

HEX MARKS THE SPOT

THROWING MUSES

THE CURSE

(4AD)

THE title presumably refers to the vagaries of the live sound here – seething guitars mixed like they're auditioning for bit parts in the next U2 movie, vocals kept low like they're ashamed of their stark beauty. According to folk who were there (Clapham Grand, 8th and 9th October), this isn't a true reflection on the band's actual performance (and anyway, the T&C shows were better). But when a Muses show starts with Hendrix's "Manic Depression", you have to shudder just a fraction, whatever irony is – or isn't – intended. I mean, hey, we all know Kristin has the power and energy and vision to out-blister even the most scabrous of boy punk bands, but the point is, she doesn't need to prove it.

It should be stated forthwith that "The Curse" is not a great Muses album, in case you infer from what follows that it is. The guitars are too raucous, the mix too interminably rocky, giving no vent to the delightful wisps and turns which can float through Kristin's songs like so many strands of gossamer. I'm all for a widening of sound, a setting free of the claustrophobic twitching and turbulent emotion which characterises much of Kristin's work, but this is too much, far too soon. It's like, suddenly subtlety has become a dirty word. (Hey, I'm sure the band rock live, but this is my bedroom, okay?)

But "The Curse" is a fine live album, and as a curio it's certainly one I'll cherish (hence, rush out and reserve yours now, kids – this is a strictly first come, first served edition). In fact, it's more than fine – how could any album not be which possesses new versions of songs like the narcotic "Counting Backwards", the giddy "Cottonmouth", or the shattering "Fireplace" (which still twists and turns like a good 'un)?

Kristin's visions are now painted in bright scarlet and in sweeping, stifling flames of heat and desire. The thundering drums on "Hate My Way" echo cavernously round the packed venue as Kristin starts retching her words, nearly reaching Kat Bjelland's anguished guttural howl. You can even picture her head lolling slightly as she cajoles another piece of magic from the guitar. But the guitars never take wing, or weave intricate webs as they used to when her half-sister, Tanya Donnelly, was around: nor do the Muses retain their pop shimmer of before. In its place is something terrifying and powerful, but something which could easily run amok. "Mania" comes cascading down in wave upon wave of guitar so fast, so furious, you fear everything will be swept away in its path.

It's interesting to note that neither "Stroll", nor "Dovey", nor "Summer Street" – three of the most heady, disorientating songs from "Red Heaven" – are featured here. Pride of place is given instead to a scalding reading of "Devil's Roof", and the near-anthem "Two Step", which still chimes out wonderful. Still, "Delicate Cutters" and "Pearl" are nothing if not subtle, nothing if not delicate. Nearly.

Basically, on this reading, "House Tornado" is back and it's back to stay. But instead of a house we have a whole forest, and instead of a tornado, it's a f***in' hurricane blowing through Kristin's hair up there on stage. One only hopes she can tame it before it sweeps her away, baby and all.

EVERETT TRUE

