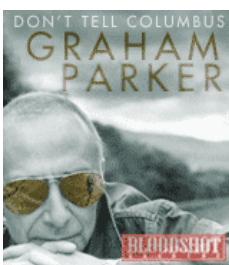


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Echo & the Bunnymen

Dancing Horses [DVD]

[Live at Shepherds Bush Empire]
(MVD Entertainment Group) Rated: N/A
US release date: 26 June 2007
UK release date: 23 April 2007

by Adam Besenyodi

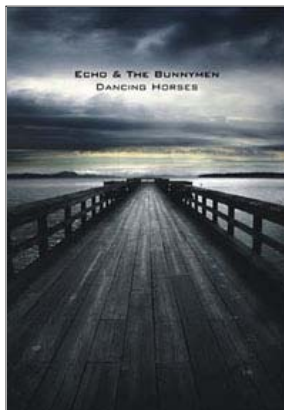
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The journey of Liverpool's other famous musicians is a somewhat incestuous and certainly messy one. After Pete Dinklage and Julian Cope left Ian McCulloch and their band the Crucial Three to form Wah! and the Teardrop Explodes, respectively, McCulloch hooked up with guitarist Will Sergeant in 1978. Together, along with their drum machine, Echo, they formed the neo-psychedelic post-punk genius of Echo & the Bunnymen. After scoring varied successes on the UK and US charts in their first ten years together, McCulloch left the band for a solo career. Sergeant, bassist Les Pattinson, and drummer Pete de Freitas (who replaced the original Echo a year into the band) decided to carry on without McCulloch, but before they could record, de Freitas was killed in a motorcycle accident.

Sergeant and Pattinson continued on under what is considered by both critics and fans as false pretense, releasing *Reverberation* as an Echo album in name only. McCulloch released his first solo effort, *Candleland*, the same year to a deservedly better reception. After both sides languished for a few years, McCulloch and Sergeant formed Electrafixion—amping up the guitars to prove relevance in the throes of grunge. In 1997, nearly 20 years after first coming together, Pattinson rejoined the group and Echo & the Bunnymen had returned. Four studio albums and another ten years, we find the Bunnymen marking their 30th anniversary with a new DVD of two-year old material, *Dancing Horses*.

Showing themselves to be still relevant, if only as the elder statesmen of the post-punk movement, the Bunnymen pull out 15 classics from their catalog to complement the four songs off the then-new *Siberia* release at this Shepherds Bush Empire show recorded 01 November 2005. An uncomplicated stage creatively lit to accompany each song is all that adorns the stripped-down and raw pub sound of this latest incarnation of the band. Gone is the smoothed-out (overproduced?) gloss of 1987's self-titled pinnacle or McCulloch's *Candleland*. Instead we are presented with a sometimes-ragged-yet-appropriate sounding McCulloch, and trademark swirling guitar work from Sergeant.

Opening the show with a their dissonant early '80s *Crocodiles* "Going Up" and segueing into *Heaven Up Here's* "With a Hip" sets the tone, but it surprisingly isn't until "Stormy Weather" that the band really feels like it's connecting. "Stormy Weather" is one of those songs that helped garner *Siberia* its "return to form" acclaim. It's the trademark Bunnymen combination of Sergeant's cascading guitar and McCulloch's vocals all mixed in an '80s stew of keyboards and live drums. But the band quickly moves back to "classic set list" mode with another *Heaven Up Here* cut, "Show of Strength", with its post-punk, gothic roots of heavy bass and mid-song tempo changes on display. Atmosphere is the goal here. While "Bring on the Dancing Horses" gains a new lease on life via the creative intro, it's McCulloch's scating and emotional delivery (voice appropriately cracking



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during the "brittle heart" repetition) that allows the song to rise above what could have been a rote performance of an overplayed hit.

Things get a little sonically murky with the hollow-sounding rendition of "The Disease" functioning as a lead-in for *Siberia's* sub-par offering "Scissors in the Sand", despite Sergeant's engaging guitar and McColloch's menacing vocals. But the guys bounce back with a trio of early catalog notables: "All that Jazz", "The Back of Love", and "The Killing Moon". The former, another *Crocodiles* contribution, is a driving rocker for these guys. "The Back of Love" is a ferocious, sweeping display of post-punk power that is both sonically and structurally cut from the same cloth as "All that Jazz". This crowd pleaser off 1983's *Porcupine* finds the band reeling it in where appropriate by balancing the charging Space Invaders-like flourishes with quieter moments. The subdued approach to "The Killing Moon" (forever re-appropriated for a new generation as the lead-in for the original theatrical release of *Donnie Darko*) accurately captures the original composition and builds upon it in this live setting. McColloch's voice often sounded strained on these last couple of performances, but rarely to the detriment of the song or presentation.

Siberia's throwback strengths are again on display with "In the Margins"—complete with ringing keyboards and classically themed Bunnymen lyrics about starting out someplace dark and having hope to move someplace better emotionally. "I see now / How life wins / When all that's left is love". Shortly thereafter, we come to the part of the show where Mac the Mouth's crotchety demeanor really starts to shine through. Near the end of the show, McColloch invites the crowd to shout any questions they may have, but "don't shout a song title!" And when they continue to scream songs titles, he gets more snippy and admonishes them further before blasting through a few more tunes.

The proper set ends with the show's highest point—"The Cutter". Boasting McColloch's strongest vocal performance of the night and Sergeant's eastern-sounding guitar work, the song delivers on all counts. Then things get a little weird again. The break between the main set and the two-song first encore is real-time. So the presentation lazily cuts between an empty stage and the band standing around just backstage drinking, until they finally return for "Nothing Lasts Forever", the lone *Evergreen* cut, and an excellent rendition of "Lips Like Sugar". But before the band breaks in, McColloch makes someone wipe down the stage because it's apparently wet where he is (never mind that during the intro to "Lips Like Sugar", he dramatically kicks over a container of water, splattering the stage again). Then amid a smattering of f-bombs and comments like "it's always nice to be down in this neck of the woods" and "thanks for coming" he bitches that just once he'd like intelligent comments shouted from the crowd.

This whole affair is, of course, followed by more real-time faux encore posturing, before McColloch humbly offers that "if all goes well, this next song is the best song of all time." Then the band effectively nails "Ocean Rain", and McColloch leaves the stage with a "You've just seen the best band of all time." Need a shot of confidence there, Mac?

Both the 16:9 widescreen video and 5.1 Dolby Digital audio presentations are excellent, and the song selection favors the long-time fan with vintage song choices. The lone extra is a substantial set of interviews with McColloch and Sergeant that cover band influences through *Siberia* release questions. The two are obviously in different locations (McColloch appears to be outside, while Sergeant looks to be in a backstage room of some kind) and the questions appear on title cards before cutting between the responses. In all, *Dancing Horses* is a fine collection of songs, and probably the closest you'll ever really want to come to spending money on a Bunnymen show.



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— 24 July 2007



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