

Live albums are dead, and music is the loser

No crystal-clear DVD or shoddy hand-held YouTube clip can ever match the power and majesty of a live concert album. SIMON HARDEMAN mourns the loss of a medium that created many of pop's defining moments



It is time to say farewell to some of the greatest albums ever made, albums that made careers, defined genres, and celebrated the raw power of music. Because the live album, once a rite of passage for every act of substance, is dead.

Yes, some bands may still make live albums: Muse, in particular, have released three live sets in a career of just four studio albums, but they are the exception. And just as there is no such thing as radio with pictures – it becomes television – then the live DVD is different from the live album. The visuals overwhelm the music, the spectacle takes over, and the sound loses its primacy.

You might think you could just buy the CD of a DVD and it would behave like a live album. But, with a few exceptions, de-visualised discs feel like the soundtracks they effectively are. Perhaps it's the digital squeaky-cleanliness of DVD; the music is dragged to a similar, soulless quality. Pink Floyd's *Pulse*, while a big seller, is an offender in this category: as a record of the band's tours it is excellent, and the musicianship is stunning, but if it converted many to the Floyd I'd be amazed.

This is because a proper live album harvests (in some cases, even creates) a performance that, in its recorded form, becomes something more than simply a DVD-style virtual ticket to a long-gone performance. It can break a band, epitomise a career, or record poignant last moments. The lack of pictures allows the music to gain power and mystery.

In particular, the crowd – banal, merchandise-clad whoopers and flag-wavers on a DVD – becomes a single, dark, tidal entity, adding unpredictable energy to, and becoming wholly part of, the experience. This means live albums aren't the poor relations of studio sets, either – they're darker, slightly dangerous, more unpredictable, bigger cousins.

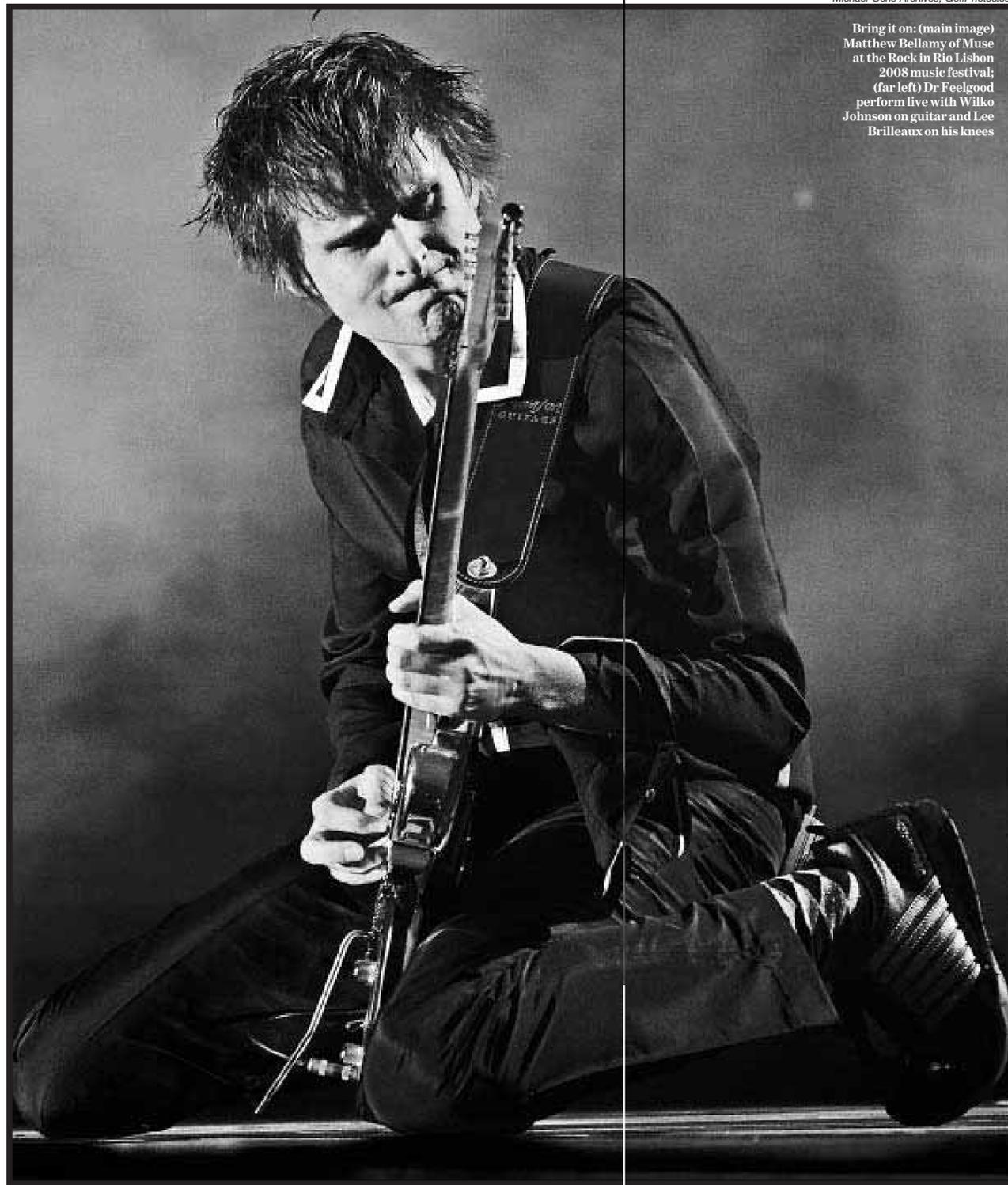
Can you think of a single band that has

broken through because of a live DVD? Live albums once did that for Dr Feelgood, Peter Dinklage, and many more.

There are countless current acts who are brilliant live, but who haven't released non-studio sets – Amy Winehouse, Kaiser Chiefs, Arcade Fire, The Raconteurs, and Arctic Monkeys for starters. Why not? Perhaps it's the web, which, in recent years has become an outlet for live sets. There is, of course, the MySpace mush of segments of poorly recorded gigs. And there are also live webcasts, but these are effectively radio, not records. But the big outlet for live recordings today, other than DVDs, is YouTube.

Amy Winehouse may not have released a live album, but there are more than 1,500 clips of her live to view on YouTube. It's a similar number for Arcade Fire and the Kaiser Chiefs. Search for the Arctic Monkeys, and you turn up more than twice as many. Even Duffy comes up with several hundred. For fans, the clips may work, but most are scratchy grabs from TV or mobile-phone footage that do little to communicate the musical and emotional power of the artist. It's not only the quality of the clip, either; the quality of the video and audio stream is thin and gutless and chokes the music. Can you imagine if all we had of Johnny Cash in San Quentin was a YouTube clip? One of the pivotal moments in pop music would have been reduced to an internet viral.

There are exceptions to the lack of current notable live albums as well as Muse. Beth Ditto's *Gossip* marked their first release on a major label this May with a live album, *Live in Liverpool*. Ditto explained at the time, "We've always wanted to do a live album, but... who does a live album any more?" She also implied that the live album kind of came about because the band didn't want to be pushed into writing new material; the conclusion is that they needed new product and a live set was the best way to get it out fast. This has



Michael Ochs Archives; GoffPhotos.com

Bring it on: (main image) Matthew Bellamy of Muse at the Rock in Rio Lisbon 2008 music festival; (far left) Dr Feelgood perform live with Wilko Johnson on guitar and Lee Brilleaux on his knees

SIX OF THE BEST LIVE ALBUMS

DR FEELGOOD *Stupidity*



The best live record ever: and it reached No. 1. Just a few years into the 1970s, rock had become self-indulgent, and pompous, and singles were increasingly cheesy. But on the pub-rock live circuit Dr Feelgood were building a reputation for their sweaty, speedy, choppy, Canvey Island-bred rhythm and blues. The ace in their hole was their mop-topped, black-clad, bug-eyed guitarist, Wilko Johnson, who careered around the stage like a madman with a machine gun, chopping out funky riffs in a totally unique style. This 1975 live set (released in 1976) was fresh, unremittingly exciting and inescapably danceable.

BEN HARPER *Live from Mars*



This double CD from 2001, the first of which is an electric set and the second of which is acoustic, is surely the best thing that Harper has done. It features the pick of his own material from his first four albums, along with (in classic live-album fashion) a selection of covers, ranging from The Verve's "The Drugs Don't Work" to a rather good "Sexual Healing". The first CD has plenty of energy, but it's the second, acoustic one that makes this record essential, despite the irritating whooping, cheering, and whistling that interrupt even the most intimate numbers. Yet Harper's gorgeous voice and understated guitar survive.

MUSE *H.A.A.R.P.*



Muse's music has so much more presence live, and this CD – an accompaniment to the DVD – emphasises that. Pomposity and pretentiousness are more acceptable when the music feels authentic, which is what this selection does. Songs grow here, in a set that, effectively, begins with the buzzing guitar and choral vocals of "Knights of Cydonia" and simply ratchets up the power from there. To get this, you do have to accept that Muse like their music BIG. Of all current, rather than reformed, acts playing the stadium circuit, they are the ones for whom live playing seems to mean the most, and it shows.

THE WHO *Live at Leeds*



Possibly the most famous live album ever. It's a brilliant rock'n'roll set, mixing Who originals with classic covers. The songs are slowed down and heaved up, most notably Eddie Cochran's "Summertime Blues" and Johnny Kidd and the Pirates' "Shakin' All Over", where Pete Townshend often dispenses with the classic riff, preferring chunky chords and Hendrix-like fills. He is asserting himself, pushing the envelope, and sidelining Roger Daltrey, whose vocals are often swamped by the enormity of the music, particularly in a huge, 16-minute version of "My Generation". But the other revelation is John "The Ox" Entwistle's bass.

NIRVANA *Unplugged*



The last Nirvana release, recorded in November 1993, before Kurt Cobain shot himself the following April. Songs like "Jesus Wants Me For a Sunbeam" and "Where Did You Sleep Last Night", and lines like the repeated "I don't have a gun" send tingles down the spine. But even without the poignancy, it's a superb set, the quieter, raw, setting of MTV's *Unplugged* series allowing Cobain to show a gentleness and humour that had eluded some listeners for whom the formulaic nature of grunge was a barrier. This is an album that could only have been made live, and is, perhaps, Cobain's career-defining legacy.

JIMI HENDRIX *Band of Gypsys*



After he had split the Experience, Jimi Hendrix was obliged to provide an album of new material for Capitol. He got together his old friend Billy Cox on bass and Buddy Miles on drums, to play four shows over two nights at the Fillmore East in New York. What resulted was an astonishing semi-jammed guitar master-class. Hendrix, using a new set of effects pedals for the first time, seems fresh, free, released and relaxed and at one with his instrument, which sounds as though it is mainlining his thought processes. This is a sad document, too, as it was the last official album by the guitar genius before his death.

always been one of the criticisms of live albums, another being that they can be end-of-career valedictions or fan-specials. Björk's 2004 four-CD box-set *Live Box* was the latter, a live reading of each of her first four studio albums which, while of interest, probably didn't make too much difference to non-Björk-obsessives. (The Icelandic singer does, though, have another live album in the can, titled *Live Sessions*.) For the general music-lover, such fan albums and quick-let's-get-something-out live releases are probably not of much interest. Another to be avoided is the yes-we-really-can-play-that-well advert. Acoustic guitar duo Rodrigo y Gabriela did just such a thing with their 2004 *Live Manchester and Dublin* CD. Anyone who has seen these amazing virtuosos on the festival circuit knows how impressive their renditions of heavy-metal favourites are, and this CD probably gained them a load more live bookings, but it is, frankly, tedious.

At the other end of the musical spectrum are the dance duo Daft Punk. Last year they released *Alive*. Their Thomas Bangalter explained why: "We thought at this time that there was an importance to experiment with the live show and the performances and we wanted to favour that form of expression rather than making a

new album. We thought that, with a live tour, we would have more opportunity to experiment than with a new album." Between the lines, of course, that means "we didn't have time to write any new stuff". But, then, who cares? It is, actually, a good set, and a decent introduction to the band.

One of the great functions of live albums has always been to serve as a kind of surrogate *Greatest Hits* collection. My favourite, the live album I've listened to more than any other, does exactly that: Creedence Clearwater Revival's *Live in Europe*, from 1970. It's not the best line-up of the band: rhythm guitarist Tom Fogerty had left after falling out with his brother John (the lead singer, guitarist and songwriter), and so CCR were reduced to a three-piece, and would soon be no more; the perfectionist John Fogerty didn't even want the album released. And yet it's a snarling, amplifier-speaker-ripping, sweat-drenched rock'n'roll tour de force. Fogerty and bassist Stu Cook have to work all the harder to fill in for the missing instrument, and it shows. It encapsulates everything that made CCR the biggest band in the world once The Beatles had gone.

Live albums are at their best when they combine being important documents with containing fabulous music. James Brown's

Live at the Apollo, recorded in 1963, is too early for the funky classics that most now associate with Brown. Instead, in a 32-minute set, it shows both his sensitive and soulful side as well as the uptempo soul grooves that drive the crowd wild. The band are as tight as a moccasin loafer. This rip-snorting incendiary bomb of a live performance is the moment Brown went from R&B star to pop star – it reached No. 2 on the *Billboard* chart and might have reached No. 1 had the record company been able to keep up with demand.

But perhaps the act who most combines these two functions of document and excitement on his live recordings is Bob Dylan. The best, though not necessarily the most interesting, is the double LP he did with The Band, *Before the Flood*, the 1974 reworking of a set of his greatest hits. But there are several notable live Dylan albums, including *The Bootleg Series, Vol. 4: Bob Dylan Live 1966* (which records the historic moment Dylan "went electric", with the "Judas" cry audible). Even more exciting, collections such as this can be the only place his more obscure songs are found. The shame is that the legacy of a Dylan of today would be more likely to be a list of fuzzy YouTube clips. RIP the live album.