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Game Theory's new release has more synthesis, less pop

By Mark Lage
Staff Reporter

Game Theory
Two Steps from the Middle Ages
Enigma Records

After last year's inspired double album titled "Lolita Nation," one might have expected a bit of a rest from Southern California's thoughtful power pop outfit.

But just about one year later, Game Theory is back with its fourth album, "Two Steps from the Middle Ages."

This new album is strikingly different from "Lolita Nation" in two main areas.

First, Scott Miller — singer, songwriter and pre-eminent riff-maestro for the band — is much less accustomed to wander around the fret-board than he's ever been.

Although most rock 'n' roll guitarists would fare better with a little of this kind of restraint, Miller's controlled, catchy style is disappointing.

Second, conventional pop song and album structure get a conspicuous rest from the fairly severe beating they were dealt on "Lolita Nation."

That album was littered with song fragments, bits and pieces of variously rearranged noise and longer songs put together in often bizarre ways.

The only hints of this strange, fragmentary nature on "Two Steps from the Middle Ages" are the short keyboard pulse and vocal song "The Picture of Agreeability" and the keyboard blurbs leading into "Throwing the Election" near the end of side two.

The individual structures of the new songs are much more direct. In fact, some of the structures are just about as basic as they get.

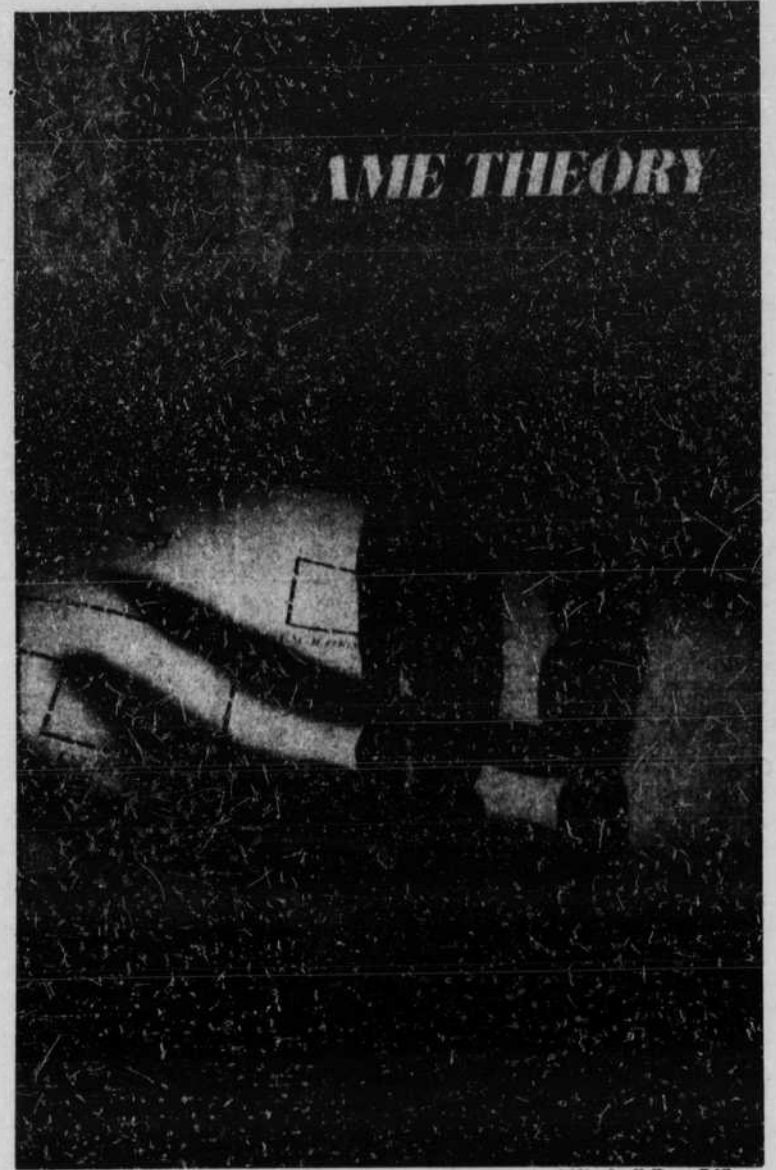
The good news is that the construction and composition of most of the new songs are so strong that the above criticisms are often irrelevant.

Game Theory's focus merely has shifted away from individual instrumental moments to interesting combinations of instruments. This process began on "Lolita Nation," but it is not nearly as pronounced as it is on the new album.

There are a number of factors which have led to this shift. On "Two Steps from the Middle Ages," Scott Miller keeps the same backing band as he had on "Lolita Nation," which is the first time in his career that this has happened.

Before "Lolita Nation," Game Theory consisted of Scott Miller and a variety of temporary backing musicians. The returning band on the new album probably contributes to its more group-oriented sound.

The production of the album also contributes to this new synthesis. The individual instruments are not as easy to pick out as they are on previous Game Theory albums.



Courtesy of Kimball Box Office

The stress is on combinations of sounds.

Mitch Easter returns to produce Game Theory. This makes them one of the few bands since The Beatles to have enough sense to stay with the same producer throughout its career.

Instead of depending on a new producer for an automatic new sound, Game Theory relies on the creative development of the band and a single producer to vary the sound.

The new album is consistent with previous Game Theory releases. Scott Miller again demonstrates that he is one of the best lyricists in rock 'n' roll today.

Whether he's commenting on relationships or the effect of the Reagan Era on smart young people, Miller's lyrics are clever, witty and thoroughly unique. At the same time, they never smother the emotional quality of the particular scene.

While there are none of the latter type of songs on the new album, it does have songs which rank as Miller's best descriptions of personal scenes, including "Amelia, Have You Lost" and "Wish I Could Stand or Have." The titles themselves hint at Miller's often strange

use of words.

If a number of his lines are initially difficult to decipher, it's not due to R.E.M./Church style obscurity for obscurity's sake, but rather results from lyrical sophistication tending more towards Elvis Costello.

In short, Game Theory continues to be one of the best bands in rock 'n' roll today, even if its not one of the most popular.

The highly polished pop veneer hasn't gained them any kind of commercial success, probably because of Miller's sophisticated songwriting style. At the same time, the band's pop sound has likely turned away many "alternative" music fans who are accustomed to more organic-sounding bands.


Those few Game Theory fans out there will probably find "Two Steps from the Middle Ages" not quite as good as "Lolita Nation," yet it manages to be a step forward for the band.

Those who have never been struck by past Game Theory albums will probably not be struck by this album.

And the huge numbers of people out there who have never heard a Game Theory album, unfortunately, will probably never hear this one.

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