

Deeply Vale box set review by Mick Middles

Ten years ago, Chris Hewitt, one of the original organisers of the Deeply Vale free festivals - four of them, in the late seventies - took me back to the site. Etched deep in the Lancashire fringe of the Pennines above Rochdale, it was a place that seemed to me still full of evocative echo...ghosts perhaps? I only attended one of the said events, albeit on two days in 1979, but I could still sense the presence of that ramshackle stage. I could hear primal sounds of early Fall, the postulating soul punk of The Distractions. Beyond that lay more echoes of UK Subs, Here and Now, ATV, Steve Hillage, Fast Cars, Victim...and so many more.

The four 'Deeplys' effectively stretched from the unholy - and sometimes unwise - outpourings of downbeat 1976 to that area of post punk when everything appeared to be thrown back in the pot. (How oddly similar these two eras now seem). This is an ancient place where the very concept of definable 'genre' would seem absurd. Hippies, albeit the rather dour variety that inspired Neil from The Young Ones, punks, rastas, skins and the generally bedraggled and bewildered, all lost to an awkward dance.

The 78 affair provided a snapshot of that evocative post punk twist where, say, Alternative TV would tour with Here and Now, thereby adding an unlikely liberalism to the crumbling insular beast of punk. Within this framework, early Fall kicked against the industrial fashionistas of Germanic post punk with their defiant style-less appeal. The feel was of a holistic view beyond the simplicity of image. And if nothing else, Deeply Vale thundered against corporate imagery. Naïve indeed, but what lovely memories are conjured up by the very phrase...Deeply Vale Free Festival. Things were simple then and no other historical festival so perfectly evokes the antithesis of the Glastonburys, Leeds' and Readings. Within the mists of memory, it has dated gloriously.

Ironic, perhaps, that the festival now arrives clamped in a lavish box set, beautifully packaged; indeed a bundle of evocative glimpses and memories that now emit an elegance that wasn't remotely apparent at Deeply Vale itself.

A good box set isn't something that itemises and separates. It is not a thing of lists and facts, although they are here, should you need them. For this has been ten years in the making. I can vouch for this having visited Mr Hewitt's Cheshire house on many occasions during the past decade. The houses exists as a museum of North West musical history, shambolic but bubbling with intrigue in every corner. Walk towards the coffee table and you may stumble over a previously unreleased heavy duty vinyl of, say, an old Kevin Coyne live set or an album by Julian Cope's favourites, Tractor,

the Rochdale band who Hewitt guided towards John Peel's Dandelion label. Naturally, Tractor are well featured here.

His front room has always boasted paraphernalia from the great old festivals of the north west, Bickershaw among them, and Hewitt's gargantuan box set in honour of that lavish and sodden affair arrived two years ago. Deeply Vale was no Bickershaw though. While that festival set the template for the, as in organiser Jeremy Beedle's words. "...the gigantism that is to come..." Deeply Vale celebrated the tiny, the lost and the hopeless. A true outsider festival and one that parallels Notting Hill visionaries; Farren, Pink Fairies et al.

Light on the purse strings, Deeply Vale tugged the heartstrings...and it still does.

There are eight hours of music clamped in this box, All of it - like a brash Northern Woodstock, punctuated by dour stage announcements and ghostly local, conversations. As to the music...well, you have to take on board the fact that this is taken straight from a mixing desk, often via sneaky cassette and as such, let's say, lacks finesse. But in this instance, rather like the punk blast of 'Live at The Roxy', it is not necessarily a bad thing. One can certainly fully enjoy, say, The Ruts' superb Jar Wars or, rare this The Fall's belligerent 'Brand New Cadillac' and the previously unreleased version of 'Bingo Master's Breakout' without longing for hi-fi quality.

However, the music is, and was, almost incidental here. What really counts are the images - hippies up trees, punk down the mosh - and countless anecdotes. All this you will find in the true jewel of this box set, the Deeply Vale Festival book. Basically, this is Chris Hewitt's house clasped between the covers. Frenetic, ramshackle and often strangely intriguing. Who would have thought that it is possible to be captivated by, say, memories of bands such as Accident on the East Lancs or, indeed, the joke pub rock hurls of Danny and the Dressmakers, whose line-up included 808 State's Graham Massey and the long lost Vibrant Thigh, with Dub Sex's Mark Hoyle and Martin Coogan, brother of Steve and leader of the fleetingly great Mock Turtles. The bare bones of future Manchester legends are lying naked here. Conceive of the elegant multi-instrumentalist, Graham Massey of 808 State and Biting Tongues thundering through a Danny and the Dressmaker's song such as 'Ernie Bishop's Dead Body'. (Historical 'Corrie' reference, in case you were wondering).

By contrast, the meandering guitars of Steve Hillage and funk prog of Tractor appear with an unlikely aural elegance that was probably lost on the gathering.

Hypnotic and enchanting, here is a curious pre echo of rave and nu-folk. Somehow all this all seems spiced by omnipresent quirkiness of Rochdale itself.

The town is placed significantly at the very edge of Greater Manchester and fired by the brisk winds of those dark, dank moors.

This is the key here. The atmosphere, the defiant aloofness of the town builds solidly into the Deeply Vale ethos. Adrift on the fringe of the Pennine hills, the town seems proudly adrift from Mancunia and, in this case, the music industry of the late seventies. Ignored, culturally at sea, it remains awash with idiosyncratic talent that verges on the perverse. Deeply Vale continued this existential aloofness. It was a port, as it were, for the delightfully unhinged. Well, herein lies their story. A glorious if unholy tale. A lost world. Sad, beautiful and alone. You can taste that unworldly vibe right here...right now.

There are other elements at work here. These were free festivals...FREE! How does that work? Well it doesn't in the modern age and, to some extent, it was insane back then. Fresh in our minds, back then, was the Mick Farren led storming of the Isle of Wight fences: the force was with the disenfranchised. At Deeply Vale, not a jot, not a hint of commercialism darkened the proceedings. It was a world of unhinged ideas and wild polemic.

Drift through the book, I suggest, and pick out snippets here and there, rather than move stoically from A to B. For Deeply Vale was nothing if not chaotic and one hopes that very concept might now clash forcedly against the slick dull affairs of today. As time passes, the very concept of such festivals seems to gain value, rather than lose it.

The eight hours of music does present a few problems. Without memories to back it up, how could one listen to and evaluate, say, six solid tracks from the long lost Wilful Damage? Even I struggled a little at this point. Again, I suggest a method of intake. Play the discs while perusing the book and, indeed, burning the- included in the package- joss-sticks included in the package. Just allow it to soak into the walls of your room. (Leave the room and leave it playing, if need be).

In shorts, this is a veritable Pandora's Box that, upon opening, offers an explosion of memory. All that is missing, is the mud. Yes, at £99 including postage, this isn't cheap but given the price of a ticket of the average deadening gathering in Chelmsford or Somerset, this rare chance to dig deep into festival folklore, doesn't seem so outrageous.