

Jam Bands  
by Richard Victorino

Try doing it over 100 times a year, give or take. You'd do it all over the country, even cross borders and seas just to do it.

Can you imagine a life on the road, eating take out daily and performing in front of crowds who cling to everything you do? You perform in front of people who have been touring with you because with you on stage, no one knows what's next, and they don't want to miss a thing.

This is the life of a jam band. Jam bands are generally described as having a blue-grass folk rhythm style. However, jam bands are also known to write new music constantly, creating thousands of different sounds for their audience.

You may have heard of the Grateful Dead? The Grateful Dead performed over 2,000 shows while front-man Jerry Garcia was alive. They performed for crowds over 100,000 selling out large venues for five days straight. Yet they managed to have only one top-ten song on the Billboard charts, "Touch of Grey," in over 30 years of making music.

Yet that is the uniqueness of the music created by jam bands. In a time when record deals and radio hits are in the minds of young musicians everywhere, one tends to ask, "What happened to just making music, not money?"

You can pay anywhere from \$45 or more to see one show of a "big name" musical group. What you'll hear for the most part is the music that comes out of the radio and/or CD players. Albeit you'll see your favorite rock stars in person (if you can catch a glimpse through the herds of people), aren't you there to hear the music?

Bands such as Phish and Strangefolk (who generally have cheaper tickets for concerts) use touring as their primary means of spreading music, like the Grateful Dead, rather than record sales.

These bands change their set lists each night they perform. There are times that a certain song isn't played in years, which makes it special if you're there to hear it live. Jam bands push their songs to their absolute limits, creating songs within songs. They combine different songs creating an unforgettable sound that can't be duplicated. During a show, the band can take you through jams where you don't know what's coming next and neither do they. But no one on stage or watching loses a beat.

That's the power of music.

Take Strangefolk, a band out of Burlington, Vermont. They're made up of a rhythm guitarist, lead guitarist, bassist and drummer. Sounds like a normal rock band, right? Listen to them and you'll hear a sound that just can't be mistaken for someone else. "If you listen only to the acoustic side, you may end up thinking Eagles or worse. But try walking up to the speaker and letting the electric sounds blow you away. Quite simply, this is a very trippy band. And once you get it you'll never want to turn back," says Andy Bernstein, writer for "The Pharmers Almanac," a book about the jam band Phish as well as other jam bands.

Before a song makes it to radio, hours and hours of takes and retakes are done. Changes and modifications are done to "perfect" the songs as much as possible so that the people will like them. But music is created by people, not technology. And people aren't perfect, so why should music be?

When you find people who like jam bands, you'll see a common enthusiasm for the music. Their fans know about the musicians as people, not just rock gods.

Instead of hours of studio time dressing up music to suit the pop culture at the time, jam bands give the audience what they deserve to hear. Music in

its purest form: experimental jams, intense guitars and keyboards, an unpredictable ride into one of the oldest forms of human entertainment and expression long before record deals and radio were invented. Sweet beautiful music where you never know when the song will end. You're taken away from the real world as long as the band allows you to be. You feed off of their music as much as they feed off of your enthusiasm. Nothing can be as intense as being at the mercy of the band, where you can be who you want to be and no one cares. The music controls you, forcing you to start moving your head and tapping your feet. Before you realize it, you're dancing.

Welcome to the life of jam bands.