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Reviews



Consistency illusive on "Illusions" Albums hit all extremes



Brian Shellito/DN

"Use Your Illusion I" Guns & Roses Geffen

After four years and about 14 million copies of "Appetite for Destruction," "Use Your Illusion I" marks the highly anticipated return of Guns N' Roses with an ambitious 16-track effort.

The most immediately recognizable changes are in the band's musical approach, which has expanded from a grinding, guitar-oriented sound to include elements as diverse as saxophones, trumpets, harmonicas, keyboard orchestras and even the use of a nutcracker in one tune.

"Right Next Door To Hell," "Dust N' Bones," and other tracks prove, however, that the fundamentals of assault rock are still in the hands of capable masters. "Right Next Door To Hell" complains, "Yeah, thought we'd own the world/and gettin' used was havin' fun" over Slash's screaming guitar and Matt Sorum's drum pummeling.

The remake of Paul and Linda McCartney's classic "Live and Let Die," provides GN'R with ample opportunity for radical tempo and dynamics changes. Rapid crescendos and sudden pauses are techniques that have become almost formulaic for the band, but here manage to forge an entrancing musical aura.

"Don't Cry" has obvious hit potential for its power-ballad qualities, not to mention the fact that it is one of the few tunes on the album that is radio-playable. Judging from the rest of "Illusion I," the glaring absence of obscenities on "Don't Cry" might have been a mere production oversight.

Rhythm guitarist Izzy Stradlin partakes of the songwriting melee in "You Ain't The First," a blues-drenched acoustic lament that echoes late-1960s Rolling Stones work, one of GN'R's paramount influences.

Admittedly, the varied musical approaches on "Illusion I" are not equally successful. Despite the use of a synthesized orchestral accompaniment and an eight-member choir to supplement Axl Rose's piano, "No-

vember Rain" is disappointingly bland and shatters most standards of taste for self-indulgent musical excess.

"Back Off Bitch" is a worthless misogynistic rant that should never have entered the studio, much less the album. The song is as banal musically as it is lyrically and is almost as offensive as it is ludicrous.

Elsewhere, GN'R displays a stunning depth of emotional probing and an ability to transform those feelings into significant musical statements, especially in "The Garden" and "Garden of Eden."

"The Garden" explores the concomitant euphoria and paranoia in the struggle for growth in the garden of life. Del James and Wes Arkeen collaborated with Rose to pen the song, and the ageless Alice Cooper pitches in on guest vocals.

"Garden of Eden" is a headbanging, thrashing assault against emotional and economic exploitation. "Most organized religions make a mockery of humanity/Our governments are dangerous/and out of control," Rose warns.

The finale for "Illusion I" is "Coma," a moody, melodic exploration of separation and suffocation in emotional and physical forms. The background addition of a simulated cardiac arrest and revival efforts combined with the pleading screams and taunts of obsessive fans helps blur the distinction between the real and the illusory.

As an evocation of the bands' growing musical eclecticism and willingness to experiment rather than stagnate intellectually or musically, "Coma" is indicative of a revitalized band and its sobering perspective on the world.

"Use Your Illusion II" Guns N' Roses Geffen

"We built a world out of anarchy," Rose screams on "Get In The Ring," from GN'R's "Use Your Illusion II." The ironies of rock 'n' roll success certainly have not escaped this band. In fact, it's hard to imagine a group of guys more DISillusioned, disgusted

and self-consciously indignant about themselves, their success, their detractors and the state of the world in general.

In short, "Illusion II" is a fascinating, hit-and-miss concoction of the best and worst that is GN'R. It is alternately loaded with political attacks, introspective balladeering, sexist savagery and narcissistic whining.

"Illusion II" begins with "Civil War," an anti-war anthem that lashes out against the carnage of history in "a human grocery store." It is the sole track on the album with original drummer Steven Adler, who has since been replaced by Sorum, a former Cult member. The lyrical intensity of lines like "in my first memories/they shot Kennedy/an' I went numb when I learned to see" is complimented by the addition of Dizzy Reed's piano work.

The use of keyboards on many of the tracks on the album adds a rollicking dimension and shows a willingness to experiment from the more basic guitar/drums/bass approach that was so successful on "Appetite for Destruction."

"14 Years" gives Stradlin a turn at songwriting and lead vocals, and here the method is successful, resulting in a swinging, sardonic statement about the remnants of a bitter relationship. Izzy's other writing attempt, however, is a banal meditation on "the perils of rock and roll decadence" called "Pretty Tied Up." The only thing really perilous about the tune is how strikingly close in sound and manner it comes to countless other degrading diatribes against women in rock's Hall of Shame.

The moments of melodic artistry and poetic sensitivity so evident on "Yesterdays" and the alternate version of "Don't Cry," however, are exalting. "Yesterdays" is one of the album's best power-ballads, with Rose shunning his past in lines like "I ain't got time to reminisce old novelties" as he tickles the keys of his grand piano.

Two songs on "Illusion II" already are familiar to listeners from motion picture soundtracks. "Knocking on Heaven's Door," originally written and performed by Bob Dylan for 1973's "Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid" soundtrack, was rephrased and extended by GN'R on the "Days of Thunder" soundtrack. "You Could Be Mine" is an original track that was featured in this summer's "Terminator II" flick. "Knocking on Heaven's Door" succeeds by offering an original interpretation where the despairing lyrics are countered by dramatic tempo changes and a triumphant choral refrain. "You Could Be Mine" is a straight-ahead rocker that offers a plethora of shrieks from Rose.

"Shotgun Blues" may be about as far from the blues as Beethoven, but the song succeeds as a quasi-punk ode to the Gunners' Sex Pistols influence. In "Get In The Ring," however, GN'R revels in its ability to sink lower than its critics. Character assassinations against the band's detractors abound as a handful of critics actually are named and a litany of obscenities hurled in their direction. Such grade-school antics are incongruous when compared to the serious tone elicited by many of the other songs on "Illusion II."

In "My World," Rose raves about his "sociopsychotic-state of bliss" to a grungy hip-hop mix. If we are to believe the album's title, it's all just a smoke cloud of bluffing behind which a troubled reality can find refuge, and perhaps that is the ultimate fascination of "Illusion II." Like a game of Russian roulette, most of the cham-

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