The Morrigan – Masque (1998)

1 Masque 5:46 2 Dever The Dancer 4:46 3 Blarney Pilgrim 7:56 4 Moonghast 6:46 5 Merrily Kissed The Quaker's Wife 3:18 6 The Traveller 6:38 7 Dribbles Of Brandy 5:26 8 The Lykewake Dirge 4:40 9 The Demon Lover 7:43 10 She Moved Through The Fair 7:02 - Cathy Alexander - vocals, keyboards, twelve string guitar, recorders, windsynth - Mervyn B. - vocals, flute, bass guitar - Dave Lodder - electric & acoustic guitars, keyboards, bass guitar - Colin Masson - bass guitar, acoustic, electric and classical guitars, keyboards, vocals, trombone - Arch - drums, Egyptian drums, pads, Roto-toms, tambourine, shaker, beer glass, 2,000 gallon oil tank, vocals + - Cliff Eastabrook - acoustic and electric bass guitars - Simon Baggs - violins - Steve Lightfoot - accordion - Matt Carter – banjo

The fourth album by this UK progressive folk band, 'Masque' shows The Morrigan's style developing, if even only a bit. After a strong album with 'Wreckers', the band returns another few years later to give another solid album, this time pushing the traditional Celtic jigs they built the first three albums up upon, and diversifying their catalogue. There's no doubt that 'Masque' is the most progressive album The Morrigan had done up to this point, although not every change the band makes here is for the best.

Although changes have been made, the sound here is still explicitly Morrigan in nature. Still here are the pastoral acoustic guitar segments, soaring traditional vocals of vocalist Cathy Alexander, and the very Celtic vibe that really defines what the band's music is all about. At the sacrifice of the Celtic saturation, there are now greater roots in progressive rock, and even such disparate sounds as Gregorian chant singing and the more martial sounds of neofolk. All of this makes 'Masque' feel like The Morrigan's strongest work when compared the the three that had come earlier, but in terms of the enjoyment factor, it is on par with 'Wreckers'. Gone are much of the energetic recorder-driven jigs that were always very fun to listen to, and authentic feel of the folk elements. Instead, there's something here that hasn't quite been heard from the band before.

'Masque' opens up with its title track, which seems to bring the listener into a sort of prog rock feudal feast hall, with guitars and keyboards blazing with whistles sounding in between. While it may turn some off on first impression, there is also something of a religious vibe that the album gives. Be it through the Latin chants or traditional European spirituals The Morrigan puts to use here, there is a Christian based theme on the album, as first impressions go. However, it is put to a good use here; instead sounding as if it is meant to enhance the feudal sound of the album rather than convert anyone.

Easily the most rock-based Morrigan album I have thus listened to, not to mention the most musically complex and ambitious. While it doesn't have the sort of charm that 'Wreckers' did, it shows the band taking steps in the right direction. ---Conor Fynes, progarchives.com

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