Fishbone's unique and grown-up style thrills Axis crowd

By MARK ROMAN

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HREE HITS AND SOUL HEADS, or so says the new album, Fishbone, checked in Wednesday night for a long overdue therapy session in Boston. The sold-out crowd was in desperate need of the healing touch of this Los Angeles sextet's unique blend of styles. Since their spring tour, when they were opening for the L.A. band the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Fishbone has tightened up its collective chops and earned a well-deserved round of headline bookings.

A huge crowd waited on the streets until well after limos before the doors were finally opened. By the time the band took the stage, the packed Axis was cooking. Literally. "Look at that," said trombonist Chris Dowd, "there's sweat dripping from the ceiling. I think that's kinda cool." Credit goes to the band for whipping the energetic crowd into a rabid, almost-dancing, stage-diving frenzy. Credit goes to Dowd for swinging off into the low-hanging stage apparatus and showing the crowd how to do it right.

There's no doubt the band put in a superlative performance. Balanced against the bad-ass hip hop of drummer Fish and bassist John Finer (a smallish Magic Johnson look alike) were the R & B horns of vocalist Dowd and backup vocalist Angelo Moore on sax. Dowd played trombone still an over-enthusiastic stage-driver inadvertently crushed his instrument. He stuck with his trumpet for the rest of the set. Guitarist Kendall Jones added gritty chops from the Parliament/Funkadelic book. It was the kind of playing the V8 heavy metal set can only dream about. Biggest and baddest of the night were the Fat Albert theme, a Fishhouse favorite, and "Freddie's Dead," a cover of an old Curtis Mayfield song which is on the new album.

Fishbone takes the Fat Albert as their anthem, a song which they use to confront the drug menace head-on. "We've gotta have a good time, indeed." Twenty years have made this Curtis Mayfield song more timely than ever. The band played it with a fiery passion, a personal involvement borne out in the music. One could not help but to move and dance and thrash to the beat.

"Freddie's Dead" was reprised later on the tour in the set, as there was plenty of untapped energy begging to burst in that tune. Interspersed were "Patty at Ground Zero," and "Slow Ben Movin' (Howard Beach Party)," a searing indictment of the Queens racial incidents.

Great music, wild times, bruises and sweat, material that matters — Fishbone shows they've grown up. The band displays a rare coupling of musicianship, satire, and social commentary that brings to mind the twisted genius of a George Clinton or Frank Zappa, except Fishbone isn't quite that twisted. They have a sharp edge, just like a razor. There's a focused message and an inspired performance. Leave it to Fishbone to break all of the rules and still remember to move the house.

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