

Bowie keeps Tin Machine running strong

The advance hype surrounding David Bowie's *Tin Machine* project made it seem to be one of the sure-fire flops of the year. However, Bowie fans everywhere can rejoice — the album is actually good. *Tin Machine* is by no means another *Ziggy Stardust*, but it is a welcome relief from recent (bad) Bowie albums.

For the uninitiated, Tin Machine is a band of which Bowie is but one member; that is, according to press reports. But, on the eponymous album, Bowie's commanding vocal presence and the fact that Bowie wrote or co-wrote all but one song make it reasonably clear who the "most equal" member is. For this reason, one tends to treat this album as a Bowie record.

David Bowie and Iggy Pop have been on-again, off-again creative collaborators for years. Bowie produced several Pop albums, including such comebacks as *Lust for Life* and the mildly successful *Blah-Blah-Blah* (1986). Pop hasn't had as much direct input on Bowie's records, but he

Brian Springer Album

has often taken steps which have influenced later Bowie productions. This is true of *Tin Machine*. Pop's last release, *Instinct*, marked a return to bare-bones grunge rock. Now, a year later, Bowie has co-opted some of *Instinct's* approach, resulting in *Tin Machine's* straightforward rock.

Since *Let's Dance*, Bowie has been in the creative doldrums. Both *Tonight and Never Let Me Down* were disappointing, sloppy attempts to recreate that charm. Taking a cue from Pop, Bowie rediscovered the classic garage-band sound. One must credit Bowie with overcoming one shortcoming of his recent albums — the tendency to release inferior remakes of Pop/Bowie compositions which originally appeared on Pop albums. On *Never Let Me Down*, Bowie's

version of "Bang Bang" was, well, unnecessary, if not simply mediocre.

Tin Machine consists of: Bowie on vocals and guitar (!), Reeves Gabrels on lead guitar and Hunt and Tony Sales on drums and bass, respectively. The Sales brothers (yes, sons of comedian Soupy Sales), who toured with Pop and Bowie in 1977, provide a rock-solid rhythm section over which Bowie gives some of his best vocal performances in years. Gabrels attacks the songs with a flamboyant approach that only rarely degenerates into the overkill riffing that (normally gifted) Peter Frampton felt compelled to use on *Never Let Me Down*. There are points that cry out for Carlos Alomar, but, for the most part, Gabrels turns in a fine effort.

This is, without a doubt, a rock album. Co-produced by Tin Machine and Tim Palmer (who also co-produced Robert Plant's synthetic-sounding *Shaken 'n' Stirred*), the sound is rough and aggressive. In fact, *Tin Machine* is reminiscent of *Station to Station* (but a bit harder and faster). Bowie displays more bile than he has in ages, and only rarely does the anger seem comical.

The opening song, "Heaven's in Here," takes the listener somewhat by surprise — until the vocals enter, it could be the bluesy raunch of The Fabulous Thunderbirds. This isn't what most people expected, but it is a welcome twist. Once the shock

wears off, the song becomes a paean to a traditional rock subject, sex. The next song, the title cut, seems to mourn bad social conditions in England. The song works because of its ferocious beat and energy, although the negative lyric imagery is a bit heavy-handed, as it is on much of the album. England seems an oppressive place — "I'm neither red nor black nor white/I'm grey and blown to hell."

"Prisoner of Love" is one of the most effective (and one of the few optimistic) songs on the album. Everything on this track clicks. The lyrics are rather simple ("My heart says no, no one but you"), but this is one reason why the song is such a joy.

If "Prisoner of Love" is *Tin Machine* at its best, the next song, "Crack City," is its worst. Musically, the song resembles the tongue-in-cheek, joke-garage-band simplicity of Sam Kinison's cover of "Wild Thing." The lyrics are almost as funny as Kinison's, albeit unintentionally. When Bowie tunelessly drones, "Don't whore your little bodies/To the worms of paradise," one has to wonder about his state of mind. The cliched fade-out, fade-in doesn't help. Later, "Video Crime" fails to work for some of the same reasons.

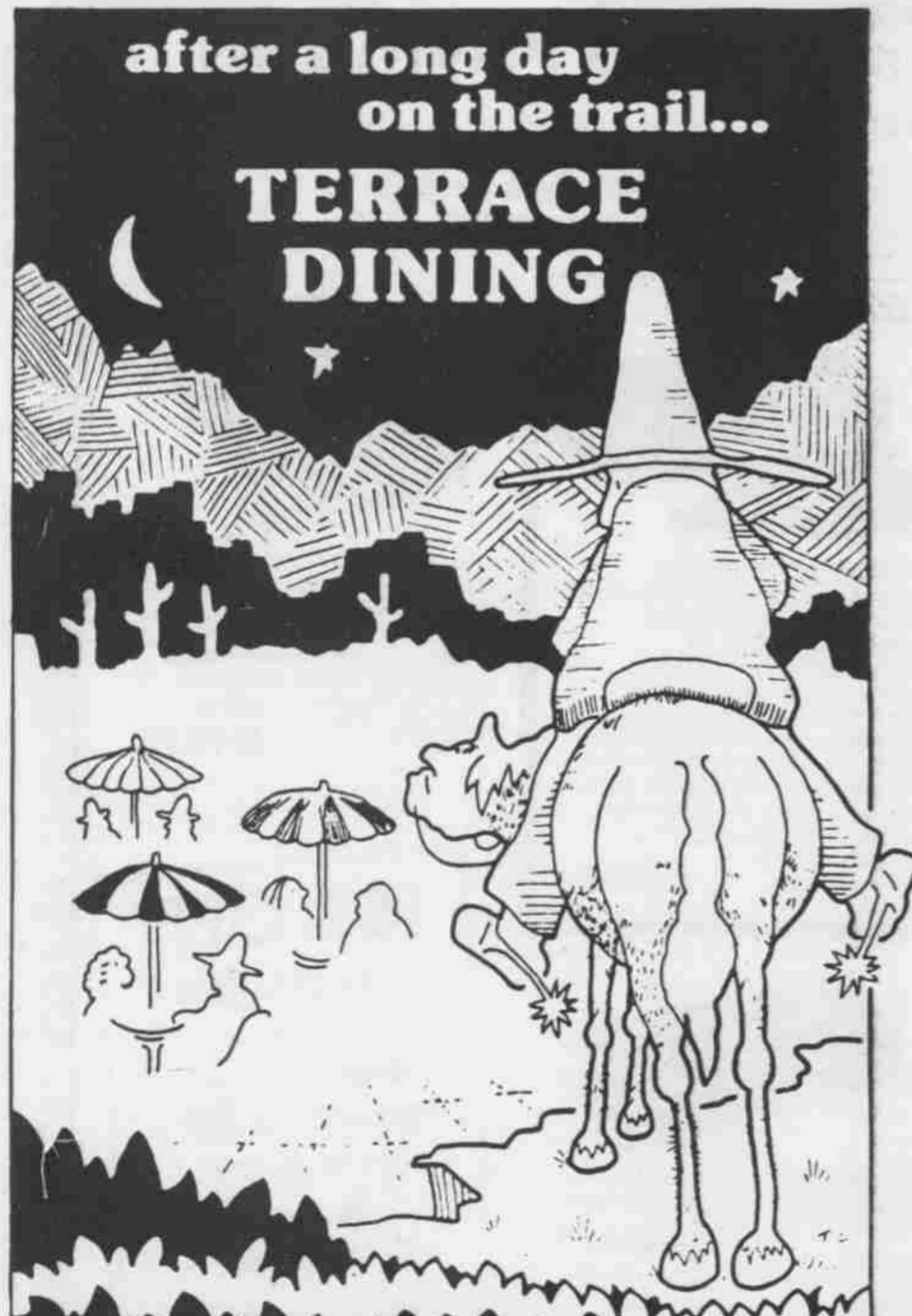
These gripes aside, *Tin Machine* contains much vintage Bowie. "Under the God" lashes out at racists with almost Morton Downey-like explicitness. The song motors along with an intensity Bowie hasn't been

able to capture lately. "Amazing" is rather slow, simple and dreamlike ("Your love's amazing"). This is an example of Bowie's best, as on "Prisoner of Love," when he is happy and not devoid of love.

Two of the best songs, "Run" and "Sacrifice Yourself," don't appear on the LP, but does this matter anymore? "Run" picks up where the one gem from *Never Let Me Down*, "Time Will Crawl," left off. With a solid beat, weaving acoustic guitars, and more poetic lyrics ("Wish I were a soldier/Crossing an azure sea"), this is classic Bowie. "Sacrifice Yourself" was touted in one major magazine as taking "Suffragette City" for a starting point, but this was probably only for the line "Wham, bam, thank you Charlie." It is intense, blitzkrieging rock.

There is one final complaint. The version of John Lennon's "Working Class Hero" is pathetically lame. It sounds like it could be the next cover of a classic song by The Firm. The song loses all of its considerable power. This choice for a cover could have been a great choice, but the performance, particularly the guitar work, just doesn't fit. Enough said.

Despite several flaws, this is truly a very good album, making future Bowie output promising (again). Choice cuts like "Run," "Prisoner of Love" and "Baby Can Dance" will be welcome on the radio this summer. Maybe the lyrics are unintentionally humorous at points, but the anger may have been necessary for this album to be made. This is not great Bowie, but it is good Bowie, making it far superior to most current releases. Here's hoping for even better next time.



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