

Out with the Bunnymen, in with the Ian

Ian McCulloch

Mysterio

Sire Records

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Echo is dead, long live Echo. Ian McCulloch puts the depression of Echo's breakup behind him with the new release *Mysterio*, his second solo effort. And while the first solo album, *Candleland*, pleased the fans and critics, *Mysterio* should blow them all away.

After the disintegration of Echo and the Bunnymen — the result of McCulloch's painful decision to leave — Ian released *Candleland*, an introspective catharsis of sorts. McCulloch presented *Candleland* as a truly independent disc, as he played nearly all of the instruments.

Candleland bristled with acute pain, and the change in direction on *Mysterio* reveals a rejuvenated McCulloch. What's more, the comparisons to earlier works of Echo seem to ring true; *Mysterio* pre-emptly the original sound of *Crocodile*.

Mark Saunders, Henry Priestman and Robin Guthrie, of the Cocteau Twins, join McCulloch in producing the new disc, while McCulloch delegates much of the instrumentation to other musicians. John McEvoy and Mike Mooney on the guitar, Edgar Jones on bass and Steve Humphreys pounding the skins add to the creative talents of McCulloch as vocalist and guitarist. Elizabeth Fraser, also of the Cocteau Twins, backs the band with her noteworthy vocals.

What's so great about *Mysterio*? Simply put, McCulloch has created a musical masterpiece worthy of attention. Even if you didn't like Echo (I didn't), you can't help but like *Mysterio*. While *Candleland* empha-

MATT MORGAN

Album

sized the painful message through minimal use of instrumentation, each number on *Mysterio* offers a rich, full nearly unfathomable depth of sound.

McCulloch opens the effort with "Magical World," a free-fall of sound. The wandering guitar fills and the insistent bass line refuse to meet until the chorus. The resulting tension and resolution highlight McCulloch's begging "Is it really such a magical world?" until the overwhelming conclusion.

"Close Your Eyes" follows jauntily behind "Magical World," with McCulloch's droning vocal enveloping the composition. Nearly perfect, the guitars, keyboards, bells, backing vocals and jazz-riff rhythm are only complete with McCulloch's monotone.

Although the disco beat of "Dug For Love" initially intimidates, the song infects the listener with McCulloch's strangely romantic vision. "All my love/ buried it deep/ and you dug it up," combines with swaying synth chords and a driving bass line to roll the listener along, helpless before the surprising power of the effort.

"Drip, honey, drip, drip your innocence/ Cause I'm feeling guilty tonight." Honeydrip's commanding lyrics and cutting guitar chords alternate between lulling the listener into a false sense of security and forcing some sort of response from the audience.

McCulloch wanders aimlessly for four seconds before driving straightaway into "Damnation," a 1950s, Chuck Berry-style guitar expose. The first four seconds are the only "aimless" sound here. "I'm changin', I'm changin'/ No more the stranger." McCulloch leaves the depression of

Candleland behind for good.

For a change of pace, McCulloch twists his remake of Leonard Cohen's "Lover Lover Lover" into a Spanish-flavored masterpiece, reminiscent more of the Gypsy Kings than Echo and the Bunnymen. Only the urgent vocals and the dance beat remind the listener exactly where he is. Conceptually a tad unusual, Ian McCulloch makes "Lover Lover Lover" one of the best pieces of the album.

"Webbed" finds McCulloch on some sort of mental anesthetic, wandering vocally through the composition, like a fascinated child. A fairly good song on its own, "Webbed" fails in comparison to the better numbers on the disc.

The stop-go "Pomegranate" finds McCulloch no less musically confused than on "Webbed." The dark, brooding bass/guitar combination serves as counterpoint to the dreamy keyboards of the chorus, all supporting McCulloch's determined, even angry, vocal to make the difference.

McCulloch changes direction again with "Vibor Blue," a winning experiment in elongated sound. The acoustic guitar and drumbeat ground the stretched, bounced and rebounded electric guitar strings, reminiscent of early, Boy-era U2. McCulloch's drone pulls a bewildered listener through a strange mix of sound and Spanglish lyrics.

The influence of the Cocteau Twins' Robin Guthrie shines through the musical approach of "Heaven's Gate." Except for the chorus, which belongs resolutely in McCulloch's pop world, this could be yet another surrealistic Cocteau offering. Elizabeth Fraser's vocals tend to emphasize the connection, but the piece further demonstrates Ian McCulloch's glorious creativity. "Take love as you find it."

Finally, "In My Head" closes *Mysterio* as a dark, Cure-like distilled emotion. The repetitive guitar fills,



The contemplative Ian McCulloch

dark bass lines and bass/drum poundings drive the work until its end, seemingly too tired to continue. Not a terribly representative means of closing the second solo effort, but good nonetheless.

Altogether, *Mysterio* amazes this reviewer, and fails to earn five blobs only because it will not change the

face of alternative music, regardless of how incredible an effort it is. The significance of *Mysterio* ultimately lies in the effect it should have on McCulloch's solo career, but that shouldn't be important to you right now. Who cares about the esoteric compositional issues? Just buy it and enjoy the music.

Pray The Church's next effort surpasses new album

The Church

Priest=Aura

Arista Records

●● 1/2

The Church has reneged on the promise suggested by their last album, *Gold Afternoon Fix*, with the release of *Priest=Aura*. *Gold Afternoon Fix* appeared to be a transitional effort meant to link their earlier, moody sound to a stronger, song-oriented direction. It covered many stylistic bases, with a limited degree of success (the best attempts being "Terra Nova Cain" and "City"), but despite its failings, it seemed to be a positive step forward for the band. Yet, *The Church* has, on *Priest=Aura*, smoothed the extremes of G.A.F.'s

JON ALLEN

Album

quality curve into a bland arc, one that uses atmosphere to mask its weak songwriting.

The rules have changed with *Priest=Aura*. Now, *The Church* has less pressure to live up to their hit "Under The Milky Way," (from *Starfish*), the one song which appears to have determined their song-oriented direction on the last album. *Priest=Aura* could very well be a cynical response to G.A.F.'s lack of commercial success through its own mid-tempo inaccessibility, yet such a response backfires in the wake of frustratingly insipid material.

Priest=Aura runs some painfully similar grooves through a murky aural grinder, keeping the material at a

constant level of blandness.

The band itself isn't the same with new drummer Jay Dee Daugherty, although his presence doesn't really affect *The Church*'s low-key sound. This "sound," so integral to *The Church*'s identity, remains the same with the exception of a more pronounced keyboard presence. Guitarists Peter Koppes and Marty Willson-Piper lay down the same shimmering and glassy guitar parts as always, and their six-string efforts peel like chimes throughout the songs. Steven Kilbey still sings in his distinctive low, whispering style, and his beefy bass playing is pulse-like and insistent. In terms of sonic presence, *The Church* present nothing unusual, and their refusal to stretch the limits of the "sound" is the album's fatal flaw.

The album's assembly-line approach to songwriting creates some simplistic melodies and grooves, although no song is particularly bad.

The album fails not in its presentation of individual songs, but in its conception of how to present them. Those songs which are least dependent on mood to make their point (such as "Ripple" and "Kings") are the best, while the worst songs tend to sleepwalk through their chords ("Swan Lake" and "Aura"). Unfortunately, the great majority of the songs don't escape these lethargic confines.

Kilbey's lyrics, while occasionally inspired in past efforts, are remarkably dull on the album. His subject matter is undirected and pointlessly abstract. In "Mistress," he sings: "And another thing/ That halo you wear on your head/ I haven't seen one of those for years/ Where have you been?"; and his confused babbling doesn't let up. Even decent lyrics ("Lustre") ring false in comparison to his better earlier work, especially on *Starfish*, and are the product of a lack of inspiration.

The Church could take a couple of

pointers from *The Cure*, a group that excels at making music that is somnolent yet not devoid of musical character. They should analyze their successes (again, *Starfish*, which is a fine album with a myriad of textures) and rethink their songwriting process before their next recording. Although one should usually credit a group for trying to avoid self-repetition, *The Church* has taken the wrong step entirely on *Priest=Aura*, and have shifted from a good, multi-denominational band to an overbearing bore.

THE RATINGS

- — forget it
- — wait for a bargain bin buy
- — tape it from a friend
- — buy it
- — buy two copies