

albums

'Tower of Power' is one to get before AM stations exploit it all

"Tower of Power"
Tower of Power
Warner Brothers
Copyright 1973

Tower of Power may have their "East Bay Grease" burned by the fires of AM overkill, but their new album stands as tight, professional achievement undeserving of such a fate.

The album, like most of Tower of Power's music, features tight vocal harmonies, a well-rehearsed, extensive brass section that never loses its lip, and driving beats coupled with a soul-styled lead singer. The cuts on the album average three minutes of driving, punching melodies, with a variety of tempos ranging from the quick, hard bass drive of "What is Hip" to the slow, melodic "So Very Hard to Go."

It's music that's easy to listen to, not demanding too much attention or a great degree of intellectualizing.

It's those qualities which may doom the album to the boredom of taking cute melodies and screwing them to the post of background music to drive to.

Those qualities have already killed, at least for me, the first cut, "So Very Hard to Go." Before AM got hold of it, it was a pretty, deceptively complicated tune.

But the combination of a night-watchman's job coupled with an AM radio and constant repetition, hour by hour, tired me quickly of the piece — a piece, that if left to FM or the stereo, would have lasted longer than a DJ's rap.

That fate awaits at least two other cuts that have the potential to become AM blockbusters and may doom the album to the eternal insignificance of a push button car radio.

The album doesn't deserve such a horrid fate. Tower of Power is one of the few groups which reproduces its studio cuts faithfully on stage — at a concert last March in Eugene, their numbers were just as tight, just as musically professional as the numbers on their album.

Many groups use horn backing in the studio and leave the trumpet offstage — Tower of Power doesn't change the arrangement. Seeing them play lends a greater understanding to the skill of the group's musicians — without even a quarter-rest, the horn section would switch from vocal harmonizing to instrumental orchestrations, without missing a beat, sounding weak, or chopping a note. And all this in the twinkling of an eye. The choreography of heads winging from mike to instrument is fascinating to watch — and even better to hear.

It's a good album, albeit without "socially redeeming" values.

Listen to it before AM gets hold of the rest of it.

Scott Spittal

"A Wizard, a True Star"
Todd Rundgren
Bearsville Records
BR2133
Copyright 1973

There is always the danger that one will become hyperbolic, that the lure of promotional records and press release flack will drive any critical faculties completely away. The normal tone of the press releases that accompany these records is restrained ecstasy. We are told it is a work of mature genius, etc. Usually, I discard the press release with the plastic shrink wrap. But, this time I think they might be right. Todd Rundgren just may have done it.

After two weeks of listening, I can't find any glib answer about what Rundgren is trying to do, and what is really galling is Rundgren probably wanted it that way.

Rundgren calls the record "A Wizard, A True Star," a conceit he disclaims on the record sleeve. "I'm not a real star. I'm just a musical representative of certain human tendencies—the Quest for Knowledge and the Quest for Love. Knowledge comes to a lucky few. Love comes to anyone with the Knowledge to recognize it. At any rate, we should have fun looking." If anything, "A Wizard, A True Star" is fun, and intriguing, and confusing, and fun.

Side one: "The International (in 8)." The side should appeal to those who, like me, are fans of absurdist humor. The side is meant to be taken as a whole, so that's how I'll treat it. Each of the songs is connected—just how is not always apparent, but they are (by strange, avant-garde pop music).

The opening lyric is a taunt. "Here we are again, the start of the end, but there's more - I only want to see if you'll give up on me - But there's always More," and the conclusion, "I swear something lies in your ears and your eyes - cause there's More - You hear and you see yet you do not believe? That there's always More - (I know)," segues into "I know a place where dreams are born - and time is never planned. It's not on any chart - You must find it with your heart," from "Never, Never Land." Every song fits into the one before and the one that follows.

Following "Never, Never Land" is "You Need Your Head" and then "Rock and Roll Pussy." The next tune is called "You Don't Have to Camp Around."

"Save all your money, go confess on Sunday Sweet Boy. And get your copy of Honey and back on the streets by Monday Sweet Boy, but tell me where does that leave me, boy. Save the satin undies, don't pluck out your eyebrows. Stow the mincing lisp, you don't have to camp around."

The next tune, "Zen Archer," fits in musically, but its Zen abstraction lyrically makes it hard to pin down how it fits conceptually. There's always more. "Onionhead," the next in line, has a chorus that says, "If you want the obvious, you'll get the obvious," and we do. The next song is "DaDa Dali," done to the melody of "Toot, Toot, Tootsie." And finally, we hear a reprise of "Le Feel Internationale."

The question now is "What does it mean." What, indeed? Well, it doesn't have to mean anything. I won't impose my thoughts about its significance on anyone. What I can say is that it is very challenging, and while I haven't made up my mind about "The International (in 8)" yet, I like it.

The second side is apparently more traditional, both in form and

content. There are actually breaks between each song. However, chastened by my experience on side one, I listened cautiously. On a medley of "I'm So Proud," "Ooh Baby, Baby," "La La Means I Love You," and "Cool Jerk," I noticed something was amiss. Rundgren's arrangements sound like the classic, original versions, but he's messed with the time signatures. The astounding thing about it is "Cool Jerk," doesn't sound all that odd in 7-6 time.

The side is much more accessible, but the whimsical tone shows up in "Hungry For Love":

"Mom's old-fashioned cooking, caviar and champagne, a meal at McDonald's, nothing fills a man when he's hungry for love."

The obverse side of Rundgren's Dada coin, the late night despair and the hope that keeps him going on, is made explicit on "Sometimes I Just Don't Know What to Feel":

"... Sometimes I just don't know what to do, ... sometimes I just feel so alone ... something makes me stay on my feet, don't you dare admit to defeat, if I tell myself it's all right, I can confront myself it's alright and watch another day dawn."

And, "I Don't Want to Tie You Down": "Sometimes it's hard to look up under the times we're going through. I scratch my head and stare and wonder how to face the day anew." The second side may lead some listeners to the more difficult first side.

Both the music and production are good. Rundgren has wisely not opted to play all the instruments himself as he did on his previous albums. Because of the complex production, it is difficult to credit individual musicians. They are all listed on the record sleeve. So are the lyrics.

Concluding this review may be the most difficult part of a difficult review. I am not prepared to state positively whether "A Wizard, A True Star" is a monument to Rundgren's pomposity or genius. Perhaps it is both. A line in "Just One More Victory" comes to mind: "You may think that I'm a Fool, but I know the answer. Words become a tool, anyone can use them."

At this point, I'm inclined to view it as a monument to his genius.

Rolf Hage

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