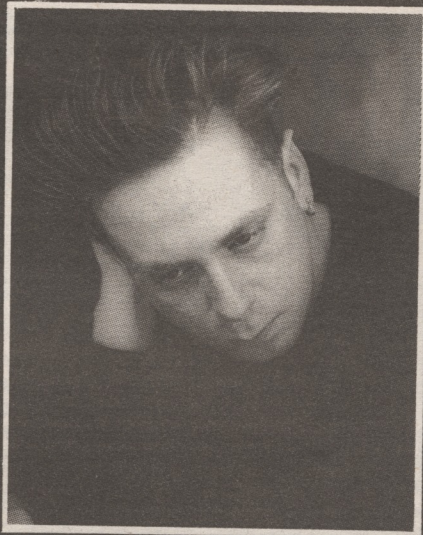


Heaven scent



THE COCTEAUS: back down to earth (almost)

COCTEAU TWINS

'Heaven Or Las Vegas'
(4AD) ****

LIKE THOSE other hardy perennials, The Jesus And Mary Chain, the Cocteau Twins eked out the '80s by so steadfastly adhering to a successful formula that they ended up verging on the parodic.

While The JAMC cut down their rock vocabulary to a Bruce Springsteen song lyric, the Cocteaus locked themselves in an equally secure bubble, hitting the plangent guitar back burner and giving Liz Fraser free rein to trill her way enigmatically from 'The Itchy Glowbo Blow' to 'A Kissed Out Red Floatboat'. For all its charm, 'Blue Bell Knoll' would've been a hollow epitaph for a trio whose unique hallmarks are constantly both acclaimed and imitated.

Fortunately, with 'Heaven Or Las Vegas' the translucent membrane that threatened to take the Cocteaus beyond our ken has been pierced. The music here is still exultant, yet a change in attitude – most notable in Fraser's singing style – draws the band from its erstwhile, er, *ethereal* altitude to equally bright, though more firmly rooted, surroundings nearer earth. At once the title 'Heaven Or Las Vegas' (both famous for their neon halos) seems totally appropriate.

The motives for Fraser's rejection of flowery ephemera in favour of almost discernible flights of consciousness (*almost*) remain open to speculation since the meanings of her sentences still evade the most pragmatic analyses. Nevertheless, her recent experience of child birth (Guthrie has a 50 per cent stake) plays a significant role, as titles like 'Pitch The Baby' and 'Wolf In The Breast' attest.

The former, a standard Cocteaus number, is overshadowed by its immediate neighbours: 'Cherry-coloured Funk', the album opener, has a subdued verse counterpointed by Guthrie's archetypal guitar spangle and a plaintive chorus, and 'Iceblink Luck', the current single, instills a joyous mood, the longevity of which far outlasts the album's 38 minutes (the wee blighter obviously played havoc with studio time).

The title track is the second high, with Guthrie's guitar well up in the mix and sounding at times like the melody line from Soft Cell's 'Say Hello, Wave Goodbye' before eloping with Fraser's vocals in a compulsive chorus crescendo.

Only the finale, 'Frou-frou Foxes In Midsummer Fires' (they're allowed one ridiculous song title!), is as immediate, a gentle ballad accompanied by piano for two minutes until the guitars pour in as though the band's nerve had suddenly snapped.

We've had the 'Sugar Hiccup', this is the Cocteau Twins' 'Psyche-candy'.

Shaun Phillips