

Welcome to the Pleasure Dome

The Charisma Years 1970-1978, Van der Graaf Generator (20 CD/DVD, Virgin box set)

What do you get if you mix the suicidal angst of Sylvia Plath's poetry, saxophone freakouts by John Coltrane or Roland Kirk, an obsession with the sound and construction of church organs, caterwauling vocals, heavy metal riffing and pounding rock drums? Van der Graaf Generator, of course, one of the best and most extreme progrock bands. Without any elves or new-age mysticism in sight, Van der Graaf offered the listener a monster blend of surrealism, philosophy and musical extremes that teetered on the edge of noise and chaos as it navigated time and key changes, mood swings and musical experiment.

As is the nature of things these days, it is time for a gathering-up and re-assessment to occur. This wonderful new box set contains studio albums, live concerts, radio sessions, studio outtakes and a DVD of TV appearances and promo videos; as well as brand new stereo mixes and high resolution 5.1 versions of four of the studio albums. There's also a wonderful 68 page full colour book, which is perhaps the highlight of it all, as it offers loads of unseen photographs, comments and a detailed band history.

That's not to denigrate the music, of course, but I do wonder just how much remastering and remixing albums need? And, to be honest, most of what is here has been available on various official and unofficial CDs for many years, though it is good to finally have 'The Pawn Hearts Sessions' with crystal clear sound. It's interesting, too, to have Peel Sessions, single versions and suchlike appended to the studio albums the tracks appear on; and although I have many bootlegs of live concerts, I don't have the excellent 1976 Paris gig which is contained on discs 9 and 10 here. Anyway, most people will, I suspect, concentrate on the music contained on discs 1-13 and the DVD disc 20, making this in effect a 14 disc box.

Van der Graaf Generator's first album, which was actually planned as a Peter Hammill solo album, isn't on here, but *The Least We Can Do Is Wave To Each Other* and *H To He Who Am The Only One* are (discs 1 and 2). They both evidence a band finding their feet, musically and lyrically, with a mix of sci-fi tinged tracks such as 'After the Flood' and 'Pioneers Over C', and the existential angst of 'Killer', an edgy inward-looking riff monster that reflects on the latent violence within us all. Robert Fripp guests to good effect on *He To He...* but it doesn't prepare you for the madness that is *Pawn Hearts*, one of their standout albums.

Pawn Hearts (disc 3) only contains three tracks, but what tracks they are! The first side offers us 'Lemmings' and 'Man Erg', complex meditations on life and death (and the bits between) but 'A Plague of Lighthouse Keepers', which originally took up the whole second side of the vinyl album, is the standout here. Assembled in the studio with judicious editing and a generous use of effects and treatments, this is progrock at its finest. No, I have no idea of what it is about, but it's awesome. The music ebbs and flows, changes suddenly and turns back on itself then heads for the hills. There are wild pounding drums, multitracked saxes, screams and whispers, anthemic keyboards and electronic interludes, not to mention foghorns in the distance and elaborate and evocative wordplay.

The album was originally intended as a double but Charisma pulled the plug on that idea. Some of the unreleased material is on disc 4, again with fantastic sound quality. *Pawn Hearts* didn't receive much critical attention at the time, although the Italians loved it and the band became stars over there. But after too much touring and a lot of industry disinterest, Peter Hammill decided he wanted to focus on solo albums and the band were no more until 1975, although they all played on said Hammill solo albums, which at times can sound like band albums anyway (and contain tracks the band sometimes played live). But that's another box set waiting to happen...

The trio of albums consisting of *Godbluff*, *Still Life* and *World Record* (discs 5, 7 and 8) are often considered the pinnacle of Van der Graaf Generator's career, but I beg to differ. *Still Life*, recommended and sold to me by the owner of the record shop in the back room of the greengrocers in Harrow, near where I worked for a while, was my introduction to the band, and it remains my favourite album, along with *Pawn Hearts*. The other two have never gripped me in the same way, and were a disappointment when I bought them. *Godbluff* contains a quartet of tracks, and to these ears they all sound rather similar and plod along, trying too hard to be 'serious'. *World Record* starts well, with the sprightly 'When She Comes', and I quite like 'Masks' too, but what was side B is dominated by 'Meurglys III' an overlong meandering jam which turns into cod reggae as it nears the two-thirds mark of its almost 21-minute duration. 'Wondering', which closes the album is great but I think almost anything would sound good after the preceding track.

But *Still Life* is glorious. It's sprightly, uplifting and exploratory. Its five tracks are varied and contrasting, making pilgrimage, revisiting science fiction themes, and considering doubt, faith and love. 'La Rossa' is angst and loss epitomised, despair transmuted into lyrical and musical over-the-top profundity. (This theme continues, but in a more pastoral and downbeat musical vein, on Peter Hammill's post-divorce album *Over*, which I heartily recommend to any miserable romantics out there.) The title track contemplates the horror of living for ever, relentlessly aging with no end in sight. One of the bonus tracks here on disc 7 is 'Gog', a live band version of a Hammill solo album track, and if it doesn't contain the startling multitracked duetting drums of the original version it is nevertheless one of the most powerful moments in Van der Graaf's musical history.

The track also appears on discs 9 and 10, which contain a 1976 concert from the Maison de la Mutualité in Paris, with lots of tracks from the trio of 1975/76 albums and a couple of older fan favourites, 'Killer' and 'Man-Erg'. The band offer rough and ready, lively versions of their music here, with the energy pouring off the stage and out of your speakers. 'Live in Rimini', back on disc 6, does similar things in 1975 for several Hammill solo tracks along with a pair of tracks from *Pawn Hearts* and 'Scorched Earth' from *Godbluff*. It's genuinely alarming to hear these tracks dissected and re-assembled into the lurching Frankenstein's monsters they become, the band relying on each other to keep up and understand what's going on at any given moment. I only wish I'd seen this incarnation live. (I have managed to see the reformed 21st century band.)

By the end of 1976 keyboard player Hugh Banton had left the band, and in early 1977 he was followed by saxophonist David Jackson. Punk was happening, too, but Hammill and Van der Graaf seemed to be not included in the progrock hate list at the time; John Lydon and Mark

E Smith of the Fall would praise them, whilst some critics saw Hammill's energetic 1975 album *Nadir's Big Chance*, which featured his alter-ego Rikki Nadir playing 'beefy punk songs, weepy ballads, soul struts', as a precursor to the whole punk movement.

Rather than try and replace Banton and Jackson, Hammill and drummer Guy Evans invited violinist Graham Smith, from String Driven Thing, to join the band, along with Nic Potter, who had played bass on the first few albums. They also shortened the band's name to Van der Graaf, and focussed on shorter, punchier songs, which were showcased on *The Quiet Zone/The Pleasure Dome*, and a single with two non-album tracks (all on disc 11). The band apparently sounded 'a little too extreme on stage' (Hammill), and cellist Charles Dickie was added to the line-up. Along with the guest appearance of David Jackson, they would record the final album in this box, *Vital* (discs 12 and 13), live at the Marquee in early 1978.

Vital is ear-shatteringly awesome: some of those beefy punk songs and a judicious selection of previous tracks put through the mincer at full volume. Saxes skronk, violin and cello squeal and whine, Hammill shouts, cries, declaims and hectors, Banton beats his drumkit up and percusses wildly, as Nic Potter tries to anchor the whole thing to some kind of pulse. Never have the band been so noisy and so alive, never have they sounded so relevant and dangerous.

It couldn't be sustained though, as the band were struggling financially, and critical acclaim wasn't translating into sales. The group split up, with Hammill continuing to release a plethora of solo albums to this day, many featuring band alumni. He would also reform Van der Graaf Generator with Banton, Evans and Jackson in 2004, although Jackson would soon leave for good; the trio have continued to record and play live since.

So, what of the videos? Disc 20, *The Video Vaults*, gathers up a number of European broadcasts and a couple of Charisma promotional films, including a cleaned-up copy of the stunning *Pop Shop* version of 'A Plague of Lighthouse Keepers', recorded live in a Belgian TV studio amongst a forest of candles. I once sat up until 3am to record this to video; now of course it is all over the internet and has been on a couple of questionably legal DVD releases. I also love the 1970 *Beat Club* footage of the band playing a couple of songs from *The Least We Can Do...*, and 'Lost', 'Killer' and 'Octopus' from The Bataclan in 1972.

Virgin are to be congratulated for their curating skills and the thoroughness with which they have approached this project. Everything from 1970s Van der Graaf Generator you could want is here in glorious sound quality, along with a bumper book you can read along to the music with. The packaging and design is wonderful too. My only complaint is that I would have liked the lyrics included but I can always pull my LPs out for that. Talking of which, look out for 3-disc editions of four of the individual albums, as well as new vinyl editions, in the future.

Rupert Loydell

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXqSVTg3fn8>

Van der Graaf Generator, 'A Plague of Lighthouse Keepers', Belgian TV, 1972

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZxWoYmb3MKw>

Van der Graaf Generator, 'Wondering', promo film, 1976

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HRZ-1LVa4Fo>

Van der Graaf, 'Cat's Eye', promo film, 1977