



Kurt Ralske: dreams in Vivid black and white

ULTRA SLIGHT

ULTRA VIVID SCENE

Joy 1967–1990 (4AD LP/Cassette/CD)

THE RECENT admission by Ultra Vivid Scene mainman Kurt Ralske that “making records can be very intellectual” immediately set the alarm bells ringing. Intellectualism seldom, in itself, leads to good records. It makes for good after-dinner speeches, but that doesn’t qualify you to be allowed within yawning distance of a recording studio.

The idea (suggested) of turning the recording process into a calculated plot is a bit like putting Magnus Magnusson on *Snub TV*. However romantic and visionary you see it, it’s a dead loss. Ralske has become a bit too serious here, separated from his sparse roots.

While the music has struck out on a more extrovert pop path than on UVS’ debut album – taking in influences from the ‘60s – lyrically and thematically Ralske is hanging back on his coyly knowledgeable perch. And the mix of light and shade just doesn’t feel comfortable.

Isn’t the sleeve just too oblique? The pull-out poster too arty? The opening impression is that Ralske – now backed by a band rather than being the solo Scene man – is the only bloke on 4AD who would cut his ear off to further his creative

career. You feel for him, less hip than his labelmates, and shunted off on a lonely path while his previous hang-out mates the Valentines and Mary Chains caress the mainstream.

Undoubtedly he’s still experimenting. ‘Joy 1967–1990’ isn’t the critical disaster of his recent debut live shows, but it’s not the ideal follow-through from last year’s excellent ‘Mercy Seat’ 12 inch. Ralske has margined off a new pop cocoon for himself, full of lush, free-falling melody laced with insights into his heroes and his own withdrawn views of madness and suicide.

He can write astute, bright pop songs like ‘Staring At The Sun’ and ‘Three Stars’. And he can use colourful textures like the almost Scritti Politti-ish ‘Guilty Pleasure’ – Side Two’s main saving grace. But on ‘Joy’ he’s stumbled over the ability to pull the threads together and gone off to hide behind a veil of shy security.

There is some of the depth you hope and expect from the 4AD stable, viz ‘Special One’ and ‘Grey Turns White’. But on the whole this record, with its cradling, tucked-up atmosphere, is seriously average. A pity. (6)

Steve Lamacq