

ALBUMS

CANON FODDER

PALE SAINTS

IN RIBBONS
(4AD)

ONE hesitates to criticise Pale Saints, one really does. One hesitates to criticise the immaculate playing, the dense, exotic arrangements, the complex tempo changes, the difficult chord sequences and the pre-punk, prog-rock method of constructing a melody. One even hesitates to criticise the New Order guitars, Meriel Barham's Tracy Thorn vocals and the "Dark Side Of The Moon" approach to multi-dimensional, quadrophonic production (a pair of headphones are essential here). Above all, one hesitates to criticise the sugary choruses and the syrupy confection of sound, especially because that kind of thing can be so appealing in so many circumstances.

Not here, though, not on "In Ribbons". Sure, one hesitates to criticise Pale Saints. But not for long. There is, it must be stressed, plenty to recommend on this, the band's second LP, and the care lavished over it is clear for all to hear. Pretty soon, however, the pros outweigh the cons by some considerable amount. By the end one is left with a feeling of utter, inconsolable despair and frustration.

Take Ian Masters' voice. No, seriously, please do. Rarely in the history of pop has a male voice been so fey, so treacly, so vividly reminiscent of a freshly-scrubbed teenage undergrad during their first encounter with marijuana. And rarely has one been so enthusiastically seized with the desire to crawl into the speakers and squeeze the singer by the throat. Nothing personal, of course, it's just that sometimes the public has to be warned.

The words are something else. The words are hilarious. When you can hear them, that is. When you can't, just guess. When you can you should be too busy laughing to properly pay attention to Pale

Saints' clumsily manufactured Morrisseyesque angst ("I never knew I could be so ill" – "Hair Shoes"), their pseudo-enigmatic fifth-form poesy ("You do not exist the way you used to... Run and hide in your mind" – "Shell") or risibly precious abstractions ("I sit and wait for birth and being/From day to night and back to beginning" – "Neverending Night"). Let's get TTT's guffawing canine in and be done with it, shall we?

At best, Masters' reflections are more dreary than dreamy. At worst, you really will need convincing the whole thing's not one big elaborate joke at your expense. In spite of their use of sensory and/or sensational imagery throughout – stars bursting open, threads of light, copious references to skin, eyes and hair – Pale Saints consistently fail to communicate the very sense of rapture or awe that inspired them to write these songs in the first place. It's a pity, and it means titles such as "Ordeal" and "Liquid" are only about one-tenth as passionately involving as they should be.

"Babymaker" is a magnificent surge of energy and exuberance after all this listless luscious loveliness, the sound of spaceships whooshing into orbit, at the very least. That singular burst aside, "In Ribbons" makes Rain Tree Crow seem like Ramones. The details are as tasteful and finely wrought as we have come to expect from 4AD, but the overall picture is dull dull dull. Like, there are millions of things to look at but *nothing's happening*.

Listen, all credit to Pale Saints for distancing themselves so dramatically (lethargically?) from the rest of the pack, but did they have to do it with xylophones and shallow artifice? I mean, one hesitates to criticise, but...

PAUL LESTER

