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COVER STORY

THIS CONCERT IS REALLY 'IT'

Who ever heard of a music festival called "IT"? Well, those who showed up - 60,000 free spirits, including the dude in the pink tutu juggling bowling pins _ got to see the group that Rolling Stone calls "America's greatest jam band." When Phish brought them all to a remote former Air Force base in rural Maine for a two-day concert, something special was probably bound to happen. One thing that happened is "IT: A Phish Concert Special," airing on WGBH Wednesday at 10 p.m., a year after the festival, which concluded Phish's summer tour last August. The 90-minute special features Trey Anastasio on guitar, Mike Gordon on bass, Page McConnell on piano, and Jon Fishman on drums, winding out a wide-ranging set of songs off albums made since the group started in 1983, when three of the members were students at the University of Vermont. The special may take on greater heft for Phishheads now that the band has announced its break-up (after this year's summer fest, in Coventry, Vt., on Aug. 14-15). The songs are interspersed with interviews with the band members, ranging from Gordon's musings on the Zen of improvisation ("You're interfering with the divine plan by trying to plan") to fits of nostalgia about past concerts, including the millennium concert at a Seminole Indian reservation in Florida that marked the band's last farewell (it took a two- year hiatus). When the interviews were recorded, in April 2004, the band was referring to the previous summer's "IT" festival as "the beginning of the next era" of Phishdom, in Anastasio's words. "What do we still have among the four of us that's worth pursuing?" he says in the special. "How are we going to be able to kick start this group? Something's gotta change." The "IT" festival at the decommissioned Loring Air Force Base in Limestone, Maine, was the third time the band had brought its summer-ending concert there. "We found over the years that when you were left alone and no one was watching, we would relax and get ourselves out of the way," Anastasio says on camera. "And that's when the really great stuff would happen, so we started making these festivals that were further and further from the center of civilization." Given Phish's trademark jam sessions, producer and director Mary Wharton said, the production crew had to cut many of the songs dramatically - such as the special's first song, "46 Days," which during the concert went on for just about that long, in TV terms. (It lasted 39 minutes in real time, but was edited down to less than seven in the video. Wharton said the producers aimed to be "a little adventurous" in the editing. The special certainly features rapid cutting between instruments and fans at a pace that shames even many music videos. After a while, the pace lulls the mind into a receptivity that makes Anastasio's comments about how the festival helps people connect with the "greater flow" of the universe sound not nearly as New Agey. In fact, you can come to believe you get "IT."