

THE MOURNING AFTER

They were one of our Tips For '96, and JACK haven't let us down with their stunning debut album

JACK
PIONEER
SOUNDTRACKS
 Too Pure (9 tks/45 mins)



JACK, again. When I saw them live in April, everything they'd ever heard that had shaped what they were playing, seemed too conspicuous, too loudly pronounced. You can hear echoes of the diverse musical influences evident in that night's short, confusing set on this hugely impressive debut, but mostly "Pioneer Soundtracks" has a voice of its own—wildly ambitious, occasionally overreaching, but always mesmerising. It's one of the records of the year—the sound of a band creating its own universe, worlds apart from anything else.

It'll probably be like garlic to a vampire to some people, though. Hardy traditionalists in beer-stained T-shirts into dull post-Weller hod-carriers like Ocean Colour Scene or the shellsuit rock of Cast or Northern Uproar will no doubt take it sternly to task for its vaulting ambition, brazen lack of modesty, its "artiness," its distinct lack of yobrock power chords and Merseybeat harmonies. For a start, it's a concept album, which will really set their critics' teeth on edge. Not that we're talking about anything as Neandethral as "Tommy" or "Thick As A Brick." Think instead of "Ziggy Stardust", "Aladdin Sane". Think of the Velvet's third album. Think, especially, of "Berlin".

Jack's influences are literary and cinematic as much as musical, and they credit the novel "Blue Of Noon", by the French writer George Bataille, for providing the characters of the two lovers whose doomed, drunken,



desperate relationship is the principal focus of these songs. We are introduced to these characters on the epic

overture, "...Of Lights". It begins like Stereolab having a crack at "Diamond Dogs", with Anthony Reynolds

whispering a lurid narrative about suicide, rape, murder, revolution, apocalypse. The setting is London, but it could

Why Jack?
 "When I was 19 I wanted to have a kid—I was gripped by that sense of mortality thing. But I couldn't afford to have a child, and I didn't want to bring someone into this world.
 "It's strange. Until recently you needed a license for a dog, but anyone could have a child... Anyway, I decided to form a group to be my surrogate child. Jack is what I'd call my son."

The LP is the second of your records to have a bullfighter on the cover. One pass?
 "I read... Or I'll Dress You In Mourning", a book about a matador called el Cordobes who went from abject poverty to being one of the richest most famous people in Sixties Spain, a Spanish George Best.

Q&A
ANTHONY REYNOLDS

I took it as a metaphor for the old self-discovery thing—it's not really about bullfighting. Like a lot of beautiful romantic ideas, bullfighting is pretty horrific in practice."

"Pioneer Soundtracks". Soundtracks to what?
 "Well, the alternative title could be 'Saturday Night, Sunday Morning'.
 "Side One is all about putting on your make-up, plucking your eyebrows, putting talc in dark places.
 Side Two is meant to hold your hand while you come down the next morning."

What if you have it on CD?
 "Mmmm... ah, well, another romantic idea that isn't so practical."

be Godard's Alphaville or the anonymous, rain-drenched city in "Seven". There is an air of millennial crisis, the last days looming.

This is a world in which the dreadful has already happened. In the circumstances, what else is there to do but embrace the coming end, rush headlong into oblivion? And so the characters that populate these songs look for salvation in sex, drugs, alcohol, every kind of excess.

The vertiginous rush of "Wintercomessummer" and "White Jazz" vividly captures this sense of recklessness abandon, strings and guitars clashing fiercely behind Anthony's increasingly imperious vocals. The hell-bent momentum of these highly-charged opening tracks reaches a climax with the thundering tympani and banshee strings of "Biography Of A First Son". At which point the brakes go on, everything goes ominously quiet and we find ourselves in the sublimar musical landscape that people like Nick Cave and

Tindersticks have previously made their own.

The attempted-murder ballad, "I Didn't Mean It Marie", is particularly close to Cave—though it has a tune and a vocal that doesn't sound like something grumbling in the plumbing, which makes it a vast improvement over most of the miserable Antipodean's comically overrated output. The plangent "FU" has also been compared to Cave, but Leonard Cohen's fabulously distraught "Famous Blue Raincoat" is a more likely inspiration. The centrepiece of this collection, however, is the seven-minute "Dress You In Mourning", a song and performance of exquisite bereavement, with the record's most formidably handsome vocal and heart-stopping arrangement. After this, the only way out is "Hope Is A Lie", a forlorn lament for a dying relationship that reminds me of the weary romanticism of something like Dylan's "Dark Eyes".

Bloody essential? Absolutely.
ALLAN JONES

JACKFAX: Jack were formed in Cardiff in early 1995 by guitarist Matthew Scott and vocalist Anthony Reynolds... They were signed by Too Pure following their debut performance in March that year... "Pioneer Soundtracks" was produced by Peter Walsh, who was at the controls for Scott Walker's "Climate Of Hunter" and "Tilt"