

2004: VOLUME 42

Arcansiel – Swimming In The Sand



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Tracklist: *Swimmer In The Sand* (4:50), *Angel Of March* (10:33), *Holy Wolf Suite* (13:52), *Evelyn* (6:54), *I'm Still Searching* (21:02), *The End* (6:56)

Arcansiel were one of the most impressive Italian bands of the late eighties Neo-Progressive wave, mixing influences from the British scene (Pallas, IQ) with touches of the classic Italian groups (PFM, Banco). After three albums they called it a day.

Now, to celebrate their reformation, they present *Swimming In The Sand*, consisting of one entirely new song – the catchy, radio-ready prog-pop *Swimmer In The Sand* – and five re-workings of what they consider to be the best of their earlier albums. *Evelyn* is the sole offering from their debut 1988's *Four Daisies*; *I'm Still Searching* and *Angel Of The March* are from 1990's *Still Searching*; and *Holy Wolf Suite* and *The End* are from 1994's *Normality Of Perversion*.

My initial impressions of this disc were very good, but subsequent listens have revealed one or two minor faults, which slightly mar the overall effect.

On the plus side, Arcansiel are very strong instrumentally, with guitar and keyboard-led arrangements spiced up with flutes, violins and saxophones to create a variety of moods and atmospheres. There are some very tasteful and catchy electric piano parts, reminding of **Supertramp** or **Kayak** at times, and on *Holy Wolf*-which most resembles **Pallas**- there's even some prog metal crunch and growly vocals. On this song in particular, there is a tendency to stretch things out a little too long, and occasionally the arrangements are a little disjointed.

Angel Of March is a strong piece with a fine melodic opening with superb guitar and marvellous electric piano and develops to a memorable chorus with a jangling guitar backing. Very catchy. *Evelyn* starts off with gentle vocals and ethereal piano, but hots up to include some soaring melodies, a touch of Celtic influence and some stomping stop-start riffs before cooling down again at the end.

The twenty plus minute *I'm Still Searching* is perhaps the best track, featuring much instrumental development including delicate acoustic guitar passages (recalling **Genesis**), thrilling electric guitar soloing, smouldering sax and very nice interplay between organs and synths which is very well handled. The vocals are also particularly good here. The brief chamber music passage featuring violins and flutes, which occurs a couple of minutes in is especially nice. Lovely stuff.

The minus points are:

- Tracks four and five are reversed on the track listing (at least on my demo copy), a small point I know, but it is a trifle confusing.
- *Swimmer In the Sand* whilst pretty enjoyable, is a touch bland when compared to the other material, and is perhaps a step too far in the commercial direction for my tastes. One track like this on an album is fine, but I wouldn't want a whole disc's worth.
- Finally, and most importantly, the otherwise mostly excellent *Holy Wolf Suite* is spoilt by the mispronunciation of the word Holy, which is rendered pretty much throughout as Holly, making for an altogether more prickly character than I assume was intended. Of course, the singer's English is light years ahead of my Italian, but mistakes like this do tend to detract from the lyrical impact. However, as the lyrics to this particular song include expletives and references to anal sex, and a section where the singer is almost rapping, perhaps it doesn't make that much difference.

On the rest of the disc, the English vocals are really good, so all this does in the end is knock a point off the overall score; I wouldn't let it stop me investigating their work further. Lyrical faux pas aside, Arcansiel are a good group, with a lot to offer the adventurous Neo fan, bridging that style nicely with the classic 70's style. This collection makes a very good starting point for exploring their catalogue.

Conclusion: 7 out of 10

Dave Sissons

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