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REVIEW

Music DVD Review: Echo & The Bunnymen - *Dancing Horses* (Live At Shepherds Bush Empire 2005)

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I used to really like Echo & The Bunnymen back in the eighties. But I also used to get really frustrated with them.

What first drew me to this band was early records like *Heaven Up Here* and *Porcupine*. The overall mood on these albums was mostly one of doom and darkness, but it was always balanced by songs that rocked. On songs like "All My Colours," "Over The Wall," and "Higher Hell," lead vocalist Ian McCullough would drone his way through the doomy lyrics, while Will Sergeant's guitar cut through the din like shards of glass.

Mostly though, these songs — almost always written and played with dark sounding minor chords at the forefront — put a more modern spin on the long since forgotten psychedelic excursions of sixties bands like the Doors. McCullough's voice and mysterious stage persona were even compared to Jim Morrison back then.

However, as the band later gained popularity through MTV videos and airplay on "modern rock" radio, the music increasingly took on more of a pop sheen. This was epitomized by the late eighties hit "Lips Like Sugar." There were still occasional flashes of the darker beauty of the earlier Bunnymen on some of the latter eighties albums — most notably on songs like "The Killing Moon" and "Thorn Of Crowns" from the brilliant *Ocean Rain* album.

But you could see that Echo & The Bunnymen were rapidly developing something of a split musical personality. One which would eventually cause the band to split up as McCullough attempted to parlay his MTV stardom into a solo career.

The video below for "Lips Like Sugar" is taken from Echo & The Bunnymen's great new live concert DVD *Dancing Horses*. Even though this concert was filmed as recently as two years ago, even here you can still see the band's musical duality at work:

McCullough still comes off as every bit the mysteriously dark pre-1980's new waver in his corkscrew hair and ever present

England's Shepherds Bush Empire during Echo's tour behind the 2005 release *Siberia*, the look of the stage on this DVD is often a dark one — which is certainly one befitting these guys. As usual, McCullough looks his bored and cool best, chain smoking cigarettes throughout the performance.

The twenty song setlist is also a real strong one, which carefully balances the newer material from *Siberia* with the classics like "Bring On The Dancing Horses" and of course, "The Killing Moon." Probably the most beautiful song the band has ever written, "Killing Moon" sounds as gorgeous as ever here. McCullough doesn't always hit all the high notes — although he usually does. Sergeant's psychedelic raga runs on guitar are also augmented by some nice sounding string flourishes, played on keyboards by Paul Fleming.

In one of the most rocking parts of this performance, the newer song "Scissors In The Sand" sits perfectly between the better known Bunnymen rockers "All That Jazz" and "Back of Love." Sergeant shreds through these three songs like a man possessed, as drummer Simon Finley pounds away on the skins without missing a single beat. For its own part, "Scissors" — which is from the *Siberia* album — sounds like something which could fit right in with the harder songs on the much earlier *Porcupine*.

On another of the newer songs from *Siberia*, "Stormy Weather," Sergeant's dark guitar sounds play in perfect counterpoint to the brighter hues of Fleming's keyboards. There's even a part played on xylophone here. I passed on *Siberia* when it first came out two years ago. But hearing the songs from that album here in the live context, gives me serious pause to reconsider that decision.

But back to the classics — because this show is basically bookended by two of them. "With A Hip," from Echo's second album *Heaven Up Here* finds McCullough's voice sounding as menacing as ever. It's still easy here to see why he was compared to Morrison all those years ago. On "The Cutter," which closes the show (well, before the encores anyway), McCullough adds just a touch of raspiness to his vocal (all those cigarettes, no doubt), as Sergeant's guitar wails pierce through the air.

Of particular note on this DVD is the Dolby digital 5.1 sound mix, which is excellent throughout the performance. In other words, this is one you need to play really loud. The extras here on the other hand are few, but there is a revealing interview with both Ian McCullough and Will Sergeant.

So did the real Echo & The Bunnymen finally stand up here?

Much as I occasionally found myself still yearning for these guys to more fully embrace the gloomier aspects of their musical "dark side," I found this DVD — somewhat to my surprise — to be thoroughly satisfying. The current band is tighter sounding than any I can remember.

Most importantly, the performance rocks.

Echo & The Bunnymen's live concert DVD *Dancing Horses* will be released this upcoming Tuesday June 26.



You'll find Blogcritics contributing editor and music raconteur Glen Boyd sharing his Thoughtmares about everything from music to politics to professional wrestling on his personal blog [The World Wide Glen: Welcome To My Thoughtmare](#). In his alter-ego as "Disco Glen," Mr. Boyd is also the undisputed king of the dancefloor.

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