

ALBUMS



PIC: KEVIN WESTENBERG

HEAVEN CAN'T WAIT

COCTEAU TWINS HEAVEN OR LAS VEGAS (4AD)

MEDIOCRITIES like Peter Murphy and David J must wonder, as Salieri did of Mozart, why God chose the Cocteau Twins and not them. Why Robin Guthrie and Liz Fraser? They're the wrong shape! One a dumpling, the other looking like a shrew that's been disturbed in the undergrowth. The most patently unethereal beings on the planet who lumpenly and persistently refuse to shed any light upon their own creative activities. It would have made as much sense for the musical gift to have been conferred on Paul Gascoigne.

Still, there it is. And "Heaven Or Las Vegas" is, of course, absolutely magnificent, as brilliant and expected as some regular, seasonal phenomenon, like the break-up of ice floes with the coming of the spring. It represents a slight shift towards the mainstream after the abstract, outer reaches of "Blue Bell Knoll" – they reckon it's an out-and-out pop album but all left-field bands like to think they're basically making pop records, even Pere Ubu.

Their only concession, in fact, is that you occasionally hear – or imagine you can hear – a coherent word or phrase here and there. Fundamentally, it's more of the gorgeous same. Very little has changed, on the evidence here, since the days of "Sunburst And Snowblind". Musically, the Cocteau Twins are in a way as conservative and impervious to shifts in pop style as Dr Feelgood. Their methods have remained pretty much unchanged since 1983 – those diffuse cascades of jangle guitar like cloudbursts of hundreds and thousands, those swooning arcs of noise, all of them are trusted and archaic textures.

And yet, in the exceptional case of the Cocteau Twins, none of this matters. Indeed, it would be a calamity if they were to tamper with, or update their sound, to "progress" or keep pace with the times. The Cocteau Twins, perhaps because they refer to nothing, are without texts

or even sub-texts, remain blissfully and magnificently outside pop's chronology. They have never been much better or much worse than "Heaven Or Las Vegas" and so have nothing to live up to or live down. They have a special licence to carry on as long as they want, producing bi-annual consignments of crystalline transcendence in this vein.

So, what is there left to say about the album? Well, if it has its wobbly moments, they are "Iceblink Luck", the single which, while beautiful, stoops a little too low to conquer the charts – I shudder when they break into that Bo Diddley break near the end. And – ahem – "Frou-Frou Foxes In Midsummer Fires", while not as twee as the title (which sets a UK all-comers record in tweeness) is rather too light a note on which to conclude the album.

The rest, however, is pure elixir. "Cherry-Coloured Funk" is tantalisingly hazy, keeping us in liquid suspension as Liz almost utters a sentence; "Pitch The Baby" may be some sort of paean to the sprog but needn't be – its metronome throb and milky, swirling constellations are pure, unapplied bliss. "Road River And Rail" appears to be similar to All About Eve momentarily, before dissolving into sweet smells.

In truth, describing the Cocteau Twins is like describing shapes in the clouds, or worse, describing the joys of ice cream toppings. As usual, Liz's lyrics veer between intimations of sugar and spice and all things nice and the aurora borealis. While a sense of the ethereal is a byword with the Cocteau Twins, we're never allowed to forget that the pleasure of their sound is as much akin to gorging on sweets or buying perfume as much as any prospective glimpse of the Beyond.

The one drawback of the Cocteau Twins is their mischievous reminders that theirs are sugar-coated fancies – one always feels a little ashamed, a little over-indulgent after partaking of these aural Turkish delights, rather than feeling ennobled or spiritually purged. "Heaven Or Las Vegas" is an apt title in that respect. But don't let that stop you, for Heaven's sake.

DAVID STUBBS