

'Nirvana' is not exactly a musical paradise

Robert Plant

Manic Nirvana

Es Paranza/Atlantic
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Listening to the latest Robert Plant album is a frustrating experience — not because it's bad, but because it isn't any better than it is.

Certainly the concept is intriguing. Using "Tall Cool One" from 1988's platinum *Now and Zen* as a starting point, Plant combines dance beats, inventive keyboards and his trademark wailing voice, all drenched in noisy, overdriven guitars. While *Now and Zen* was focused, too often *Manic Nirvana* is cluttered.

With both classic rock and heavy metal riding waves of popularity, Plant attempts to be true to his past while steering the music in a different direction — unlike Bon Jovi, for instance. In press releases, Plant says, "I think *Now and Zen* was a little cagey, a little safe ... I think I took a couple of options which were a bit soft. *Manic Nirvana* now reverses those decisions." Unfortunately, in pursuing his admirable goal, Plant doesn't quite make the grade.

The band from *Now and Zen* returns intact for Plant's fifth solo album. Drummer Chris Blackwell, bassist Charlie Jones, and keyboardist Phil Johnstone work to create interesting textures for guitarist Doug Boyle to crash through. Plant's voice is strong as always, but less in control than on past releases. Plant and Johnstone also act as producers, injecting tape and synthesizer effects into the basic sound, for a complex

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mix.

But, like fellow soft drink ad veteran Robert Palmer on *Simply Irresistible*, with *Manic Nirvana* Plant relies on audio equivalents of MTV techniques like fast cutting and flashing images. True, the sound is complex and interesting, but that doesn't necessarily make for continued listening pleasure. Side one is far more successful than side two, largely because it relies more upon the straightforward, hard-driving rock that is Plant's heritage.

The first single, "Hurting Kind (I've Got My Eyes on You)," leads off the album with a winner. Boyle's brain-melting guitar riffs over thudding bass and keyboards highlight a band in overdrive. Another successful track is "SSS&Q," which drapes tongues of hard rock guitar fire over the techno-pop leanings of Plant's third album, *Shaken 'n Stirred*.

"I Cried" attempts to create the dynamic, acoustic-electric fusion of *Led Zeppelin III*, but it doesn't heat up until the middle of the song. "She Said" starts with a flourish of keyboards before kicking into a swirling rocker sounding like INXS on acid.

Most of the other tunes have serious flaws. "Big Love" wastes the killer groove and reverb-laced drums of the verse with a second-rate chorus. On "Nirvana," Plant gets too ambitious, trying to combine an excess of ideas with a minimum of focus. "Tie Dye on the Highway" opens with the Woodstock quote "What we have in mind is breakfast in bed for 400,000," before Plant launches into



Bob and the boys: (l-r) Doug Boyle, Chris Blackwell, Mr. Plant, Charlie Jones and Phil Johnstone

a busy mix of muddy keyboards and chunky guitar, to a drum beat reminiscent of the Psychedelic Furs' "High Wire Days." "Liars Dance" is a Zep-derivative acoustic number, but its clashing guitar and vocal rhythms in the chorus are cumbersome.

The sole cover tune on *Manic Nirvana* is a rendition of Kenny Dino's "Your Ma Said You Cried in Your Sleep Last Night." This cut is already receiving airplay for its "unavoidable" surface noise — Plant sampled the bass drum from his own scratchy copy of the original record.

Nice gimmick, but the song is subpar. In the last verse, Plant adds the familiar lyrics "Hey hey mama/Say the way you move/Gonna make you sweat/Gonna make you groove, etc." ("for the benefit of true Zep followers," according to the press release). Yes, Robert, you're calling up the classic Zeppelin tradition, but dammit, how 'bout some new lyrics?

Manic Nirvana finds Robert Plant striving for an inventive new sound. There are several strong cuts here, but, like Led Zeppelin, Plant too frequently goes to excess, trying to do

too much. Had the concept worked better, Plant might have produced a definitive album for the 90's. As it is, *Manic Nirvana* is rough going at best, but excusable for its inventiveness with the old formulas.

THE RATINGS

- — miserable
- — mediocre
- — enjoyable
- — quite good
- — unmissable

'88 to '90 Clef compilation is a cheery vinyl effort

The Clef Hangers

Take Two!

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It's not often that a group of young college guys band together to record an album containing an a capella version of Ray Charles' "Georgia on My Mind" side by side with the jazz classic "Stormy Weather." Even less likely is that they would throw the two songs in with a lineup which includes the Beatles' "When I'm Sixty Four" and Yaz's "Only You," and dedicate the work to "The University Baptist Church, Jim Beam, and all women."

In *Take Two!* the Clef Hangers manage to do this and come up with a tape which lands this side of fantastic.

For those who may not have heard

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of them, the Clefs are UNC's elite, all-male, barbershop-style singing troupe. Membership in this group is highly competitive — about 50 men audition annually for fewer than 15 coveted spots. The competition is increased by the fact that once someone is accepted, he may stay until he graduates, without needing to re-audition. This being the case, only seven men, out of about 100 who tried out, were added between 1988 and 1990.

Take Two! includes the work of the present day Clef Hangers as well as that of the previous troupe. Recorded at two professional studios, the album's sound quality is superb. This was surprising, considering the reputation student groups have for turning out less-than-spectacular

recordings.

It is difficult to make a comparison between the vocal quality of the '88-'89 and the '89-'90 Clefs. Both groups are overflowing with talent at every level, be it bass or first tenor. A comparison can be made, however, between the two respective years' song choices. The first year's compilation is more (and the word is used lightly) daring. The second, with some notable exceptions, is a bit on the conservative side.

Two pre-reggae, Harry Belafonte-type tunes, "Fly in Me Face" and "Jamaican Farewell," stand out in *Take One*, the side performed by the '88-'89 Clefs. Both renditions do appropriate justice to Island Calypso and to Belafonte, with a Rastaman imitation done by Paul Bowman, '91, in "Fly in Me Face" that is fantastic, making for a memorable song.

A Clef Hanger version of Sam Cook's "Wonderful World" is done in "Clef Hanger Blues." Soloist David Moffit, '89, manages to pull the song

through its sometimes funny, sometimes silly lyrics, which concern the trials of a lovestruck Clef, too busy to be with his girlfriend.

The Carolina Fight Songs at side one's conclusion are entertaining but a bit too polished. They are, however, a step above the second side's finishing number "Dear Old Chapel Hill," a song which takes alumni sentimentality to the limit.

The two finest songs on the first side, and on the entire tape for that matter, are the renditions of Yaz's "Only You" and Judy Collins' "Send in the Clowns." Baritone Rob Chase's solo in "Only You" is beautiful and easily surpasses the original group's vocal work. The entire group of Clefs came together to record "Send in the Clowns" without the use of a main soloist. What is left is an incredibly well-worked piece, with unexpected harmonies, rhythms, and small solos which, without the aid of instrumentation, bring Collins' hit to a new level.

On the second side of *Take Two!*, three pop song remakes, Sam Cook's "Wonderful World," the Eagles' "Seven Bridges Road" and the Beatles' "When I'm Sixty Four" stand out as the '89-'90 Clefs' best work. Of the three, "Seven Bridges Road" is closest to the original, and it is the best tune produced on the second side.

The Clef Hangers fall short in their upbeat version of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and their slowed down, stylized "Georgia on my Mind," an old Ray Charles classic. A more traditional singing of the spiritual would have made the song easier to follow and more entertaining while a faster rhythm in "Georgia on my Mind" would have helped the song retain more of its original jazz flavor.

The Clefs are a group meant to be listened to live, and while their album *Take Two!* is a masterpiece, the addition of skits and the vaudeville the group incorporates while on stage makes it more than worthwhile to hear them in concert.