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### Crack the Sky -- 'Ostrich' (Aluminum Cat)



( Handout / December 23, 2012 )  
Rating: \* out of 4

The progressive rock veterans who make up Crack the Sky know their 15th album, the recently released "Ostrich," is a departure in many ways. On its website, the band quickly dispelled any notions that the new record would remind fans of its '70s heyday, when the West Virginia act won on many Baltimore fans with songs such as "Surf City" and "Hold On."

"Writer [John] Palumbo has either hit a manic phase or is attempting to get our attention via the back door," read the six-piece group's **online message**.

Both routes seem plausible. "Ostrich" is a deeply strange record that will keep your attention for as long as you're willing to scratch your head at it. It's also a sonic mess, jumping from funk-fusion ("The Box") to fidgeting new wave ("Holding My Breath") to moody ambience ("Under the Hood"). Many of the vocal takes are filtered through flanges and effects resembling answering machines. These studio tricks disconnect Palumbo from the songs, which might be the point, but it also makes for a mostly joyless listen.

The band confuses up-tempo songs for songs that will get listeners dancing. It's simply hard to imagine the jittery, ADD-approach of "Ostrich" working at any party, regardless of the ages and tastes in the crowd.

The dated, out-of-touch music of "Ostrich" is less confounding than Palumbo's lyrics. On almost every song, the singer reaches for biting social commentary, with minimal results. "Pole Dancing at the Hollywood" aims to shame married men for going to strip clubs. With its mentions of BMWs and pool boys, "Your House is On Fire" reads like a dumbed-down Bret Easton Ellis novel, attempting to skewer the oblivious wealthy. None of it works, partly because the music is so distracting and also because the comments feel mundane and dated. We've heard all this before, in more entertaining ways, on TV, film or in music.

The album works only when it stops clowning around. "All's Song," the somber closing ballad, is an earnest love letter to a daughter. Palumbo can't resist eye-rolling lines ("Life doesn't stop for anyone, not even us / We're just passengers on the bus") but the song at least feels honest, and even emotionally vulnerable. When he sings, "I'm just an old fool, trying to hang on to you," it's hard to believe it's the same guy who sang "Yellow cake, winter flakes, just grab me my bong" just 40 minutes earlier. With the jokes aside, Crack the Sky finally show cases heart instead of scattered mind. Too bad it took until the final song. -- **Wesley Case**

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