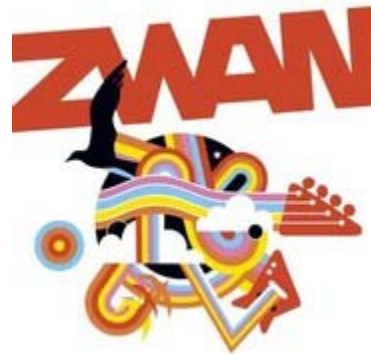


Apr 25, 2003

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Zwan

Mary Star of the Sea

by Daniel Q. Marek
February 19, 2003

Zwan
Mary Star of the Sea
Reprise/ Warner Records
3 stars

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In December of 2000 we saw the fall of Billy Corgan's famed Chicago quartet the Smashing Pumpkins, but even as the teary eyed patrons left the Metro that night, he was already mulling over an idea for a super group like none before -- Zwan.

Compiled from a cross section of influential acts, the band consists of Billy Burke (aka Corgan) on vocals, Chavez guitarist Matt Sweeney, Tortoise guitarist David Pajo, Smashing Pumpkins drummer Jimmy Chamberlin, and A Perfect Circle bassist Paz Lenchantin.

Despite the fact that super groups are all the rage now (think Audioslave, Flaming Lips backing Beck, Grohl backing the Queens, ext.), Zwan seems more like a continuation of Corgan's signature songwriting -- simply moving from one powerful wall of sound to another.

Beginning off with the floaty "Lyric" it's obvious that Corgan's control on the album must have been heavy. With Chamberlin on the drums and three guitars in front, at first the song sounds like a b-side Pumpkin's track. Melodies fly by as guitar solos fade in and out between keyboard twinkling and great backup vocals by Lenchantin.

With "Settle Down" the band shows off its pop sense, but never oversteps the boundaries of serious rock, while "Declaration of Fate" takes off into a whirlwind of guitars that sucks up the air until you grasp Corgan's "Maybe we were born to love" theme.

The spacey guitar riffed intro to "Honestly" is accented by keyboard notes popping in around the love stricken lyrics until the bounding chorus kicks in and wraps you in comfortable Pumpkin warmth.

"Of a Broken Heart," one of the most memorable pieces on the album, begins off ala-"Disarm" with light acoustic work peppered with vibraphone-like notes and violins until Chamberlin brushes in and creates the backdrop for a fantastic ballad.

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Breaking the mood, the band dives headfirst into the rhythmically bouncy and full "Ride a Black Swan." The song brings an era of later Pumpkin material with heavier guitar sounds and driving drums, but with Sweeny and Pajo on Corgan's wings, the guitar slices leave your head spinning much more often than previous projects.



The 14 minute opus "Jesus / Mary Star of the Sea" rounds out the religious tinged theme on the album (don't worry, although the album could be followed like a hymn, it's not a religious sell-out) with a gospel-like Corgan begging for call and response before he explodes into the fury of "God and Heaven are all my own" backed by Hendrix-style solo run-offs and improvisational ecstasy.

Although the disc itself is a prize in any collectors library, the limited release DVD/CD combo bucks is worth the money. The behind the scenes studio and concert footage opens a new light into this somewhat mysterious quintet.

If Corgan grabbed 'God' status with you in the Smashing Pumpkins, it should be obvious that he would follow this path with the character of Billy Burke (who is actually a Florida evangelist). With an artist that made the 90s bow down to Infinite Sadness with songs of helplessness and loneliness, Corgan's music left a wake of musical mastermind that couldn't be imitated without sounding like himself. Perhaps that is the biggest success, and problem, with Zwan -- the fact that Corgan can't (or doesn't choose to) escape his own signature sound opens paths to exploring the boundaries of his songwriting. These are boundaries that the Pumpkin's couldn't attain. Only a group of like-minded excalibur musicians could attempt to pull this off.

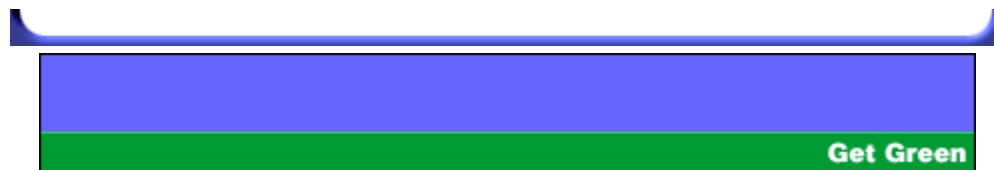


Zwan

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