

Gold Waiting to Be Mined

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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As misnomers go, Wicked Liz & The Bellyswirls is a doozy. First of all, there's very little wicked about the vocal work of Wicked Liz, who goes by Liz Townsend when not on stage. She can growl in a most unmenacing way, but her voice generally runs from pop sweet to hearty. On the threatening scale, she's closer to Jewel than Courtney Love. Second, the band is more of a collective than the name would suggest. Townsend handles the vocals, brothers Leo and Bob Kelly take guitar and bass, respectively, and Greg Hipskind keeps the beat on drums. Songwriting duties are shared.

Semantic issues aside, the group's self-titled debut CD is a well-crafted, stripped-to-its-essence, and polished tease – in a good way. The record's seven songs clock in at under 25 minutes and cover much stylistic ground, pretty much everything on the lighter side of edgy.

“Lie in This Bed” and the standout “Tuesday” are delicate and country-tinged, “What's Wrong Now?” is a catchy piece of power pop, and “Can't Stand” comes from the Joan Osborne school of soulful singing. (At other times, I hear in Townsend a delivery and quality that remind me of Natalie Merchant and The Cranberries' Dolores O'Riordan.) Such versatility is often a strength, but Townsend's voice is the all-important unifier. The instrumental rave-up “The Bellyswirl” seems to come from a different planet altogether, and while there's nothing wrong with it, it's missing the hook and light touch that Townsend brings to the rest of the tunes.

The best of the bunch is a jangly cover of Carey Pierce's “3 of Us in a Boat” – which is also the amusing point of departure for the cute cover artwork (in which poor Liz is left to fend for herself in the ocean to keep the title accurate). The song and treatment play to the band's best side, with Townsend's zero-gravity vocals floating over a tight, upbeat arrangement. As much as I like much of Wicked Liz & The Bellyswirls, it seems a starting point and not an end. If these four stick together, they'll hopefully become a little less stylistically nomadic and settle into a comfortable groove. There's a gold mine of glittering power-pop nuggets in this band, but it will take some mining.

In addition to Wicked Liz & The Bellyswirls, Leo Kelly plays guitar for Spatterdash, whose second CD Truth Serum we neglected to review when it came out in the first half of 2000.

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Truth Serum finds the five-piece Spatterdash in a mood significantly more ambitious than Kelly's other band. This is guitar-heavy rock music pumped up with riffs ("Boomerang Effect" even nods, briefly, to the Aerosmith version "Walk This Way") and Chris Sindt's powerful vocals, sometimes recalling Eddie Vedder and Layne Staley. Nearly all the songs work most of the time, and when they falter, it's primarily a problem of too much. There is sometimes too much guitar, too much keyboard, and the songs are more expansive than they can afford to be.

I think this shortcoming is largely a function of the studio environment and its effect on songwriting. There a tendency to fill in every space with something, even when its role in the song is unclear. Some arrangements just need to breathe, and sometimes the tunes just need to be tightened and pared down.

The band's covers are significantly more economical; you can hear it on the studio cover of "Church of Logic, Sin, & Love" and even more in a strong live version of the classic "Hush."

The extra flourishes also fall away from the live takes of the band's own songs – "Tale of Drunken Delight" and "Chemical Smile" – revealing a group that simply needs to become more confident in its own writing in the studio. Then it will really take off.