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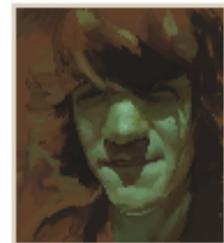
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COSMOS AND CHAOS (AS WITSEND)

Syzygy Crossover Prog

3.13 | 9 ratings



Conor Fynes
Prog Reviewer

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Now known as Syzygy, Witsend carved out a firm niche for themselves in the US progressive scene in the early '90's. Although Syzygy have had significantly greater success in more recent years with two solid follow-up albums and an excellent live recording to date, Witsend's creative statement could be said to have started and stopped with "Cosmos and Chaos". Released in 1993 on the tail-end of the surprisingly widespread neo-prog sound, Witsend's style was a familiar blend of Genesis-inspired progressive rock, tempered only by its distinct focus on acoustic guitar. As is the case with all good debut albums, "Cosmos and Chaos" demonstrates healthy potential on all fronts. Its patchy album structure and innocuously derivative style notwithstanding, "Cosmos and Chaos" is a pleasantly enjoyable start for they who would come to call themselves Syzygy.

While the album's title may have listeners expecting something of a more rampant and unpredictable nature, "Cosmos and Chaos" as a name gives the album a sense of being binary, with its parts being placed into either the Cosmic, or Chaotic categories. Musically speaking, Witsend strike a fairly equal balance between a largely instrumental symphonic prog style and gracefully subdued nylon-string acoustic pieces. The album is so firmly split between these two styles that it almost seems fairer to regard the two sets of music separately. Of the two approaches, Witsend's full-band prog is by far the more engaging of the two. Although guitarist Carl Baldassarre offers vocals on "Circadian Rhythm", Witsend's brand of progressive rock is kept almost entirely instrumental. Think some of the stuff Steve Hackett did during his solo career, and you wouldn't be far off the mark.

Although Baldassarre is behind most of the writing on the album, Witsend's music is pleasantly balanced as a three-piece. Without vocals to keep the music rooted in one place for too long, there is plenty of mobility for the guitars and keyboards to pass the torch between each other, the drums all the

while offering some impressively dynamic rhythms to keep the other two on their toes. Above all else, it's the musicianship that impresses most here. The compositions are lively and tend to offer plenty of space for the musicians to strut their skill, without treading into the world of instrumental noodling. In spite of Witsend's evident skill with progressive rock however, there's no sense that the band has dared to venture past the boundaries set down by their predecessors. The assortment of vintage keyboards, warm electric tones and theatrical drumming all beg to be called progressive rock cliches. Thanks in large part due to how well Witsend are able to play their respective instruments, this lack of an individual identity isn't a death knell for the music; rather, it stands as a barrier keeping the band's compositional skill from reaching greatness.

The acoustic pieces are far less involved (or involving) than the progressive rock pieces, but they add a bit of a unique flair to Witsend that may have otherwise been lacking. Although it's clear where most of the creative efforts go, many Baldassarre's acoustic tunes are pleasant and well done. Once again, Steve Hackett comes to mind. Baldassarre certainly seems to share Hackett's love of classical guitar music, and it's a charming counterpoint to the more intense rock material. "Etude No. 1 For Guitar" is a particularly enjoyable piece- although it's about as easy-listening as it gets, Baldassarre's composition with the acoustic is very tasteful. Although I think these acoustic (and handful of piano) pieces do well to provide a welcome contrast to the more familiar progressive rock sound, the album tends to follow a pattern of falling back and forth between the two approaches without a sense of segue or flow. As a result, "Cosmos and Chaos" seems to have been released at a point where it gives the impression of being a 'collection of tracks' rather than a start-to-finish album. In many styles, that would be fine- after all, the joy in many sorts of music lies in the song itself. Being that Witsend have made a clear decision to follow progressive rock canon, the album's unfocused structure holds the album back. Even the apparent finale "Chaos"- which attempts to wrap up the album by sampling moments earlier in the album- is a mixed success at best.

Witsend didn't strike gold on "Cosmos and Chaos", but their willingness to place such a focus on a style beyond rock or even prog rock convention deserves commendation. Witsend exhibit plenty of musical skill and an impressive grasp of production quality here. It's an unfortunate and all-too common disappointment to hear such talented prog musicians opting to follow the paths of their influences to the detail like this, but Witsend have enough musical goodies in store to make it a worthy listen or purchase for dedicated fans of instrumental progressive music. It's a solid foundation for the greener pastures Syzygy would later frolic in. To quote the oft-used expression: "Close, but no cigar."

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