

Stereolab: Marxist Theorists with a Groove
The Palace, November 20, 1999

Suffice it to say that Stereolab's avant-garde sound has secured the band's cult status despite its major-label signing. As the London-based purveyor of fashionable art rock, the Groop (as the band members exactly spell it) is the established specialist of melodic pasticcio. Muzak-inspired exotica, tempered shoegazing leaning, analog electronica, and post-bop/bossanova blend are meshed together to create an eclectic delight. On top of it all, philosophical ruminations pervade Stereolab's bilingual lyrical content. Clearly, these Marxist theorists are savvy synth-pop artists with a groove intelligent enough to combine brain teasing and hip swiveling at the same time. It is quite a surprise, naturally, that the 'Lab discards some of its florid predilection in favor of sparse and simplified instrumentation. Supporting act Olivia Tremor Control, on the other hand, boasts a gamut of lo-fi gears, ranging from clarinet to (yes!) Sousaphone.

Composure is not a characteristic typical of rock stars, but the audience is instantly drawn to lead chanteuse Laetitia Sadier's elegant nonchalance. Her savory '60s French pop and jazz delivery intertwines with backing vocalist/second guitarist Mary Hansen's attractively almost-waifish tone in a contrapuntal swirl. Balancing the funk equation on "Metronomic Underground" and "Miss Modular" is bassist Simon Johns, a recent addition to the current lineup. Drummer Andy Ramsay, thankfully, serves up animated chunks of rapid-fire rhythm, which is not always apparent in some previous recordings.

The absence of calmer, more penetrating tracks proves to be a disappointment. Not to worry, however. Courtesy of keyboardist Morgane Lhote, the Moog-driven chirps, drones, and swells are always a delectable aural treat alongside Tim Gane's sparkling guitar chops. Toward the finale, Stereolab builds up bombastic '60s sci-fi effect extravaganza, notably on the extended version of "John Cage Bubblegum." A harmonic retromodern interplanetary excursion, it is all at once otherworldly and familiar.