

Velvet Revolver - Libertad (2007)

Written by bluesever

Tuesday, 20 November 2012 17:13 - Last Updated Tuesday, 26 March 2019 17:00

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01. *Let It Roll* 02. *She Mine* 03. *Get Out the Door* 04. *She Builds Quick Machines* 05. *The Last Fight* 06. *Pills, Demons & Etc* 07. *American Man* 08. *Mary Mary* 09. *Just Sixteen* 10. *Can't Get It Out of My Head* 11. *For a Brother* 12. *Spay* 13. *Gravedancer (Don't Drop That Dime)* Musicians: Scott Weiland – lead vocals, keyboards on "Get Out the Door" Slash – lead guitar, talkbox on "Get Out the Door", acoustic guitar on "Messages" Duff McKagan – bass, backing vocals Matt Sorum – drums, percussion on "Get Out the Door", backing vocals Dave Kushner – rhythm guitar

Velvet Revolver always seemed like the answer to a quintessential L.A. rock & roll question: what does the engine of Guns N' Roses do when they're left to rust by the side of the road? It was long past the point when Slash, Duff, and Matt Sorum could possibly hope that Axl would abandon Buckethead, Tommy Stinson, and whoever else was toiling away in the studio under the GNR banner and go for a reunion tour, and old rockers need a place to make noise even while they're in the process of fading away, so they started a new band (Izzy may or may not have been invited to the party, but he long ago started following his own path and never seemed interested in coming back into the fold). A band as big as this needed a true star to front it -- a lesson well learned from the charisma-free black hole that was Slash's Snakepit, where the vocalists never could quite spar with the guitarist -- so even if they flirted with Buckcherry's Josh Todd, there really was only one choice to fill the singer's slot and that was Scott Weiland, who wasn't abandoned from his own imploding band, Stone Temple Pilots, as much as alienated from them due to a combination of ego and excess. A band in search of a singer, a singer in search of a band, both parties calling Los Angeles their home, both well-known for their all-encompassing love of rock & roll debauchery -- it seemed like nothing could go wrong.

As it turned out, nothing quite went unquestionably right, either, as their 2004 debut, *Contraband*, met the GNR-meets-STP expectations but never transcended them. It was far from a flop -- selling millions around the world -- but it wasn't quite compelling either, partially

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because it was too easy to hear the separation between Slash's sleazoid booze riffs and Weiland's hazily psychedelic melodies, and they had yet to find a common ground apart from a handful of songs. Despite this, it was hard not to feel some affection for Velvet Revolver, since they were so unrepentant in their love for old-school rock & roll theater, and also since they were driven by Slash and Duff, two of the most lovable characters in '80s hard rock, and there was a certain joy to hearing them play again on a big stage where they belong. But the key problem with Velvet Revolver is that the GNR aesthetic doesn't quite gel with Weiland. If GNR are the kind of band all rock fans feel good about loving, Weiland is the kind of frontman who gets grudging respect; it's possible to love his music, particularly the irresistible swirling melodies, without really loving him. A large part of this is that he exudes a reptilian coldness that doesn't thaw even when paired with the big, blowsy rock of Slash and Duff, but instead of giving the music tension it just means that it doesn't quite gel, since both parties play to their strengths instead of finding a collective sound.

That's as true on their second album, 2007's *Libertad*, as it was on *Contraband*, but this record is more cohesive than the debut, partially due to the presence of Weiland's old STP producer, Brendan O'Brien, who lends the recording color and texture that enhances the melodies while still giving the guitars considerable muscle. O'Brien amplifies the energy for both the singer and the band and, taken on their own terms, they sound quite good. Weiland gets off some great tunes (as on the "Days of the Week" sequel "She Mine"), sometimes the band dominates (as on "Spay"), and sometimes everything suddenly clicks (as on the relentless opener, "Let It Roll," where both parties shine). Too often, though, there are concessions between Weiland and the others during the course of a song, with the bandmembers getting to ride their riffs during the verse, then fading into the background as Weiland delivers a chorus that is indelibly his own, as on "She Builds Quick Machines," which seesaws between the two extremes. This isn't necessarily a bad thing because both camps are good at what they do and the individual pieces of the songs are pretty enjoyable, but as *Libertad* rolls on, it's hard not to wish that Velvet Revolver buckled down and acted like a band, finding a way to fuse their two aesthetics into a whole, instead of stroking their individual egos by indulging in what they're good at.

Of course, indulgence is the very reason the band exists: it's what made them stars, and without GNR or STP around, all the guys in this band need some outlet for their energies (which may only be partially musical). And in that regard, Velvet Revolver fulfill a need for the bandmembers, but also for an audience that is craving rock & roll that is proudly about good times -- an audience that is not insubstantial in 2007, but is poorly served. *Libertad* won't necessarily provide that audience with lasting sustenance, but it is a quick enough fix of old-fashioned rock & roll hedonism that does do its job reasonably well, as it has the riffs and melodies to please, even if they're not quite pulled together as full-fledged songs. And that's all down to the band acting as a group of stars instead of a group -- the charisma of each individual bandmember still shines brightly, but if they can funnel that into some kind of group charisma next time around, they might finally have an album that lives up to their past instead of merely doing no disservice to it. ---Stephen Thomas Erlewine, allmusic.com

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