

**JACK**  
THE JAZZ AGE  
Too Pure ★★★★★

English modern orchestral rockers come of age

I loved Jack's debut album, *Pioneer Soundtracks*, when it came out in 1996. Going back to it now, however, after listening to *The Jazz Age*, it sounds surprisingly rickety, something knocked-up in a rush, all springy floorboards, hammered tin roofing and walls you could dent with a stick. *The Jazz Age*, on the other hand, is a much sounder structure altogether – handsome, elegant, grand; beautiful and breathtaking in the perfect symmetries of its detail and design. It's the Sistine Chapel of modern orchestral rock, in fact. At a time when too much of what we have to listen to is the aural equivalent of a garden shed, *The Jazz Age* is a palatial vision in a landscape of eyesores, disfigurements, lean-tos and leftovers.

You would have thought by now that there possibly wasn't much more mileage left in that particularly English strain of seedy inner city romance and destitution, highly-strung and down-and-out, that Marc Almond patented in the lurid Eighties and Tindersticks, darker and less theatrical, made their own in the early Nineties. Even the previously infallible 'Sticks, for instance, sounded oddly jaded on much of last year's *Curtains*, where they often seemed tired of their own gloomy atmospheres and the increasing effort of coming up with fresh musical and lyrical permutations on so many well-worn themes of elegant despair, spoiled and faltering lives.

And it's not as if Jack have this particular musical waterfront to themselves anymore. *Pioneer Soundtracks*, remember, was released into a climate of dull, overcast guitar bands, shell-suit rock and moronic utopian

album  
of the  
month

Colin Houkins



# Tenement symphonies

anthems. Apart from the aforementioned Tindersticks, there wasn't much around quite like it. Now, of course, *Pioneer Soundtracks*' mix of declamatory rock and string-drenched epic ballads is more familiar – thanks, in large part, to The Verve and the success of "Bitter Sweet Symphony" and "The Drugs Don't Work".

Let it be said, however, that no one does this overwrought balladeering thing with as much of a flourish as Jack, whose lead singer and lyricist, Anthony Reynolds, makes Richard Ashcroft's dolorous musings sound like the maudlin midnight misery of a lachrymose brickie, drunk at closing time and making a tearful nuisance of himself. *The Jazz Age* is Marc

Almond's tenement symphonies, rewritten for the millennial edge – this album's colossal "Nico's Children" has the wracked ruined grandeur and tidal orchestral sweep of Soft Cell's masterpiece, "Say Hello, Wave Goodbye".

*Pioneer Soundtracks* flaunted its literary and cinematic influences rather brazenly, to the point that they seemed to the band's detractors either foppish affectations or – worse – merely comic. Here, they take the sting out of that particular criticism by anticipating it. The full-on, string-fuelled rush of "Cinematic" is a wry, lovely, stirring acknowledgement of the power and persuasion of fantasy that is all the more poignant for its self-depreca-

tion. There's also a welcome sense of humour on display that wasn't often apparent on *Pioneer Soundtracks* but is evident here on the gloriously Bowiesque glam-rock stomp of "Pablo" and in the cheekily-titled "Love And Death In The Afternoon" (an amusing conflation of Woody Allen and Ernest Hemingway).

But it's tracks like "Nico's Children", the opening lament of "Three O'Clock In The Morning", the unbearably beautiful and unapologetically pessimistic "Saturday's Plan" (imagine Leonard Cohen's "Famous Blue Raincoat" without the laughs) and the sublime "Lolita Elle" (a lost love remembered with a clarity that guarantees maximum heartbreak) that best characterise this powerful, wonderful record.

Against the odds, *The Jazz Age* is an unqualified triumph.

Allan Jones



### Ratings:

A classic	★★★★★
Excellent	★★★★
Good	★★★
Average	★★
Poor	★

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