

## CD of the week: Jack

Pioneer Soundtracks  
(Too Pure)

★★★★ £13.99

**W**RITING about Serge Gainsbourg recently, I said that one of the reasons we found this unholy roller so hard to *comprenez* was because the UK doesn't really have an equivalent of the French "chanson" tradition within which The Big Serge worked (and which he warped); and which in turn comes out of a venerable strain of heavily confessional Gallic literature that runs from Gide and Montaigne to Genet and Michel Leiris. If you bear in mind some of these same reference points when perusing Jack's deliriously ambitious debut LP *Pioneer Soundtracks*, then their alternately cerebral and Bacchic, bruised and sardonic world view might begin to gel that bit quicker. (Gainsbourg is thanked in the sleeve notes, along with Morrison.)

On the cover, a grey-skinned, bony, baldy Brit of a boy poses inside a beautiful suit-of-lights, the kind of matador clobber Madonna cleaves to in her dreams. At which point you think: ah, *mais oui*, what is "Jack" if not the painfully plain Anglo everyman ("I'm alright..."; "...the Lad") equivalent of the far tastier Jacques.

Likewise, the album's opening lines — something like a statement of atmospheric intent — read like George Battaille's *Blue Of Noon* condensed into a hungover poetry of dirty old town flippancy:

"Dirty is in her lover's arms/It is London in the morning/Behind them the skyline burning/The riots meaning nothing."

Jack's singer-songwriter Anthony Reynolds wants to play with the grown ups. But unlike the majority of Britpop's would-be Troglodytes, his aspirational boundaries extend a little beyond life as a kind of nouveau Persauders re-run of cocaine and cagoules and copping off. This is not a boy who wants you to think he has trouble with the longer words in *Exchange & Mart*. But none of this is meant to make him sound inaccessible. Because the grown-ups he wants to play with have names like Bukowski and Brel, Serge and Scott, Jack are always straining towards a perfectly obvious popular art. There's not a single naked name-drop in any of the nine *Pioneer* tracks, even if the influence of certain authors looms behind certain songs like the damaged city air behind an asthma attack.

Not as arch as the *Divine Comedy*, nor as isolationist as *Momus*, Jack still belongs to a certain rogue strain of English Boy pop: heterosex, pervy, pretentious. Thankfully, the pretensions are toward perfect pop; and if their icon of eternal perfection is sixties Scott Walker, then it's probably the recent example of Jarvis Cocker that has spurred them along apace. Jack can be as light as St Etienne ("Meet me in the off licence at a quarter to 10") and as dark as a cave.



Jack: a certain kind of English Boy Pop — pervy, pretentious

("Oh my darlin'/Fetch my medicine") Bits of *Pioneer Soundtracks* are as hesitant and unformed as any debut album has a right to be — but there are moments (like the long moody intro and outro of *F.U.*) when their pointed appointment of Peter Walsh as producer (of his duties on the last two

Scott Walker LPs) pays off. As I say, Reynolds and his cohorts — principally guitarist/songwriter Mathew Scott and keyboard player/arranger George Wright — want to play with the grown-ups. And if Jack aren't entirely there yet — real life realisation lagging behind the resplendent conceptual idea of

it all — then, at their best, their songs have the same arrogant what's-THAT? swagger of a Common People or Something For The Weekend.

Unlike the kind of band who are hyped on their supposedly "controversial" nature, but whose actual music discloses nothing but please-like-me (let's call this the Sleeper syndrome), Jack really can sling together a song — a highly-strung and artfully arranged, decently controversial proper song that lives and breathes and sweats and sulks and refuses to apologise for its own intelligence. "Adultery, Sapphic tendencies/A cargo of alcohol and amphetamine la la la la la la ..." An adult song — not adult as in AOR-freezes-over, but adult as in an old "X" film: Liz Taylor whispering in Paul Newman's ear or Ben Gazzara prowling after Ornella Muti; Belle Du Jour and Bout De Souffle and ...

And blow me if Charlotte Rampling hasn't just honeyed out of my radio, talking about the debt we all owe to — what else? — the French chanson tradition! For behind every Terry Jacks ("We had joy, we had fun, we had Seasons in the Sun!") says Char, there often lurks a far darker original — in this case, the darkly chuckling spectre of Jacques Brel.

And I would say that's just where our Jack have pitched themselves: somewhere between Happy Jacks and Haunted Jacques. It's a good place to start. Ian Penman