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DVD Review: Free Forever

The late '60s hard rock band Free probably wasn't even heavy enough to be included in our Before There Was Metal section, but they were hugely influential on bands that came up in their wake. Starting out as part of the British blues-rock movement in 1968, their minimalist but quietly virtuosic style caught on relatively slowly, but became huge. Free songs tended to be slower and more burning/intense than the raucous work of bands like The Faces or Humble Pie, never mind cult acts like



Black Cat Bones, Toe Fat or Leaf Hound. But the band was extraordinarily tight, with a locked-in rhythm section providing a perfect platform for stinging lead guitar work and gritty, soulful vocals.

When Free formed, its members were all teenagers - vocalist Paul Rodgers and drummer Simon Kirke were 18, guitarist Paul Kossoff was 17, and bassist Andy Fraser was 15(!). They released their first album, Tons of Sobs, in 1968, and a self-titled follow-up in 1969, neither of which made much commercial impact. It wasn't until their third album, 1970's Fire and Water, and the massive hit single "All Right Now," that they became superstars. They played at the huge Isle of Wight Festival that same year, and quickly recorded a follow-up album, Highway, which wasn't as commercially successful as Fire

and Water had been. Early in 1971, the band split up, in large part due to erratic record sales, disputes between Rodgers and Fraser, and Kossoff's drug problems. A year later, though, they reunited, hoping that getting the band back together would alleviate Kossoff's depression. They made two more albums, *Free At Last* and *Heartbreaker* (the latter featuring a new bassist, Tetsu Yamauchi, and keyboardist John Bundrick), before breaking up for good in 1973. (There's also a live album, simply called *Free Live!*.)

Rodgers and Kirke went on to form *Bad Company* with former *Mott the Hoople* guitarist Mick Ralphs and ex-*King Crimson* bassist Boz Burrell. Kossoff released a solo album, *Back Street Crawler*, and formed a band by the same name that made two more albums, but he died from drug-related heart problems in 1976, at 25.

Anyway, a new two-DVD set by *Free*, *Forever*, came out this week in the U.S. - it was originally released in the UK and Europe in 2006, but the group's American popularity has always been overshadowed by their homeland status. Most of their albums aren't even on CD in America, and their two-CD best-of, *Molten Gold*, is out of print.

Forever contains all the video footage that could be rounded up of the band in its original 1968-71 incarnation; the first disc includes three songs from the German TV show *Beat Club*, five songs from a British TV show called *Doin' Their Thing*, and videos for five more songs. The second disc contains their complete performance from the *Isle of Wight Festival* in 1970. Here's the thing, though: only three songs were actually filmed. So the rest of the performance is audio-only, with a screen-saver-like set of shifting images (photos of the band, mostly) scrolling by as you listen. There are also interviews, circa 2006, with the three surviving bandmembers. If you're a *Free* fan, you should definitely own this. If you're not, it may convert you.