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HEAVEN 17 "LIVE AT SCALA: LONDON, 29 NOVEMBER 2005" (MVD VISUAL)

I mean, what do you say about this? I'm not being derisive, by the way, I'm telling you that up front because text lacks tone and some of it might seem said with derision in mind. But this is not so. Anyway, disclaimer aside, it's legit question. What DO you say about Heaven 17 getting back together and performing at Scala in London? Of course, for all I know, they may have been together for a while, making money on memories, which is fine. I, in recent years, went out of my way to see Dennis DeYoung (Styx) perform live in my hometown of Pine Bluff, and to interview him after the show. "Mr. Roboto" was one of my favorite rock songs in the 80s, when I was a kid growing up, weird and uncertain in the world but already finding a turn-on in music. But as I was saying, I'm pretty sure back somewhere in some shut-off corner of my memory is some data about Heaven 17. It makes me maudlin thinking about it. Nonetheless, going in with suggested hidden familiarity and lots and lots of who-is-this, these two facets combined for an interesting experience. Add to it my love of electronic beats and good keyboard music and I'm set for an odd but pretty good experience. This is 80s synth pop, we're talking about, so you have a general idea what the music sounds like. For that matter, you could find artists on Metropolis Records' roster today doing synthpop, some of which would remind you strongly, I'm sure, what we were listening to back in the 1980s. This smidgeon of nostalgia was but an eddy in the gentle throb of the beats, the sensuous electronic keys, the three-woman back-up vocals and the slightly flat sounding voice of the front man. His voice is both help and hindrance. Not ever having been an outright fan of Heaven 17, I don't know if this guy is the original lead singer of the group or not. If so, then - with his willingness present - there's no excuse for not having him be the lead singer still. Besides, even if he's new, despite the flattishness of his voice (which isn't bad, mind you, it just doesn't have a lot of slope - you algebra folks might catch that ...), his voice suits the tunes. So there's good and bad thrown in a mix and coming up (mostly) positive. At any rate, it lends an interesting feel to the music. On a side note, I caught myself wondering what the front man

is really like. The show started with mostly darkness and some dim light, a suitable for a keyboard intro. Lights up to reveal the two non-singing, technological contributors to the music; next, cue the back-up ladies (who are really quite good!). Finally, strolling out in a nice light-colored suit, the

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lead man himself. If he's playing nice, the mask is hard to see. Is it all business with him or does he still love doing this? What's he like backstage? Is the apparent fun on his face (and those of the girls) real - or part of the show? Does he stroll out last because his ego demands the singled-out attention or is it just simply the agreed-upon choreography of the set? All these questions - idle noodling of a relaxed reviewer lying in bed and watching Heaven 17 coming through the on-tour-on-TV time warp - distract from the music itself. As I said, I won't belabor you or this review with descriptions of synth pop. You KNOW what synth pop was doing in the 80s and some of it was good. This is good. The songs have some variety, from thumpy dance ones to some 'tronic-ether-rock. All in all, at the right price, this is a nice package that will warrant repeat viewings. Nice.-- review by Kristofer Upjohn

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