

POWER PLAYER

ROCK METAL MAGAZINE

VIRGIN STEELE

The Marriage Of Heaven And Hell Part I & II
 Genre: Power Metal
 SPV



I seldom give out perfect scores. To deserve one, an album has to either be an example of brilliance and artistry that has seen me through many experiences, something I draw comfort from in difficulty, something that emboldens me, or a record I deem the height of creative power. Virgin Steele's 'Marriage' albums fulfill both criteria. Released in the metal dark ages of 1994 and 1995, these records were conceived as one collection of songs, tied by the themes of love, death and religion. Having experimented since their inception in the early 80s, this trio from Long Island, New York went on to create a stream of flawless albums all through the late 90s and early 2000s, pushing metal to its limit with classical, barbaric and romantic notions that make their discography rich and untouchable.

Virgin Steele are a rather impenetrable band, mostly due to their strange melodic choices and outside influence. David DeFeis, vocalist, composer and pianist, is truly a god among men, and the 'Marriage' albums showcase his work at the height of his genius. This is uncompromising, soul-touching metal of the highest order, full of over-the-top arrangements, intellectual lyrics and sonic performances.

'The Marriage Of Heaven And Hell Part I' is the heavier album of the two, featuring excellent metal tunes like 'I Will Come For You', 'Blood And Gasoline', and the kingly 'Life Among The Ruins', but what sets it apart is the epic nature of longer, more inventive cuts like 'Trail Of Tears' and the superlative 'Last Supper'. DeFeis sounds like a caged lion on this album, barking, howling, and screaming, but it was during these recordings that his touching falsetto was unleashed, and can be heard in full force throughout. Edward Pursino's guitar work is simple but technically proficient, filling out the keyboards and pummeling drums like crashes of thunder. It's a perfect introduction to the Virgin Steele sound; direct, epic and breathtakingly powerful.

'The Marriage Of Heaven Part II' is a different beast all together. The music here is so evocative, so fantastical that it sounds like a dream composed atop Olympian mountains. Harder in places, softer in others, this one takes more time to appreciate, but the journey is worth it. 'Symphony Of Steele' is the band's mission statement, and it foreshadows the European power metal movement with its throttling drum beat and fist-raising chorus. 'Crown Of Glory' rips open the sky, and 'Victory Is Mine' houses the quintessential metal riff, with a chorus that is dipped in gold. It is between these numbers where the band's greatest achievement lies: the wonder that is the spiraling, 'Emalaith'. A track worthy of religious conversion, this is DeFeis at his most passionate, and I defy you to listen without shedding a tear.

Anyone calling themselves a power metal fan without these albums needs a good talking to, as they are absolutely essential. Packed with extras, these long out of print records can once again be discovered. Innovative, deep, and life-affirming. Classic.

POWERPOINTS: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

BRUCE TURNBULL

VIRGIN STEELE

'Invictus'
 Genre: Power Metal
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After the superlative 'Marriage' albums, Virgin Steele took a more pugilistic turn with 1998's 'Invictus', re-issued here with a whole second disc full of acoustic interpretations of some of their most renowned works. 'Invictus' is the silent third part of the 'Marriage' story, and indeed, it shares some similarities with those albums,

and some musical themes, which are reprised throughout this large, raging collection. This is the first album to feature prominent double-bass drumming, something they took from their European contemporaries, which makes this a little less classic sounding. They also added a progressive bent to the material, as well as making it more regal and dramatic, something they would perfect with the following 'House Of Atreus' albums. Originally titled 'A Season In Purgatory', 'Invictus' is a violent album compared to the two that preceded it, with DeFeis using his lion's roar more than he used to, but that's not to say this doesn't share the same melodic and romantic tendencies of the 'Marriage' duo.

The title track opens things up with a hypnotic riff, while 'Mind, Body, Spirit' is classic Virgin Steele, right down to the soaring falsetto and driving guitars. 'Through Blood And Fire' is the band's interpretation of the kind of melodic power metal that was hitting the continent around this time (after this, the band would tour with the likes of HammerFall), while 'Defiance' wins the prize for the catchiest tune. The undisputed highlight comes in the shape of ending epic 'Veni, Vidi, Vici', which is everything Virgin Steele had achieved up until this point in one huge-sounding package.

While 'Marriage' was a musical journey through the history of Christ and a trip to the mountains of the gods, this is music that a Roman emperor might slaughter his detractors to. 'Invictus', in its own way, is just as essential for power metal fans, despite not quite reaching the heights of what came before it.

POWERPOINTS: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

BRUCE TURNBULL