

Guided by Voices Turns Sad, Accessible; Eve Hits Sophomore Slump

Guided by Voices Isolation Drills

★★★★ 1/2
Artists make their best work when they're in pain, and Guided by Voices ringleader Robert Pollard is no exception to the rule.

The fourth-grade-teacher-to-indie-rock-star has been touring heavily in the last year, following the exposure from 2000's *Do the Collapse*. While away from his Ohio home, he's been separated from his wife and family for longer stretches than ever before, and the dysfunction has weighed heavily on him.

Fear not, Guided by Voices fans, Pollard's quirkiness and inscrutable lyrics are still around. But the man of a thousand melodies is sad, and it shows.

The new record, *Isolation Drills*, is a somber outing for the normally bright Pollard, as the title suggests. The loneliness of the road is draped over the 16

songs he has submitted for your approval. But if anything, the depression translates into great music — the best and most beautiful Guided by Voices has produced since 1996's *Under the Bushes Under the Stars*.

For perhaps the first time, Pollard is writing about himself. "How's My Drinking?" is a fight with his alcohol abuse set to sad, deliberate music. "Fine to See You" is about a melancholy visit home. Both songs are gloomy, and the better for it.

Even the brighter rock songs are bitersweet and moodily atmospheric. "Fair Touching," "Twilight Campfighter" and "Unspirited" all have subtle hooks and a tinge of wistfulness despite their jangly sound and catchy melodies.

Speaking of catchy, that's what Pollard does better than anyone: write a song that plants itself in your head. "Glad Girls," he has admitted, is one of

the catchiest songs he's ever written. It's a superbly bright anthem that dares you not to sing along. The same could be said for "Chasing Heather Crazy." He sings both with his endearing pseudo-British accent, and with gusto unbecoming in his middle age.

Isolation Drills has a thick, gritty rock sound, a tweak of the maligned pop gloss of *Do the Collapse*. Credit new producer Rob Schnapf (Elliott Smith and Beck) for focusing the band's rock edge. It's a refreshing sound — Doug Gillard's strong, ringing guitar — though not a return to form.

The hissing, four-track all-stars of the mid-'90s are now long gone. Enter a more accessible incarnation of the band, different but equal.

All the bleeding heart lo-fi fans should stop screaming "Judas!" and wake up to the best solid album their hero has produced since first breaking through. Pollard is one of the best songwriters of our time, and *Isolation Drills* proves he can do it smiling or crying.

Brian Millikin

Eve Scorpion

★★
Scorpios are known to be enigmatic, receptive, introverted and, most importantly, forces to be reckoned with. Just when you think you've got them figured

out, they'll stun you with their passion and spontaneity.

When Eve stormed on the scene in 1998, she exhibited all of these qualities. As the first (and only) lady of the Ruff Ryders family, she was an exciting and relevant addition to a domineering posse that includes hard-core rappers like DMX and Drag-On. After holding her own on the label's *Ryde or Die Vol. 1*, Eve's no-nonsense flow and eye-catching physique helped to lift her into the small cadre of credible female rappers.

Indeed, the Philly native's first solo effort was so widely anticipated that she became the first woman to have her debut album (*First Lady of Ruff Ryders*) enter the Billboard 200 chart at No. 1.

With her sophomore album *Scorpion*, Eve certainly remains an enigma, but the only sting you'll experience is the disbelief of having paid for this disorganized ode to played-out rap themes.

The first single "Who's That Girl?," which is anchored by a chorus line lifted from Madonna's chart hit, is a catchy ditty that is wholly unrepresentative of the album's sound. One reason for the inconsistency is the rush of gritty, meaningless tracks. Another is the simple fact that for much of the album, you aren't even listening to Eve.

Apparently, the definition of "solo" has yet to enter the Ruff Ryder dictio-

nary. Following the trend set by her label mates and her own multiplatinum debut, *Scorpion* has so many special guests that only two cuts are actual Eve tracks.

That pair of tracks ("Cowboy" and "Giri") is the best twosome on an album that features Da Brat, Stephen Marley and Teena Marie, among many others. Like *First Lady*, the majority of the pairings on *Scorpion* are well-intentioned but ineffective.

Despite her successful commercial efforts, Eve still finds herself hard-pressed to prove that she's "pretty with the heels on and shitty with the Tim boots." So there's "Gangsta Bitches," a promising posse cut with Trina and Da Brat that is ruined by the former's off-beat verse.

Then, for three songs, Eve lets her Ruff Ryders dogs loose. Their bite isn't quite what it was a few years back as

each track is worse than the one that preceded it.

Thankfully, the good Dr. Dre is in the house to keep *Scorpion* from flat-lining.

His production on "That's What It Is," which sports a well-placed chorus from Styles of the Loxx, will have heads nodding; and the track he laces for "Let Me Blow Ya Mind" makes sure that Eve's teaming with No Doubt's Gwen Stefani isn't a waste.

But when the smoke clears, *Scorpion* is still little more than a schizophrenic collection of stars, sounds and styles. The album lacks a true center to keep it all together.

There are 13 tracks, 14 guests artists, nine producers, four original beats and three decent songs. It all adds up to one big disappointment in the first lady's second term.

Michael Woods

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