

Fragility and Power Echo and the Bunnymen

Humility is not a virtue that sits comfortably within the world of rock 'n' roll. The spirit of the music demands a brash self-confidence, and that is one characteristic Ian McCulloch has never been accused of lacking.

He is the singer, lyricist and resident sex symbol of Echo and the Bunnymen, a band he genuinely believes is the cream of the 80s British post-punk crop.

"The Killing Moon' (the band's 1983 hit) is the best song a band has written since the 60s. I used to say our entire collection is the best, but I've got more humble!" he explains, with just a hint of a smile on the full lips known to drive admirers to distraction.

Echo and the Bunnymen recently previewed their new self-titled album by performing on the roof of a London record store, just as some other band did on the Apple building in 1969, and you can bet your new Beatles' CDs that their rendition of 'Twist and Shout' was their way of proclaiming themselves a new Fabulous Four for the late 80s.

John Lennon created a furore by declaring the Beatles bigger than Jesus, the unlamented Frankie Goes to Hollywood pushed the limits of arrogance, while Julian Cope calls himself Saint Julian ... these Liverpoolians are a big-mouthed bunch. But Ian McCulloch's self confidence is justified by his band's status as one of the most perennially popular British rock ensembles of the decade.

Dilemma

The traditional "here today, gone tomorrow" dilemma of trendy UK pop bands hasn't been faced by Echo and the Bunnymen. Their four previous albums (plus a singles compilation, *Songs to Learn and Sing*) have all been British hits, and their stirring live performances have made them concert favourites. I've been a convert ever since witnessing the very first London Bunnymen gig back in 1979, when the drum stool was still occupied by Echo, the drum machine.



For years I endured the barbs of cynical friends for championing a group with a name that sounds like the title of a children's book, but the tide is turning. Reaction to their new album is positive, as was the response to an American tour with New Order.

But America's taken a while to crack — why is that, Ian?

The nattily dressed young man pauses for reflection, scanning the city streets beneath his hotel room window for the appropriate answer.

"I don't believe that cutting corners gets

you anywhere. The fact that we're still together, down to earth, and relatively normal is down to taking our time. If someone says, You've got to do this, we'll say, No, we're going to have a year off instead.

"As a group, we've never had a plan to get from A to Z. It was always to go through the whole alphabet, because every letter has something worthwhile. A lot of bands sit down to find the quickest way to Z. We've never done that. I guess we're at about M now!"

AWOL

A year ago, it seemed as if their letter was K for Kaput. Drummer Pete de Freitas went AWOL, formed a new band the Sex Gods, and went on a wild Merry Pranksters-style rampage through New Orleans and Jamaica. Down to a trio again, the Bunnymen worked on a new LP, but the sessions didn't work out and rumours of their impending demise spread.

But the Echo bounced back. Pete's trespasses (and long-distance phone bills) were forgiven, Laurie Latham (Paul Young, the Stranglers) was recruited as producer, and the revitalised band cooped themselves up in various studios for six months recording *Echo and the Bunnymen*.

The three-year wait since *Ocean Rain* has seen Echo and the Bunnymen crystallise their sound into a commercial, yet still compelling, form. It is a refinement of, rather than a radical departure from, their signature moody and majestic style.

So are they playing it real safe?

"Some of the criticism of this LP in England is that it is not more exploratory, but that is conscious. People always look to us to innovate, to lead the way, and I just thought we'd play it fairly straight. I thought I'd let all those new bands think up something for themselves! [The Bunnymen have been a crucial influence on English rock — just ask the Mighty Lemon Drops.] "Mind you, I think the songs are quite weird anyway!"

Whimsy

Indeed. You won't find peers like U2 and Simple Minds loosening up with a piece of psychedelic whimsy like 'Bedbugs and Ballyhoo,' but then the Liverpool lads have always possessed a lyrical and musical sense of humour conspicuously lacking in

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