

The site of the Ventura County Fairgrounds shows was a general admission dirt racetrack between the Pacific Coast Highway and Surfers Point Park; with palm trees and mountains behind the stage and a view of the Pacific Ocean from the bleachers. July 30, 1997 was Phish's first Ventura stop since Trey learned to surf nearby in 1993, and both the 1997 and 1998 Ventura Fairgrounds setlists were laced with coastal themes referencing the scenic locale. Ventura '97 featured a number of must-hear performances including a bass-driven, syncopated Wolfman's Brother > Chalk Dust Torture, a deep and spacey Stash and a gnarly Character Zero in set I. Peak improvisation of the highest order defined set II with a Free > David Bowie > Cities > David Bowie combination that dominated the show's second half with some of the summer's biggest jams. Add in Weigh (played just twice that summer), the first West Coast Piper and a blazing cover of Jimi Hendrix's Fire and the result was a steaming cauldron of patient funk and cacophonous shredding that defined summer 1997 Phish.

On July 20, 1998 Phish again encountered Ventura's breezy oceanside. Ventura '98 was characterized by some new songs, some bustouts and some wicked jams played with a democratic group-mind that conjured a stellar Bathtub Gin opener, a new arrangement of Water In The Sky, the swinging funk of The Moma Dance and a hairy Split Open And Melt set I closer. Set II exploded with a crucial bass-and-drums-fueled Drowned > Makisupa Policeman pairing that utilized Page's synth stylings to seamlessly blend rock and reggae. A concentrated Maze led to a perfectly placed, self-referential Sea And Sand - played for the first time since 12/31/95 and only the third time ever. An inspired Prince Caspian carved the way into the Harry Hood set II closer. The encore was the Phish debut of Sexual Healing as Trey played drums and Fish, to the crowd's delight, sang Marvin Gaye's tale of capsizing in rising waves of love. A funky, experimental Halley's Comet capped the show as the band left the stage one-by-one to waves of digital delay that swept the beachside fairgrounds.

The *Ventura* box set captures the feel of two magical nights of Phish - recorded by Paul Languedoc to multitrack tape, mixed by Jon Altschiller and mastered by Fred Kevorkian. Jams from the soundchecks were included at the end of both shows for a glimpse behind the scenes. This collection is a summer soundtrack that just gets better with every listen.

Enjoy!

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