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MUSIC REVIEW

A Band Tradition, Both Carried On and Changed



Chad Batka for The New York Times

Trey Anastasio, the lead guitarist of Phish, at Madison Square Garden on Thursday. Except for two major breaks, the band has been performing since 1983.

By JON PARELES

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It's not the ball drop, but for tens of thousands of people, [Phish's](#) annual run of shows at Madison Square Garden, which winds up on New Year's Eve, is the more significant year-end event in Manhattan. Always an immediate sellout (but still available for pay per view at [livephish.com](#)), the concerts are both a tradition and a challenge. Phish has to provide its familiar joys but vary them enough to surprise [fans](#) who are obsessively meticulous tabulators.

Thursday night's concert was Phish in crowd-pleasing mode: uptempo, playing familiar songs and ready to keep fans dancing — never getting too abstract or experimental. Its two sets were both CD-length, just under 80 minutes each, with the Rolling Stones' "Loving Cup" as a splashy, gossypily encore.

This was the Phish that's so light-fingered that its remarkable musicianship is often taken for granted; after all, things just keep bubbling along. The camaraderie of musicians who have been playing together since 1983 (with two major breaks) was acted out in the way each player's improvisations peeked out and then tucked themselves back into the band.

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Chad Batka for The New York Times
From left, Page McConnell, Trey Anastasio and Mike Gordon of the group Phish, on Thursday.

Mike Gordon's bass double timed its way into counterpoint and then eased back toward riff. Page McConnell's keyboards, particularly Hammond organ, pushed forward with insistent, meaty chords, and then dissolved into support. Jon Fishman's drumming rode the rhythms as much as it defined them. And Trey Anastasio's lead guitar, the band's dominant instrument, regularly stepped out, more pointed and purposeful than in some of Phish's past phases: with wailing long blues lines or twangy little jabs, with ambling chromatic lines or quick filigrees. Yet instead

of tracing the full storytelling arc of a guitar hero's solo, they tapered away, handing off the spotlight to another member of the group.

Like every worthy jam band, Phish flaunted its variety. It opened with the meter-shifting, harmonically labyrinthine song "The Sloth" and the quick arpeggios of "You Enjoy Myself," demonstrating its ensemble precision; it also jammed vigorously on basic two-chord grooves.

The band breezed from nimble jigs to progressive-rock pomp in "Guyute," leaned on the funk of "The Moma Dance" and mobilized the bluegrass lilt (with warped chord progressions) of "Run Like an Antelope."

It chose more than a few songs with lyrics steeped in self-doubt — the recent "Show of Life," "Mike's Song," "Back on the Train," "Roses Are Free" and a relative rarity at Phish shows, "Lifeboy" — but played them with thoroughgoing ease. There was one stretch of a darker mood: "Maze," conjuring the lyrics' paranoia with a modal, insistent bass line and radar-blip keyboards before making its way to its own major-key redemption.

Along with "Lifeboy," there was an unexpected twist: "Chalk Dust Torture," a Phish staple that still delights disgruntled undergraduates, somehow evolved during the jam into the recognizable melody of "I Am Hydrogen," played considerably faster than usual. It was the kind of variation that makes Phish's fans take notice, though it wasn't exactly a grand innovation.

This was just a big, happy Phish party. The musicians' fingers flew; lights splayed above the stage; glowsticks were tossed, in mass bursts, at big transitions; balloons bounced around; the year-end ritual was intact. Thursday's concert was a high-level holding action; the next one, as always, might be something else entirely.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: December 30, 2011

An earlier version of this article misspelled the title of one of Phish's songs. The song is "I Am Hydrogen," not "This Is Hydrogen." And an earlier version of this correction erroneously stated that the song is an album.

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