

Review:

Camera Obscura | Steve Adams

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Although Camera Obscura is Steve Adams' third solo album since 1997, the Los Angeles guitarist is most widely known for his membership of Mirage (later Pete Barden's Mirage). Gradually gaining a reputation for being a modern-day axe hero, mostly on the back of his instrumental album Vertigo which laid down Steve's own brand of heavy progressive rock, Camera Obscura is a worthy follow-up and will only enhance the reputation of the latest exponent of the six string. The album was recorded by a core trio of Adams on guitar, vocals, strings and mellotron, Desha Dunnahoe on bass and keyboards and Karen Teperberg on drums and percussion, with a handful of guests playing on individual tracks.

Despite being three-quarters instrumental, it is worth considering the three vocal tunes first. Adam's has a surprisingly pleasant voice, warm and very smooth, it gently floats over the ether and perfectly compliments the music of each of the songs. Silent Divide with its mellotron flute sounds is a great little pop song - catchy melody, great arrangement and two fine solos (one acoustic, one electric) combine to make a superior number. Fragile is more reflective and melancholy dealing with the end of a relationship. The solo is reminiscent of Gary Moore's playing on a Thin Lizzy love song and every bit as good (the song as well as the solo!). Wisteria, to my mind, is the weakest of the vocal tunes as it doesn't seem to flow as well as the other two songs; the rather grandiose sweep of the string synth seems somehow incongruous and the ending is rather weak, particularly as it is the final cut of the album.

Despite the strength of the vocals, it will undoubtedly be the instrumental numbers that Camera Obscura is judged on. And there is no fear of a guilty verdict. In A World With No Sky opens the album with intent; lulled into a false sense of security with a string synth arpeggio, Adams interjects some ferocious power chords before letting rip with some potent soloing. Obviously, being mostly an instrumental album by a guitarist, the album is replete with solos, although that does not prevent Adams giving the listener the variety required for an album to bear repeated listening. This is exemplified by Seven Four which meanders through varying time signatures and includes both bass and keyboard solos. The Door Stays Open, a tribute to the late Peter Bardens, is a lament that features Steve Mattern guesting on Hammond organ. Although there seems to be a ground swell of opinion against Hammonds, I love them and this bluesy number wouldn't be the same without it. The cover of Steve Hackett's

Jacuzzi, with Mary Dagoni on flute, is a faithful representation that does not deviate too far from the original, a shame as I always prefer cover versions to be radically reworked, after all there is a degree of arrogance in recording a version of a classic song and the original will invariably (but not always) be the definitive version, so one might as well say - great song, but this is how I would have done it!

Belgian guitarist Philippe Thibaut trades licks with Adams in the 'call and response' piece Diminished Capacity. With some ferocious soloing it showcases the talents of both musicians and will have the heavy metal crowd drooling - I fully expect this piece to be utilised in future air guitar contests! The remaining pieces are all above instrumentals that showcase an original approach the genre. There is a touch of the Steve Hunter about Adams' playing which is no bad thing, particularly as Hunter never seemed to be able to step outside of his role of consummate session guitarist (his album The Deacon is well worth checking out!). There really is no filler on this album, each piece is carefully considered and cleverly arranged, resulting in an album that would fit neatly amongst any collection of guitar virtuosos.

The promotional card that accompanied the album stated that if you like Satriani, Vai or Hackett - you'll love the guitar work on the new CD by Steve Adams. For once, the marketing men were not spouting bullshit.

Conclusion: 8 out of 10