

# interview

## Something Phish-y

by Brent Legault

How do you categorize a band that incorporates blues, funk, country, and barber shop quartet harmonies into its style?

How do you describe a chaotic, eclectic sound without using tired words like "chaotic" and "eclectic"? You don't. You just give up and call it Phish.

Phish eludes any simple definition, much like its seadwelling namesake eludes an angler's hook. Its sound is instantly accessible, immediately groovable, yet it loses nothing with repeated listen-

ings. With each consecutive listen, you discover interesting tidbits of sound nestled between a voice or a guitar. There is a lot going on here. Sometimes it sounds like six or seven musicians instead of only four, especially when they burst into one of their unique, four-part vocal harmonies.

"We're trying to go someplace with our music," said drummer Jon Fishman. "Why have four instruments fill the same space?"

Phish's newest release, *Rift*, does "go someplace" and it takes the listener along for the ride. The music is complex without sounding muddled or

busy. Nothing sounds like it was thrown in for effect. It's as though the songs "wrote themselves," in the sense that each piece of music developed naturally, without excessive interference from the bandmembers. *Rift* comes off as fully composed, but not overworked.

Said Fishman, "An album is like a painting. (Each) song is a different part (of the composition), and they have to fit together. They're permanent."

Indeed, listening to *Rift* is the aural equivalent of viewing a piece of art. It's like "listening" to a Jackson Pollock painting. Splashes of

guitar. Splatters of vocals. Drops of percussion. Streaks of bass. Smears of piano. Yet, somehow it all comes together, and after further study, when you stand back and admire it for awhile, you detect particular patterns. Images form that may vary among different listeners.

Phish seems fascinated by the sound a voice makes. Many of its lyrics are nonsensical. A phrase might be sung over and over again, losing any contextual meaning, but the pleasure of the experience is in the nuances of the vocals. According to Fishman, the band has someone coach them with the barber-shop harmonies.

Even though Phish works well in the studio, some of the bandmembers confess frustration with working apart from the stage and the audience. Guitarist Trey Anastasio said, "The love and religiosity of our shows hasn't always translated to record." And Fishman admits, "(Phish is) much better as a live band."

Again, like Jackson Pollock, much of Phish's "art" lies not only in the piece itself, but in its creation and presentation. The audience adds to the performance, like an extra, but vital, member of the band.

Said Anastasio, "Sometimes we throw these beach balls out into the audience, and each one corresponds to a different band member, and each of us is jamming along according to what's happening to our particular beach ball... the crowd is controlling the music."

Fishman said, "When we play live, we try to broaden our understanding of the songs. We play so much, and to keep (our playing) fresh, we need to reach out... to stretch our boundaries at every show."

Despite reservations about its recorded material, Phish remains excited about its work on *Rift*. Fishman said, "We like to use the studio as an instrument. We look forward to experimenting with (that concept) on future albums."



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