

THE POLICE

From the first time they set foot on American soil, The Police were hailed as a "must-see" band -- a group that alchemized an already impressive studio sound into something utterly otherworldly when they hit the stage. Masters of controlled energy and insidiously evocative melodies, Stewart Copeland, Sting and Andy Summers played with the improvisational instincts of a jazz trio and the raw energy of a punk-rock band -- a combination that made them one of the definitive rock groups of the '70s and '80s.

But while the band's recording career has been well-documented most recently on 1993's MESSAGE IN A BOX: THE COMPLETE RECORDINGS -- only those lucky enough to have seen The Police in concert could claim first-hand knowledge of the band's live precedence. Until now, that is. With the release of THE POLICE LIVE!, an extensive two-volume chronicle of the trio's entire career, fans and neophytes alike can relive the experience.

THE POLICE LIVE! is a decidedly unfussy affair, documenting just two concerts - a legendary 1979 gig at Boston's intimate Orpheum Club and the Atlanta stop on the band's Synchronicity tour in 1983. Few bands would be well-served by such careful scrutiny of isolated moments, but as the recordings of these two nights prove, the Police more than pass muster.

The first CD and cassette, Live In Boston, which was taped just after the release of REGGATTA DE BLANC, kicks off in appropriately visceral fashion with a rousing rendition of "Next To You," a high-energy theme reprised in such early-days bashers as "Landlord" and "Fall Out" (the first Police single, which dates back to 1977). But even at this point -- when their peers were stranded in the three-minute pop song jungle -- The Police had already developed the sparkling instrumental interplay that they'd come to be lauded for.

As early as 1979, the band was able to stretch out -- to nearly nine minutes on a compelling "Bed's Too Big Without You" -- allowing all three members to bob and weave dexterously, never slipping into the overblown orchestrations of then-recently-extinct dinosaur-rockers. Between Summers' alternately scathing and delicate guitar work, Copeland's deceptively complex polyrhythms and Sting's loping bass and soaring vocals (he warns of impending laryngitis at one point, but you'd be hard-pressed to hear any such difficulty in the grooves), The Police were indisputably the most adventurous ambassadors of the genre then known as new wave.

They quickly outgrew that - and all other - pigeonholes. Although The Police existed for just over six years (and released only five albums while extant), the band's contribution to the lexicon of rock was immense. They were the first band to fully integrate the no-nonsense approach of punk rock and the spirit-moving positive energy of reggae, a combination that imbued such classic songs as "Roxanne" (the band's first stateside hit) and "Walking on the Moon."

The Police moved at a startling pace over the next few years: albums like the Grammy-winning REGGATTA DE BLANC and ZENYATTA MONDATTA (which spawned hits like "Don't Stand So Close to Me," which itself won a Grammy as 1981's Best Rock Performance).

After a year-long sabbatical, the members reunited to record SYNCHRONICITY, an album that would prove to be their studio swansong. The most successful Police album yet, it produced one of the most-remembered rock ballads of the '80s ("Every Breath You Take") and led the band to embark on a wildly successful tour that would complete their journey from sweaty clubs to stadiums. In fact, the Police ranked the #1 most played band on U.S. radio in the '80s.

But as borne out by the second part of THE POLICE LIVE! - recorded live at Atlanta's Omni - The Police lost none of their passion in the process. Kicking off with "Synchronicity," a gripping two-part meditation that revealed Sting's increasingly philosophical lyrical bent, the trio delivered a smoldering intense set of songs, as gripping when burning on a low blue flame (as on a measured "Walking In Your Footsteps") as in full-on crowd igniting mode ("Message in a Bottle," "Wrapped Around Your Finger").

The clearest barometer of The Police's incredible growth as a band -- over a comparatively short timespan -- is the brace of songs that appear on both volumes of THE POLICE LIVE!. You can hear it in Sting's voice - a plaintive wail on the 1979 club version of "Can't Stand Losing You," a rich commanding presence on the later take. You can hear it in the band's willingness to experiment, stretching and reworking songs like "Roxanne" (transformed from simple ditty into a lengthy show-stopping anthem) and a set closing "So Lonely."

The Police had phenomenal chart success and won a multitude of accolades both public and critical, but they never allowed such peripherals to overshadow their commitment to the music itself. **THE POLICE LIVE!** bears out that from the beginning to end, providing a clear, concise picture of a band that took us on a short-but-unforgettable trip through the inner reaches of its soul - and let us have a great time in the process.