenon reminiscent of what The Grateful Dead did in the 30 years of their existence, between 1965 and 1995. So much so that they were often anointed as heirs to the Dead's throne and identified as a band that kept alive the tradition of jam bands – relentless touring, lots of improvisation, very few studio albums and a benign attitude towards anyone who wanted to record their shows.

In true jam band tradition, Phish concerts feature long songs; 10 and 20-minute songs are par for the course and seldom do they play the same song in exactly the same way that they've played it before. Jamming and improvisation, quite like in jazz, is a hallmark of Phish and other jam bands, like they were for the Dead. There are other similarities with the Dead. Both have hardcore fans that are loyal to the point of being irrational and would give up everything to follow the bands as they toured relentlessly year after year.

Yet there are differences. I think the Dead's songs have richer lyrics and a more rock-

steady pace, while Phish has a more contemporary sound and not much in the form of lyrics. One Phish song called *David Bowie* has just three words: 'David Bowie', which is repeated several times, followed by 'UB40', which is again repeated several times. It doesn't say anything else at all. Yet, *David Bowie* is one of Phish's fine songs that grow and grow on you.

Unlike the Dead, where a towering lyricist like Robert Hunter, a poet and musician in his own right, layered allusions from mythology, American roots and traditional songs that the band then blended with their musical fusion of blues,

rock, bluegrass and psychedelia, I have never found Phish's lyrics to be memorable. Their music is, for sure, but lyrics? I'm not sure.

What instead makes the cut for me is the combined genius of the four members of the band. Each of them is a master of the instrument he plays. Trey Anastasio is one of the finest rock guitarists alive (sorry, I'm not even going to go into the Jerry Garcia versus Trey Anastasio non-debate that you may frequently come across in the blogosphere because Garcia is not alive any more!). Page McConnell on keyboards is outstanding; Mike Gordon on bass is brilliant; and Jon Fishman is a star on the drums that reminds me of Led Zeppelin's John Bonham and The Who's Keith Moon.

I first heard Phish late. In 1995, a friend of mine gave me a tape of *A Live One*, a double-CD, their first 'live' album, a compilation from several sets played at different gigs. It hooked me and I went searching for more. It was tough. Music stores in India had no Phish then (even now, it's rare to come across an album) and the Internet here was in its infancy. Not any more. Phish, like many of today's bands, use the web efficiently to distribute their music, particularly their live concerts. They do have a few collectible studio albums, their first official release, *Junta* (1989), is a fine one to start with but *Hoist* (1994) and *Billy Breathes* (1996) are also good ones to cut your teeth on the band.

But let me warn you. I've always found Phish to evoke a black or white response among listeners. You either like them or you don't. Come to think of it, that's another similarity that they have with the Dead.

(To stream or download the music mentioned in this column, go to [www.hindustantimes.com](http://www.hindustantimes.com). And send feedback to [downloadctrl@gmail.com](mailto:downloadctrl@gmail.com))



GOING PHISHING

Phish performs on the first day of their three-day marathon concerts at Hampton, Virginia, early this month



PHISH WERE OFTEN ANOINTED HEIRS TO THE GRATEFUL DEAD

