



Cosmos and Chaos (as Witsend)

Syzygy Crossover Prog

Review by Squire Jaco

★★★★☆ This relates to the 2014 reissue of Cosmos and Chaos.



Caveat: Regardless of how much I love a band or album (and Syzygy is one of my very favorite progressive rock bands), I am not the biggest fan of re-mastered albums unless the original had glaring production flaws.

So, what do I think of this new 2014 reissue of Syzygy's "Cosmos and Chaos" album?

Positives: 1) I like the re-recording of two shorter tracks using a grand piano instead of the original electronic instrument (Yamaha CP70). 2) I really enjoy those two bonus tracks of pre-Cosmos and Chaos Witsend. Not only are they reasonably well recorded for 1984 cassette recordings, but the songs are pretty interesting and well-played with another drummer and bass player in the band. 3) The packaging is fantastic, with very good liner notes to boot. The group has seemed to take great pride in how they package their recent albums. 4) The remastering is a subtle improvement - nothing drastic to these old ears. But some flatness in the original recording is removed, and I hear certain guitar and keyboard parts more clearly than originally presented. There is an overall warmer feel to this remaster. 5) The track re-sequencing presents a unique way to listen to this music, grouping all the solo instrument material up front, then the small ensemble pieces, and finishing with the full band "Witsend Trio" pieces.

The not-so-positives: 1) The two live bonus tracks of songs that were originally instrumental-only (Mount Ethereal and Strange Loop) now contain vocals, and are very enjoyable...but extraneous if you already own the Glorious Disturbance live album from a couple of years ago where I first heard those same (or very similar) performances. 2) As mentioned above, the remastering is nothing dramatic; I thought the original recording was pretty good as it was. 3) I've heard the original album so many times that I'm already conditioned to expect a certain song to follow another (e.g. Etude No. 1 is naturally followed by those snarling opening guitar tones of Strange Loop), so it's a bit uneasy to me to hear a different track order. The band members apparently felt that it was jarring or jagged to go from soft to rocking, or small ensemble to full band sound; but I actually liked that dynamic in the original recording.

I can appreciate that Syzygy probably wanted to better identify this older Witsend album as one of their own, so a repackaging and remastering reissue under the Syzygy name would make

sense. They saw a great earlier album like Cosmos and Chaos that they did not want to get lost in the shuffle, and they put together a really nice package (especially with the bonus tracks, and particularly if you've never heard those two great instrumental rockers redone with vocals).

But...I have to say that I've always loved the original too! Personally, I'd rather listen to a new album of new music from these guys instead of a marginally improved reissue of an album that's already pretty darn good. I sense that the band members are pretty particular about the music they present; it no doubt factored into their decision to reissue this album. Their commitment to their music is certainly evident in the amount of time spent writing and perfecting their craft between albums, as well as the phenomenal level of sophistication and musicianship behind every single song in all of their albums. Yet while I feel that this version of Cosmos and Chaos is great, I'm not convinced that it was enough of an improvement over the original to warrant a reissue, especially with all the thousands of other bands and albums vying for my ears' attention.

Bottom line: If you never picked up the original, definitely get this reissue with the improved piano parts, the remastering, and the cool bonus tracks - it's a great album. If you do have the original, this still makes a nice "improved and enhanced" alternative to that album. (4 out of 5 stars).

(Eagerly looking forward to their next album of new material...) - SJ