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Madonna releases electronic 'Ray of Light'

By Rob Moseley
Oregon Daily Emerald

To begin with, I've never been a big fan of Madonna.

The only aspect of her music that has ever held an attractive quality in my mind is her innovative spirit. Whether it's been defying accepted sexual norms, introducing new dances or promoting the image of women, Madonna has always found a way to stand out. She has never had the strongest voice of the pop divas, but what separated Madonna from the likes of Celine Dion was her over-the-top image and personality.

Unfortunately, none of that is present on "Ray of Light." In fact, instead of forging new ground and rising above conventions as she has in the past, Madonna chooses to embrace one — the electronic movement.

By sticking to the themes of love and faith that have been so prevalent throughout her career and musically adopting a trend, the one-time biggest name in pop has the listener singing "God Save the Queen."

The songs that truly succeed on "Ray of Light" are those that hint at Madonna's glory days.

"Nothing Really Matters" hints not-so-subtly at "Like a Prayer." The problem is, so do aspects of "Sky Fits Heaven." In fact, most of the truly danceable tracks remind me of old-school Madonna.

That's not to say the album is not without highlights, however. Madonna does the intelligent

thing in putting most of the quality productions in the album's first half.

The opener, "Drowned World/Substitute for Love," though repetitive, is attractive in a Portishead fashion, a sound that continues on "Swim." The title track bumps the tempo up for a four-song stretch with a danceability that overcomes Madonna's obvious lack of vocal range.

"Frozen," which recalls Depeche Mode, continues a theme of Indian influence that begins one song previous with "Shanti/Ashanti," an electronic ode to the guru in which Madonna sings in a Middle Eastern tongue.

That insight into her own spiritual beliefs provides a departure from the normal Madonna fare, a departure that is pervasive throughout the album.

Unlike her hits of the late-1980s, which seemed to be about pleasing the listener, "Ray of Light" is a very personal album. Besides the issues of loves gained and lost, Madonna sings of the image she created for herself while at the forefront of pop culture and, not surprisingly, her daughter. While writing and performing "Little Star," the aforementioned ode to baby Lourdes, must have been an enlightening experience for mom Madonna, it provides not a hint of satisfaction for the listener.

But in the end, "Ray of Light" comes across as Madonna's ef-

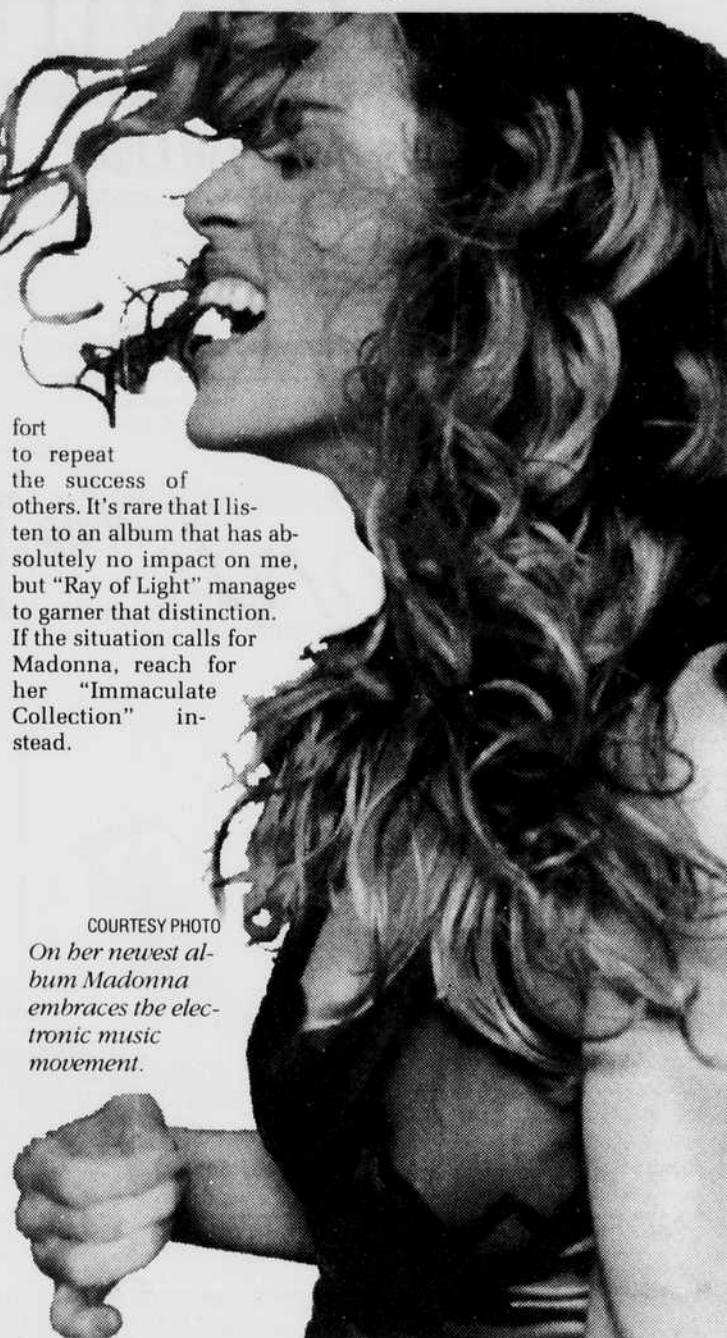
CD REVIEW

Ray of Light Madonna

■ **STYLE:** Electronic Pop
■ **RATING:** ★★★★★

fort to repeat the success of others. It's rare that I listen to an album that has absolutely no impact on me, but "Ray of Light" manages to garner that distinction. If the situation calls for her "Immaculate Collection" instead.

COURTESY PHOTO
On her newest album Madonna embraces the electronic music movement.



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Series will present Merlin in his youth

By Bob Thomas
The Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — To mention Merlin is to conjure visions of a doddering, white-bearded hermit as seen in Disney's "The Sword in the Stone" and Lerner and Loewe's "Camelot." But what about Merlin in his younger years?

NBC supplies an answer with a two-part adventure, "Merlin," starring Sam Neill with a distinguished cast. It will be broadcast Sunday and Monday April 26 and 27.

Neill's Merlin emerges as a dynamic wizard who faces a daunting array of opponents: Mab, the Queen of Darkness (Miranda Richardson); the evil sorceress Morgan Le Fey (Helena Bonham Carter); her slippery gnome friar (Martin Short); the dangerous Lord Vortigern (Rutger Hauer).

Isabella Rossellini appears as the hero's lady love, Nimue; John Gielgud as the tragic King Constant; and James Earl Jones as the voice of the Mountain King. "Merlin" was filmed largely in Wales, but also in Scotland and at Pinewood Studio in England.

"Merlin is a complicated character, actually," Neill reflected on a visit to Los Angeles. "He is a statesman, not without some conflict. He comes from the old Druid religion, but he generally finds himself allied to the new, Christian faith. A simple man, a spiritual man, yet very worldly and complex."

"He has been schooled in magic, but he tries to resist the use of magic because it represents everything he wants to put behind him. Finally he finds himself having to use 'special effects' to get by."

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