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From the opening moments of “God Save the Keg” from Blackmore’s Night’s seventh studio album *Secret Voyage*, you realize that this is going to be a trip well worth taking. All the signs were there a long time ago when ex Deep Purple guitarist Ritchie Blackmore formed his own band Rainbow. His fascination with medieval, traditional and classical influences came to the surface time and again on the first couple of Rainbow albums.

Looking back he had never looked at ease under the spotlight as part of one of rock's biggest bands. Onstage tantrums, walk outs, and public disagreements seemed to be part of his undeniable genius. Even within his own band, Rainbow, he struggled to find anything like a regular line up amid reports of sackings and people quitting citing him difficult to work with. All that has gone and now we see a vastly different and very contented man. No longer under the gaze of the mainstream rock media, he can now play the music that he wants to. Typically, of course, he plays it superbly.

At first people saw his departure as him putting two fingers up to the rock world in general. It is because Blackmore is regarded as one of the all time great rock guitarists, that the admirers from his past have refused to take this venture seriously or even try to understand his wanting to explore it. Time has proved otherwise and Blackmore’s Night, formed with his partner, singer, and multi instrumentalist Candice Night, have gone onto build a unique fan base and have released five studio albums of traditional and medieval music using traditional and medieval instruments.

Gone were the trademark Blackmore guitar solos and that incredible cleanness of sound and touch that only he could produce. Instead came songs and ballads about dance, camp fires, and maidens, that were even performed in traditional period costume.

Albums such as their first in 1997 *Shadow of the Moon* and the later *Fires at Midnight* released his fascination with Renaissance inspired music and instrumentation upon the world. Alongside Candice Night, they performed like travelling minstrels rarely paying any acknowledgment to his Deep Purple past. *Secret Voyage* is altogether darker and richer. Candice Night’s poetic lyrics create stories and images and, as you would expect, Ritchie’s playing is exemplary. As Blackmore’s Night has toured around Europe they have clearly absorbed from their admirers some of the traditional sounds from the various countries they have visited. Russia with “Toast to Tomorrow”, France with “Gilded Cage” and Germany with “Prince Waldeck’s Galliard”. In a strange departure along the albums journey a cover of Elvis’s “Can’t Help Falling in Love” appears alongside a version of Ritchie’s own “Rainbow Eyes” from his Rainbow days. You cannot help but wonder if this is the version that he always intended for the song.

The grandiose opening of “God Save the Keg” is full of rich instrumentation that combine together to herald the album with an uplifting fanfare. *Secret Voyage* enchants its listener whilst taking you through a magical journey of atmosphere, imagination, and imagery. Candice Night’s impossibly beautiful voice is first heard during the eight minute triumph that is “Locked within the Crystal Ball”. There is something else going on here and suddenly Ritchie plugs himself in and delivers some superb guitar bursts that are stunningly effective and totally unexpected. The track sends out a message loud and clear. This is Blackmore’s Night, this is Renaissance inspired music but this album has an extra texture and depth to it that separates it from what has gone before.

“Gilded Cage” is silky smooth with a superb production and atmospheric gypsy violin. It doesn’t just remind you of camp fires it makes you want to light one and the traditional Russian song “Toast to Tomorrow” will have you trying to dance around it. Ritchie’s playing on “Prince Waldeck’s Galliard” is simply exquisite fully

justifying Ritchie's desire to explore this music. If anyone could do it justice it can only be a guitarist of the quality that he undoubtedly is.

"Rainbow Eyes" has a surprisingly full sound and works extremely well, in fact, it manages to transform the original onto a far higher plain. "The Circle" has a wonderful eastern vibe while "Sister Gypsy", "Peasants Promise", and "Far, Far Away" are story telling at its very best carried along again by haunting instrumentation.

***Secret Voyage* comes to a close with the totally enchanting "Empty Words" complete with echoes of the opening song. Whatever your view is of Ritchie's departure from the rock scene - whatever your bias is against this style of music and his involvement in it - this is the album that will surely convince you to finally accept that he is not only playing music that he clearly loves, but he is playing it like no one else can. He is also educating us along the way and opening our eyes and ears to music of the highest quality that has a definite place in the world. "Smoke on the Water" it isn't - today's Ritchie Blackmore it is. Accept it and move on - and appreciate his genius while you can. *Secret Voyage* is by far the most memorable and well produced Blackmore's Night album to date.**

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