

For listeners unfamiliar with Blackmore's Night, *The Village Lanterne* is more mist-around-the-castle than "Smoke on the Water." The CD is an eclectic tapestry of medieval music embellished with contemporary touches. It's rife with mandolins, cellos, bagpipes, trumpets, tambourines and imagery of ghosts, castles, knights and full moons. Even if this doesn't sound like your cup of tea — or your tankard of mead — give it a taste, because Ritchie Blackmore has waved his magic wand and created an ethereal, atmospheric and musically stunning album. And, as always, his guitar work — mainly acoustic, here — is nothing short of brilliant.

It's heartening that Blackmore is remaining faithful to the music and subject matter that compel him, rather than aiming his crossbow at a commercial bull's-eye. Even in his Deep Purple days, he played with *Ye Olde World* overtones, so his 10 years in Blackmore's Night have been a natural progression for him. Everything from the music to the mystical lyrics to the Renaissance Faire clothing in which he and vocalist Candice Night are pictured works because it's authentic. I could just as easily visualize Blackmore wheeling a shopping cart through the aisles of Ralph's in this garb as I could imagine him wearing it onstage.

And that translates into songs that pulse with conviction. The album starts strongly with "25 Years," a haunting, Oriental-flavored piece showcasing a beautiful mandolin solo. Blackmore's music here, and throughout the album, is perfectly paired with the shimmering, otherworldly vocals of Candice Night. Even when she's singing passionately, there is a delicate grace to her vocals, as though they're swirling within the music, instead of separately accompanying it.

This style benefits "I Guess It Doesn't Matter Anymore" (one of the few songs on the CD featuring electric guitar), which possesses both an urgent drive and a Baroque elegance. It commemorates Resurrection Mary, the legendary ghost of a girl who was hit by a car on the way to the prom, and who now eternally stands roadside, awaiting a ride home. Night's lyrics are awash with imagery: "Standing in the rain/The cold and angry rain/In a long white dress/A girl without a name/I pulled along the side/And offered her a ride/Like a rolling mist, she floated inside."

Equally mesmerizing are the Celtic-flavored "World of Stone," a stately tribute to Joan of Arc featuring male background voices joined in a semi-Gregorian chant, the tenderly charming "Streets of London" and the jubilant, triumphant title cut, with its uplifting lyrics espousing bravery and integrity. And then, of course, there are the Blackmore instrumentals, which could move a pillaging barbarian to helpless tears, as well as effective reworkings of Deep Purple's "Child in Time" and Rainbow's "Street of Dreams," pairing their former singer, Joe Lynn Turner, with Night on vocals.

*The Village Lanterne* is what good music is all about: evoking strong emotions and transporting the listener to realms beyond everyday struggles and strife. Give it a try — it will grow on you...like ivy up a castle wall.

~ Meryll Lentz