



the Italian Izz ?..... review cd "MADAME ZELLE"

Conqueror is but one of the exceptional bands on Ma.Ra.Cash Records, one of Italy's premier labels for great progressive rock. This is a band which feels ready to take over the prog world with a new album and line-up that oozes confidence and professionalism. The shift started with the previous album "74 Giorni" which found the band making strides although there are a few of our reviewers who preferred the more overt Italian symphonic flair of the first two albums. "Madame Zelle" is a brand new concept album picking up from where "74 Giorni" left off. The lovely and very talented Rigano sisters Simona and Sabrina return with veteran and lone original member Natale Russo on the kit. Two new axemen finalize the new line-up of Conqueror, Mario Pollino on lead and Gianluca Villa on bass. While the lovely Italian vocals are still firmly in place, the last two albums seem to be moving in a more international prog-rock direction and less steeped in traditional Italian feeling. Listening to "Madame Zelle" the first band they reminded me of was not an Italian band, but a mellower version of USA band Izz (think of a track like "Confusion" from Ampersand.) I think Izz fans would really dig the sound on this album and suggest they check it out.

"Madame Zelle" is an ambitious concept album based on the life of the famous courtesan and alleged double-agent Mata Hara, and it follows her life dedicating each track to a different chapter, all the way until her execution by firing squad in 1917. The sound of the new album is perfectly appropriate for the subject matter: elegant, exotic, and full of beautiful passages. Newbies Pollino and Villa waste no time hunkering down with Russo to provide Conqueror with a backbone that is sure-footed, at times muscular but able to be light on their feet as well. The tracks mix symphonic and jazzy progressive rock with a light dose of RPI flavour and a heavy shot of melody. Against this superb band are the tasteful keyboards of Simona Rigano (the piano being my favourite!) and her delightful vocal prowess. Younger sister Sabrina Rigano is often the "lead" in many tracks, covering the saxes but most important here is her flute work. She carries many passages with "lead flute" work that is strong and simply floats you away. "Madame Zelle" is just LOADED with gorgeous flute solos which I think convey very well the personality of the subject. To add the final extra touch they bring in guest musician Ottavio Leo to add sitar and other instrumentation throughout the album. These moments really add some nice spicy touches to the "Zelle" sound, giving certain tracks an infusion of the Loreena McKennitt travelogue sound. Special mention goes to guitarist Pollino who has less lead presence than he might otherwise have due to the heavy flute emphases, yet when he does take a solo he plays with majesty and great emotion.

I believe the compositions overall to be an improvement over "74 Giorni" which I must confess I was luke warm on. A friend and I were talking about Conqueror and agreed that this band are on the very "refined" end of RPI whereas we generally prefer the dirtier and saucier RPI, the RPI from the rough side of the tracks if you will. But when you are in the mood for the classy and the refined, no one does it better than Conqueror. Here they deliver an album as elegant as Delirium's "Il Nome del Vento" and as accomplished as Finisterre or Ubi Maior. And I still believe the Izz reference is a valid one. Whether the actual tracks are as memorable as those distinguished bands will be revealed in time, this is an early review after only 3 or 4 spins. But my gut tells me people are going to love this album. The songs range in length from 5-15 minutes with the opener "Margaretha" being the extended epic track.

The artwork and booklet for this CD release need a paragraph all their own. Every track gets its own page, which features complete lyrics as well as stunning photography by guitarist Pollino, similar to the cover shot. With graphics partner Enzo Puglisi they have assembled a gorgeous booklet of shots of Mata Hari as posed by Alessia Navarria with extensive make-up work by Angela Gugliotta. Being a history geek I would have preferred to see some archival photos of the real Mata Hara included, but these softened black/white "acted" shots come very close to delivering the same feel. The care put into the booklet adds a nice touch to the overall aesthetic of the release.

If you enjoyed the previous work of Conqueror this album is a slam dunk. If you've never heard them, this is a good time to start. "Madame Zelle" will give you 9 tracks of lovely contemporary progressive rock as graceful as the Mata Hari herself.

Jim Russell

JULY/2010



www.conqueror.it