

Hot Buttered Rum's *Live in the Northeast*

by Adam Gromfin (May 14, 2007)

When it comes to making a live album, there are at least two possible approaches: You simply hit record, play a show, package it up, and release it, warts and all. Or you can record a few shows, carefully cull the best performances, and release a truly refined masterpiece. Each approach has its advantages, and each appeals to a different kind of purist — the former to the historian, the latter to the perfectionist. With *Live in the Northeast*, Hot Buttered Rum chose perfectionism, a choice that paid off in spades.

In the Fall of 2006, itching to release their first live album featuring the whole band, Hot Buttered Rum announced that it would be recording a handful of shows for official release. Coming from a band admired for its deep catalogue, the announcement served as a sort of fair warning to die-hard fans that there would be repeat performances — a song repeated two nights in a row a virtual aberration among Butter shows and heresy of the highest order in the jamband scene. As guitarist Nat Keefe explained in a recent interview, however, once the band shook the initial strangeness of repeating songs, it developed a “deeper relationship with several songs,” discovering “their purest aesthetic qualities. . . . You really do learn the heart of a song that way.” *Live in the Northeast* beautifully reveals that “deeper relationship,” presenting the true core of live Butter: music that is forceful without being flashy, serious without being stuffy, intricate without being inaccessible, and diverse without being distracting.

Holding *Live in the Northeast*, you'll immediately be struck by its gorgeous packaging — its silhouette image another instant classic from illustrator John Boys, and its red trees evocative of Fall in the namesake region that proved such fertile ground for the album. Listening to *Live in the Northeast*, you'll immediately be struck by its stunning sound quality. From the rolling banjo of “Busted in Utah” to the eerie fiddling in the introduction to “Spider” to the tender mandolin-work in “California Snow & Rain,” each and every instrument is presented richly and accurately. The true genius of the album lies not in its presentation of each individual instrument in studio-quality sound, however, but in the flawless placement of those instruments (and, of course, vocals) into a coherent soundscape. Working with the raw multi-track recordings, Butter's long-time sound engineer, Josh Osmond, expertly mixed the album as he would a live room — with Erik Yates (banjo and flute) panned far left, Aaron Redner (fiddle and mandolin) panned far right, Keefe and Zac Matthews (mandolin and fiddle) spaced out between them, and bassist Bryan Horne front and center (omnipresent without ever overpowering). Osmond's work presents complex pieces such as “Return Someday” and “Summertime Gal” in the widescreen technicolor they deserve, with Horne prominently playing both anchor and pivot point to layer after layer of instruments and vocals. In that way, *Live in the Northeast* perfectly showcases a band whose powerful performances stem as much from each member's impressive talent as they do from the quintet's tight ensemble work.

Live in the Northeast also presents proof positive that Hot Buttered Rum can ROCK! Often described as a rock band playing bluegrass instruments, no prior Butter recording has so

perfectly displayed the band's bolder and heavier side. Not 30 seconds into "Busted in Utah," heads begin to bob, defying the accepted scripture that big sound requires big drums. Drumsticks be damned, Horne's tremendous bass-work and Matthews' clockwork mandolin chops provide a percussive rhythm section that is (only slightly paradoxically) subtle and complex, deferential and driving. That full sound permeates *Live in the Northeast* — from the reggae-tinged "Return Someday" and psychedelica of "Desert Rat" through definitive covers of the Grateful Dead's "Cumberland Blues" and Leo Sayer's "Feel Like Dancin'" — winding the listener through a robust and intense set of acoustic rock.

The difficulty with a release such as *Live in the Northeast* is that no single set of music can fully capture the variety of a band that rotates more than 100 songs and plays nearly 200 shows per year. The album's twelve tracks certainly convey a strong sense of what it is that makes Hot Buttered Rum special, but also omit (by necessity) several fan favorites, lengthier arrangements, and some rarer special pieces. Never fear, however: The band has suggested that this is but the first of a string of live releases, as it contemplates serializing regional recordings such as *Live in the Northeast* and offering digital downloads of full shows. Besides, if the biggest stone one can throw at this album is that fans simply want MORE, well that's pretty high praise.

Hot Buttered Rum will officially release *Live in the Northeast* at their much anticipated May 19 show at San Francisco's Fillmore Auditorium. The album will be available for purchase from www.HotButteredRum.net.