

POP MUSIC

The Boston Globe

Twenty years later, Phish still moves against the current

Band's creativity thrives outside pop's boundaries

By Steve Morse, Globe Staff, 11/30/2003

When Phish plays the FleetCenter on Tuesday it will be 20 years to the day since the group debuted at an ROTC dance at the University of Vermont that was by many accounts a shambles. The band hadn't learned any new songs, so it relied that night on playing such retro hits as the Hollies' "Long Cool Woman (in a Black Dress)" and the Stampede's "Sweet City Woman."

"It was pretty horrible stuff," Phish singer/guitarist Trey Anastasio says with a laugh. "But this was a formal dance at the ROTC and they needed a band. And they disliked us. Somebody played me a tape of it not long ago and you can hear arguing going back and forth."

But an early pattern was set.

"There were three people we knew and they liked us," says Anastasio. "And then there were the people in the back who really hated us. And that model has never really changed. Even though there's a lot of people into Phish now, it has always felt like there's this large group of human beings who think that we totally suck and they can't understand it at all. And then there's this obsessive group who can't get enough of it."

Today, Phish is the undisputed leader of the jam-band movement and heir to the Grateful Dead's keep-it-honest, do-it-yourself legacy. The group, which returned from a two-year hiatus by selling out Madison Square Garden last New Year's Eve, is also a massive cash cow. Phish's "It Festival" in Limestone, Maine, this summer grossed \$8.5 million -- tops for any musical event in 2003 (the band plans to do another fest next year and is looking at site options). Also, Phish's authorized concert downloads at www.livephish.com have earned more than \$2 million this year, as an average of several thousand fans sign up for each show, according to band manager John Paluska.

But it took years for Phish to gain widespread acceptance. During the early days of playing at Burlington, Vt., clubs such as Nectar's and Doolin's, the band always had to fight for credibility.

"As we started to become more popular in Burlington, we were still very disliked by the Burlington music scene," says Anastasio. "We were complete outcasts. At the time, the 'cool' stuff going on was this Bad Brains/post-punk thing. It was a great period of music and there were some great bands in Burlington that I loved, like the Hollywood Indians, Screaming Broccoli, and Ninja Custodian. We were huge fans and would go to their shows, but we weren't accepted because what we were doing was seen as weird."

"Coming into this 20th anniversary, what really strikes me is that I've seen so many trends go by," he adds. "For 20 years we've just been kind of floating along, but you still get a funny reaction sometimes. Page (McConnell, Phish's keyboardist) was at a concert recently walking around backstage and again he felt the same feeling he had when there were multiple band concerts in Burlington. He'd say, 'I'm the guy from Phish,' and the reaction would be, 'Ugggh.'"

In the early days, Phish would mostly play private parties. "We knew everybody who was coming and then they'd have a party at their house and tell their friends," says Anastasio. "We used to do parties at a place called the Ranch, a house on the outskirts of Burlington. There were local Vermont herb growers there and we'd have these parties while huge stalks of weed were drying all over the place. We'd play in a corner and then go hang out with everybody."

The band's lineup solidified with Anastasio, McConnell (who had first booked them into a Goddard College gig before asking to join them), bassist Mike Gordon, and drummer Jon Fishman. The chemistry between Anastasio and Fishman ran particularly deep.

"We hit it off instantly," says Anastasio. "No kidding, we stopped in our tracks. He was walking by in this crowd of people going one direction and I was going the other direction. It was the first day of school and all these kids looked like a big sea of faces and out of this sea of faces I saw Fish. I just stopped and instantly we started hanging out. I was over in his room an hour later with my guitar amp and he had his drums and we'd be playing all night. . . . He was a freak back then and so was I."

The next summer they painted houses around Princeton, N.J., (where Anastasio grew up) and made enough money to go to Europe and play street music. They also lived on a beach in Corfu, Greece, for three weeks and that's where Anastasio wrote early Phish classics "You Enjoy Myself" and "Harry Hood."

Anastasio got kicked out of UVM after one semester for committing a prank that he doesn't wish to talk about today. But Phish soon took over his life, and dreams were hatched of playing in Boston. The group's first Boston gigs were at Molly's (now the Kells) in Allston in 1988, then the Paradise Rock Club in early 1989. They had been turned down at the Paradise for years and Boston promoter Don Law's office "wasn't even returning our calls," says Paluska, an Amherst College graduate who had just started managing them. So Phish rented the Paradise themselves to get the gig.

"Everybody was terrified because we had to sell tickets. It was a real risk, but what happened was that people drove in from all over the place. I remember it so clearly. I remember standing in the wings ready to go on and seeing a lot of our friends who came from Vermont, but also a lot of people from Boston who were there to check it out. And then our first big New Year's show in Boston was at the World Trade Center, which we also rented out."

The group hit the Boston market hard. It recorded its first album, "Junta," in 1988 at Euphoria Sound Studios in Revere. And between 1989 and 1992, it performed at the Paradise six times, at Nightstage, at Johnny D's, at the Strand Theatre in Dorchester, and at the Somerville Theatre seven times.

"I take some credit for putting music shows into the Somerville Theatre," says Paluska. "We had to talk the owner into it."

Bigger sites then beckoned. Phish opened for Santana at Great Woods (now the Tweeter Center) in 1992. The band's word-of-mouth popularity (it has never been a radio favorite) kept spreading and the group booked New Year's Eve at the Worcester Centrum in 1993, followed by Boston Garden in 1994 -- a famous show during which the band was hoisted above the crowd inside a mockup of a hot dog, which has since been displayed at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland.

The band's music has continually grown -- incorporating elements from psychedelia to jazz -- and so has its staging effects, including set designed to look like an aquarium at the Centrum in 1993.

"I was at that show," says Eric Gould of the fast-rising jam band Particle. "They climbed into this shell that opened up and they were hoisted on harnesses while wearing wet suits. They've just unleashed so many creative ideas through the years."

"It grew into something that we could never possibly have expected," says Anastasio, though he says the FleetCenter show on Tuesday won't be a shoot-the-works event. "We're planning one thing that will be really fun for everybody, but we're not going to make a big deal out of it," he adds.

On Wednesday, Anastasio leaves to play eight shows as part of Dave Matthews's solo tour, including a FleetCenter date on Dec. 16. "[Phish band members] all have different individual things that we're doing now," he says. "I don't want to get to a point where I feel Phish is an anchor instead of a balloon."

Anastasio now lives in a house in the woods outside of Burlington and obsesses about the Vermont school system as much as about music. "We're not 18 anymore. Now I'm almost 40 and have two kids. And my life is completely different."

But he knows that his bond with Phish is too good to deny. "When my friends who aren't involved in the Phish thing ask me about it, I say, 'Well, just imagine if you were still hanging out with your three best friends from when you were 18.' It's hard to believe when you think about it. But we're trying to maintain that essential connection and allow space for each other to grow. That's our main focus now."

© Copyright 2003 Globe Newspaper Company.

© [Copyright](#) 2003 The New York Times Company