

Jams Reign Supreme at Phish's Utopian Three-Day Magnaball Fest

Band's 10th major gathering features deep cuts, trampoline jumps, vacuum hijinks and surprise late-night improv set

■ BY JESSE JARNOW | August 24, 2015

Even two decades into America's prolonged festival summer, there remains nothing like a Phish camp-out. Over the weekend, some 30,000 fans descended on the Watkins Glen International speedway in central New York to attend Phish's Magnaball, a sold-out three-day festival in which the 31-year-old Vermont quartet was the only musical act, give or take unamplified bluegrass combos and marching bands hired to wander the campgrounds. With art installations, a Ferris wheel and the Bunny — an on-site radio station simulcasting the concerts and freeform weirdness onto a local FM station by way of the otherwise highly programmed SiriusXM — Phish once again remade the world around them to their own design.



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Phish played nearly 12 hours of music during eight sets over three days — an anomaly in this or any festival season — including an unannounced all-improvised late-night performance on Saturday hidden behind a massive 183-foot movie screen across the back of the speedway's bleachers. As they demonstrated by offering no repeated songs over the weekend and ample amounts of jamming, Phish have long since surrendered the pretext of playing their own distinct (and sometimes parodied) jazz/jam/prog/neo-classical/Broadway/Zappa/Dead subgenre for any audience except for their own. In return, their own audience has seemingly grown only more devoted. Where the group's fans once initiated massive glowstick wars during the

band's jams, many now waited patiently for big downbeats to throw the plastic sticks in the air en masse, like massive neon fireworks shows. Though not as remote as other Phish events, such as their 1999 festival deep in the Florida Everglades, the weekend at Watkins Glen (which also hosted 2011's Super Ball IX) still felt worlds away from nearly everywhere.

With its long, lazy pace, Magnaball was a summer vacation for a certain strain of music dorks. There are Twitter accounts devoted to whether or not a single song has a jam or not (latest status, updated this weekend: no), chord-by-chord maps of the band's improvisations (sometimes posted live), and impassioned discussions about whether or not it's even alright to try to objectively rank Phish shows. Some used the music as an access point to spirituality, like those who participated in a continuous program of Jewish gatherings organized by JamShalom and Shabbat Tent, including "Munchies and Meditations with Rabbi Shu." Other fans reacted differently. On the second day, whenever the quartet's jams reached their peaks, fans up front hoisted an American flag with an inflatable cock-and-balls attached, waving it triumphantly with the music and creating a pliant symbol for anyone still seeking one, whether debauched, radical or corny.

At Magnaball, highlights weren't guest appearances, acoustic sets, thrust stages or even big hits, but the nitty-gritty of Phish's music. Pulling from three decades of fan favorites and deep cuts, the band earned some of the biggest cheers for new material like "No Men in No Man's Land" and "Blaze On," songs debuted at the current tour's start four weeks ago, and which have already earned their own bootleg shirts, available in Magnaball's campgrounds. Selling high-quality MP3s of every gig through LivePhish.com, as well as LivePhish+ subscriptions, and running multi-cam webstreams of many performances — including Magnaball — Phish has created a world where Phish heads keep up with the band's latest happenings in a manner somewhere between that of crazed sports fans and devotees of serialized cable dramas. Though fans have traded concert recordings since the band's mid-Eighties start, recent technologies like Periscope and Mixlr have allowed them to run their own audience streams if Phish aren't running their own (or even if they are), transforming the phenomenon known as Couch Tour into a nightly event when Phish is on the road.

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