

I'm one of those guys who is gonna take Ritchie Blackmore anyway I can get him. From his days in the big bad Deep Purple, up through Rainbow (their Long Live Rock 'n' Roll album is a fave of mine) and through to his latest band Blackmore's Night, I have listened to Mr. Blackmore's playing with unwavering admiration. I'm not the guy's biggest fan, but I do know that whatever he is into the result is going to be interesting, at the very least. When Ritchie formed Blackmore's Night with Candice Night, the upper guitar-God had some of his harder rocking fans shaking their heads in disbelief. Featuring a seven piece band of medieval instrumentalists, plus the vocals of Miss Night, Blackmore's Night is what Ritchie calls a "renaissance rock band". They have had quite the success in Europe and Asia, most notably Germany and Japan, releasing albums and touring with their intimate and unique shows. Performing live sets more akin to traveling minstrels around the renaissance fare maypole (the band actually does play these types of gigs!) what one experiences from a BN show is a lot of mandolins, acoustic guitars, lilting harmonies, lutes and straw, lots of straw. It's about as far removed from a rock show as you can get.

The band's latest CD, Winter Carols, is their first ever Christmas release and these 'covers' of traditional holiday music suits Blackmore's Night well. As Ritchie states in the promo materials: "Most of these Christmas Carols are from the 1400s, 1500s, 1600s. I am naturally attracted to these melodies" and you certainly can't damn the guy for his commitment. This 12-song CD is as good a holiday release as I have ever heard, the arrangements of these old classics (and some so old I have never heard of them) are solid and well played. But what we're really hearing on Winter Carols is Ritchie and Candice (who is Ritchie's romantic partner as well as musical) a whole bunch of strings and some horns, and not really the band (with one notable exception).

As we should suspect, when Ritchie plays, he plays well. The instruments he plays tend to be more acoustic. On songs like the original "Winter (Basse Dance)," "Ma-O-Tzur," and a particularly amazing rendition of "Good King Wenceslas," one can hear how well Blackmore has kept up his chops. There is also the rather 'modern' "Wish You Were Here," featuring what sounds more like a full rock and roll band arrangement. On this song, Ritchie breaks out with some slide and electric guitar lead work at the end of the song. A little taste is a dangerous thing though, as it made me yearn for the Blackmore of old!

Overall, I guess I feel the way many of Ritchie's old-time fans do — I want to hear him "rock out" a bit. But again I'm up against a case of what this CD is as opposed to what it could be or what I want it to be. Winter Carols may be a bit heavy on the strings in the overall production and I'm not so sure Candice's voice is best served on these numbers, but if this is what we are getting from Ritchie Blackmore these days, this is what we have to take from Ritchie Blackmore and be happy with it. I would have liked a little more band playing and maybe even a few more obscure 'carols' than what is represented here, but over all Blackmore's Night's Winter Carols is a solid holiday release.

~ Have Hope