

GZA Serves Spicy Lyrics, Stale Production

By TACQUE KIRKSEY
Staff Writer

It's funny how musical ground-breakers can more or less disappear.

Meanwhile, mediocre pretenders and usurpers stick around longer than should be possible by cosmic law.

The first half of the '90s set the stage for hip hop's immense commercial success, both sonically and in terms of scope. Yet the Wu-Tang Clan, one of the foremost purveyors of that success, has been largely lost in the undertow of the last decade's trends in rap.

At the helm of the Wu's attack was the GZA, or the Genius, who co-founded the group. As the collective began to lose focus throughout the '90s, he went on to have the most consistent solo career. His latest release, *Legend of the Liquid Sword*, is a cinematic, conceptual album fraught with the Wu's ubiquitous

theme — hip hop as the stuff of epic. "Auto Bio" leads off the record with GZA's booming flow chronicling his career before and after the Wu-Tang universe. The track's spare instrumentation, centered on string swells and a slithering piano line, is reminiscent of Wu's trademark sinister sound.

The single "Knock, Knock" features tense yet bouncy production with the GZA taking stabs at music, business, politics and the degree to which they have assimilated hip hop. A great deal of the rapper's lyrical energy on the album is directed against his industry.

His longtime partners RZA and Masta Killa make guest appearances on "Fam (Members Only)," bringing their word-twisting visual rhymes to the track.

This cut is evocative of the last Wu-Tang Clan release, 2001's *Iron Flag*.

Sound-wise, the album's best song is the title track. GZA boasts of his near-divine lyrical prowess over interlocking loops of piping synth sounds and guitar licks as Allen Anthony sings the hook with a smooth, Ronald Isley-like flavor.

Overall, *Legend of the Liquid Sword* finds the GZA and the Wu-Tang mystique at a crossroads. Some emcees have become overly ambitious musically, letting the background noise overshadow their flow. But a number of artists from the Wu-Tang roster have fallen into the opposite trap, consistently lacing their well-honed lyrical skills with predictable production.

This is *Legend's* major flaw — fans

familiar with the Wu and its offshoots will find themselves in an all-too-familiar territory, sonically and thematically.

However, GZA is a rapper's rapper, and for those more interested in word-play than backing tracks, this album won't disappoint. Lyrically, he still creates the verbal cinema of GZA's *Liquid* and Raekwon's *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx*, but with more emphasis on control as opposed to sheer head-banging bravado.

The problem is thus — as innovators, the GZA and the Wu-Tang collective deserve their place in the progression of contemporary hip hop. Yet numerous pretenders and internal troubles have diminished the Wu presence. Can the Wu maintain its place in the pantheon of rap as a younger generation of listeners comes into its own?

Despite its lyrical potency, *Legend of the Liquid Sword* and other less-than-revelatory albums make such a return to prominence seem unlikely.

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album reviews

GZA
Legend of the Liquid Sword
★★★★☆

Icy Songsmith Struggles With Sentiment, Ghost

By BRIAN MILLIKIN
Staff Writer

Joseph Arthur is one cool customer — almost too cool.

The little-known, critically acclaimed songsmith makes a studio-savvy brand of melancholic pop. Overstuffed with textures and synthesizers, each beeping and blipping soundscape is more icily detached and slickly postmodern than the next.

The sound of Arthur's solid sophomore album *Redemption's Son* is nothing short of stunning — each song is a thickly layered, electronic epic of emotion — but it isn't always enough. The production is often too cold and too distant for the yearning and longing in the songs. Sometimes the studio effects are too self-aware, too hip and contemporary for

their own good.

The result is something like Beck's classic *Odelay* on morphine — polished cool and dreamily melodic. Some songs are bathed in gentle mechanical ambi-

ence, accompanied by Arthur's hushed speak-singing drawl or angel-voiced falsetto. They are wounded songs, songs about confused love and alienation — emotionally and quite literally.

"I think aliens abducted me," he croons in the superb "I Would Rather Hide." There's a painful, Neil Young sadness to the lovely "Innocent World," and quiet, apprehensive love abounds in songs like "Honey and the Moon." But that isn't to say that all of

Redemption's Son is that subdued. Many songs drown under fierce beds of synthesizers and heavy sound effects, becoming something like pop of the apocalypse. Arthur can growl as well as he can gush, as in the angered "Permission," even if it doesn't complement him quite as well.

The one thing that Arthur connects with is his hollow spirituality. If there's a ghost in Arthur's machines, it's the Holy Ghost. His search for a response from a higher power is like a chorus repeated through the album's entirety, "Dear Lord" might be the best prayer song ever written — a rollicking, electronic Shaker revival, complete with gospel cooing and choir hand-clapping, a

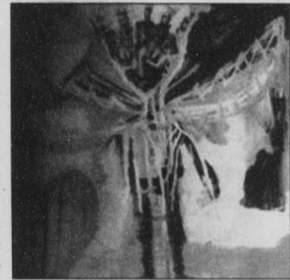
repentant rock pastiche. Arthur finds his music's soul, and it's in the soul-searching.

He spends an awfully long time looking for it, too, as *Redemption's Son* checks in at an arduous 75 minutes. Brevity isn't one of Arthur's gifts, and several songs could easily be trimmed to make the album more manageable.

A long record is sometimes a sign of an artist's lack of faith in his material, as if he didn't trust that the songs were strong enough if not in a pack. That might be true of *Redemption's Son*, as a lot of Arthur's songs aren't always as impressive as the instrumentation. The melodies don't always live up to the promise and thrust of the production — the Christmas tree not always as worthwhile as its ornaments. He seems more comfortable with a dial in his hand, not a pen.

And that might be fine by Arthur's standards. He might be too cool to care.

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album reviews

Joseph Arthur
Redemption's Son
★★★★☆

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Dreis Drowns in Pretensions; Zumbido Combines Cultures

Tad Dreis
Solitaire for Two
★★★★☆

Tad Dreis' sophomore attempt sounds like an alt-country response to The Beatles' *Rubber Soul* with its soothing guitars and earthy melodies.

The only problem with *Solitaire for Two* is Dreis sometimes falls into triteness that ends up sounding like The Beatles playing on Fisher-Price instruments and deriving their lyrical inspiration from J. Lo.

But it is important to recognize that there is clear talent in Dreis' music — the album just sounds as if it were released prematurely. With a little more work, all the songs could have been given the same poppy playability as "Back in a Few" and "Bureau de Change," the album's only instantly appealing songs.

Unfortunately, a number of songs on *Solitaire for Two* have weak elements that foil their strengths. "I Said I," the album's opening track, is indicative of how Dreis' songwriting sometimes lacks cohesion.

The instrumentals found within are simplistic, taking advantage of beautifully upbeat acoustic strumming and minimal drumming. It's the type of music that saturates your car when you're driving around on sunny days with your windows down, somewhat like a sonic sunshine found in some Wilco song.

But where Jeff Tweedy creates abstract images that roam the listener's head, Dreis writes a Hallmark card about missing a lover.

When Dreis sings "I miss you, even though I'll see you soon," it seems like anyone who can string together "Roses are red/ Violets are blue" can be a singer-songwriter.

The same kind of juvenile lyrics ruin "Lottery of Love." Dreis statically compares a lottery to someone's attempts at love, lyrically killing a wandering guitar.

Sadly, the album's best songs are hidden between bad tracks. Even though everyone likes a good song, your smile's a little smaller after sifting through a pile of crap to find it.

The swooping melody of "Good for You" is infectious, but it follows "I Said I." The two songs' instrumentals are so similar that "Good for You's" first impression is shattered by its annoying twin.

"T-Shirt" is the album's best number with its seductively dirty-blues swagger. In the song, Dreis finally finds the grit and depression in his voice that was missing from the album.

If Dreis would have found a bottle of whiskey in which to soak his vocals, he could have been able to save the lyrically weaker songs and — ultimately —

the whole album.

By Kemp Baldwin

Radio Zumbido
Los Últimos Días del AM
★★★★☆

Sometimes, an album is so strong musically that the words simply don't matter.

Radio Zumbido's release *Los Últimos Días del AM* proves that even when someone is singing in a foreign language — or in this case, sampling — the effect can be just as powerful, if not even more so.

Trippy, electronic and textured, *del AM* mixes several different sounds, cultures and feelings into a multifaceted and complex album that nevertheless is refreshingly simple. The album doesn't try to change the way you look at the world, comment on the situation in Afghanistan or break your heart — it's just catchy music.

Juan Carlos Barrios (who makes up all of Radio Zumbido) recreates the sensation of listening to low-budget AM radio in rural Mexico, picking up an eclectic mix of every imaginable genre.

Whether it is salsa, reggae, pop, psychedelica, bomba, rock, classical, flamenco or jazz, Barrios weaves together tracks out of trash, creating a tapestry of tunes that washes over the listener.

Though the depth of songs can be intimidating sometimes — the rolling and roaring "Lo-Fi Chicken Bus" crushes with its blaring trumpets stacked on crackling samples — the album generally is an exercise in experimentation.

The purring "Radio Solola" and the crisp guitar synth of "Livingston Buzz" are reminiscent of DJ Shadow's *The Private Press*, but Barrios is different because of what the album does as a whole. Each track bleeds seamlessly into the next, making skipping useless and even naming the standout songs futile.

The tight structure and complexity, plus the simple headbanging fun of "La Rueda," define the album as a whole, but the sensual slickness found on "Caracol" makes it the best cut.

Though not the most energetic or shocking electronic exploration, it is the most daring. Barrios shows true talent and bravado by layering rattling salsa beats on top of hypnotic electronic synth.

And while some of the tracks have bass lines and snaps that could be danceable, this is an album meant more for the drive back home from the club than under strobe lights and towers of foam.

It's techno for the quiet, contemplative type. Drum and bass for the worn traveler. DJ Shadow for the seriously stoned.

By Nick Parker

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