

Leah - Of Earth & Angels (2012)

Written by bluesever

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1 Prisoner 5:05 2 Remember 4:14 3 Old World 4:00 4 I Fade 3:44 5 Ex Cathedra 4:27 6 Ocean 3:29 7 A Thousand Years 2:54 8 Tragedy & Magic 3:10 9 Mainland 4:58 10 Say Yes 4:12 11 Confess My Love 4:40 12 Illusion 4:12 Bass – Briton Liakakos
Drums, Percussion – Sean Lang Lead Guitar, Rhythm Guitar – Dave Hughes Vocals,
Synthesizer, Piano, Music By, Lyrics By – Leah

Symphonic metal has a history of being grandiose to a fault. Nightwish, Epica, Xandria and a host of others have played their part in helping power metal's sister genre garner popularity. Subsequently, fans have come to expect music of a fast-paced, hard-hitting nature; ripe with choirs and even full-blown orchestras. Then we have Leah (McHenry). While her contemporaries fuel the more elaborate side of symphonic metal, Leah's approach is of a far more basic nature.

As an eponymous project, Leah is primarily concerned with the vocals. The Canadian singer is, as one would suspect, fairly operatic. Her deliveries are almost exclusively slow and deliberate, though never to the point of sounding like a personal endurance test. When things do pick up, it's often thanks to short-lived guitar solos ("Old World"), though Of Earth & Angel's latter half does take more initiative than the first, especially on its two closing tracks. Even then, Leah never belts out her notes with any sense of urgency. Reinforcing this style is the distinct lack of instruments beyond guitar, bass and drums. The fact nearly every other symphonic band makes said elements integral to their music ends up working to Leah's favor. If anything, one may find themselves wanting to hear little to no instruments as the album goes on. Much of this has to do with how Leah's voice sounds. This isn't so much due to tonality so much as singing style; it's easy to imagine her serene vocals vibrantly emitting from a stage only to delicately echo off the walls. "Tragedy & Magic," one of the album's shortest tracks, makes for a proper showcase of this.

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Another reason Of Earth & Angels makes a strong case for Leah's vocals, at the expense of the album's overall quality, is how it sounds instrumentally. It's easy to get the impression that each song was given non-vocal backing for the sake of technically being a metal album. The light folk influences are mostly befitting and serve as an appropriate background for the gleaming subject of focus. Even so, everything is downplayed to where it starts to feel like an afterthought, but still achieves some degree of distraction. The guitar playing is primarily to blame. David Hughes feels like he's caught somewhere between restraint and disinterest, which may have to do with Of Earth & Angel's own reluctance to fully stretch out. Album closer "Illusion" is one pleasant exception, thanks to everyone performing in a more upbeat manner. By and large, however, the preceding tracks demonstrate a lack of genuine symbiosis between singer and guitarist.

Of Earth & Angels both presents and realizes plenty of potential, especially for a debut from a mostly unknown artist. Where it blunders most is with regards to direction, a misstep that's more of a mild annoyance than anything else. Outside of Leah's vocals, however, nothing stands out, so prospecting listeners can take solace in the fact it's easy to appreciate what she has to offer. Whether Leah chooses to define herself with more folk influences or greater concentration on her singing remains to be seen, but either avenue is bound to result in ample enjoyment. ---
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