

THOMAS STOKOE - "Agent Orange"

Review by Ted Perlman #2

This was probably the hardest "Readers Demos" column I've had to write yet. I usually can find something positive to say about the musical work - the song, the recording, the playing, or the singing, etc. Something will be there that brings a smile to my face, and from there I can hopefully write something that the artist can find helpful. However, Thomas Stokoe's track "Agent Orange" left me feeling empty. I actually thought it might have been done as a joke - the laughter at the end of the track only served to reinforce that feeling. There is no real song here, no melody, no chorus, no verse, no vocals, no great solos, no innovative recording techniques, no new take on some old school style - nothing. Let's move forward - perhaps I can find something good about this recording if I listen long enough. Thomas deserves at least that, and my editors will thrash me if I don't try.

Arrangement

The track starts out with a Sade-ish sounding rhythm guitar, which leads into another section with an electric piano which leads into an awful sounding fuzz guitar...I can't tell if that is supposed to be the chorus or not. Thomas - what have you been listening to? This is not jazz, house, UK garage, techno, rave, hip-hop, neo-soul, classic-soul, old school rock, blues, or any other style I can think of. A great record should have sections that have some reason to go together. The listener should be able to recognize the chorus when they hear it. If I heard this coming from a passing car, I'd probably think it was a soft drink commercial featuring Tyrese with his shirt off. Perhaps that's what this track should be used for - background music in a film or a TV show theme. I can see the credits rolling by....

Oh god, I'm trying to not be mean or sarcastic...I'll keep listening...

Wait - the bridge is cool!!!! The best part of the arrangement, the part that actually makes some sort of sense. I knew if I kept at it I'd find something...

Instrumentation

I didn't receive a list of what instruments were used in this recording, so I'm taking my best guess. I hear a few drum loops, some drum samples, perhaps an SP1200 kick, some latin percussion. A sloppily played rhythm guitar (sounds like a Gibson 335), and quite possibly the worst sounding lead guitar I have ever heard. I have a sneaking suspicion it wasn't recorded with this tone. I smell an abuse of QuadraFuzz or some other distortion plugin. Whatever it is, it just sounds plain ugly. Keyboards? - I hear an electric piano. Not one of the cool Rhodes sounding pianos or even a real Wurlitzer electric piano. No, this piano sounds like - gasp!!! - the Casio CZ101 electric piano preset. AHHHHH!!!! I had hoped never to hear that one again. We used the Casio back in the day because we couldn't afford a real DX7, NOT because it was a good sound.

There's a nice sounding B3-ish organ on my favorite section, the bridge. The drums don't sound very "tight" - perhaps one of those attempts at non-quantisation to get them more "real" and "human". Nope - they just sound sloppy. I hear a great sounding side stick and some nice congas. The bass sounds like a real electric bass played with a pick and miked at the amp. It's played okay but it just sounds dull. The track ends with an out-of-tune electric guitar and one of the worst tremolo effects I've ever heard. And then Thomas laughs. I wonder what kind of mic he used on the laugh?

Okay - I found a few good things to say. On to perhaps some more...

Engineering

The engineering is actually not half bad. Instruments are clear and panned nicely using a generous amount of the sonic landscape. I think the lack of a good sound is due more to the instruments and sounds chosen by Mr. Stokoe than to any shortcomings in recording the parts. The ugly sounding lead guitar is recorded well enough so that I can hear right away that I definitely hate it. The piano sounds clear, even if I hate the patch used. The kick drum sounds like it has some nice compression on it, and it sits nicely with the dull sounding bass. The guitar sounds like it was miked from a Fender tube amp. Whatever mic was used seems to have captured the sound of the guitar okay. It doesn't sound brittle at all. The B3 organ, real or not, sounds great. The mix is "neutral" - meaning it doesn't jump out at the listener in a good or bad way, it's just "vanilla".

Overall

Overall, I am confused. Mr. Stokoe obviously has experience in playing and recording music. But if he wants to attain some level of success he needs to stop fooling around. It doesn't matter if the airwaves are full of inferior sounding, woefully arranged, and badly recorded records, it's best to always strive for the highest quality work you can do. I am positive this is not Mr. Stokoe's best work. I'd like to see him hook up with a collaborator who could help him take this assortment of ideas and meld them into an actual song. Then we might be hearing Thomas on the radio, TV, and in the movies. Mr. Stokoe might even have the last laugh. Remember what Decca Records said to Beatles manager Brian Epstein in rejecting them: "We don't like their sound, and guitar music is on the way out". One never knows, and there's no accounting for taste. Keep at it Thomas!