

Guitarist extraordinaire Ritchie Blackmore says of his merry band of medieval music makers Blackmore's Night: "We have the creative freedom to play any style of music we want. We can play folk, rock, ballads, instrumentals or tavern songs." Now I'm not sure if Blackmore and company — vocalist Candice Night; keyboardist Bard David of Larchmont, bassist/guitarist Earl Grey of Chimay, Squire Malcolm of Lumley on percussion, and Gypsy Rose on violin — run through all these styles on their 12-song album *Secret Voyage*, but they've managed to release a great CD nonetheless.

Blackmore and Night united during the waning days of the guitarist's rock and roll thang. Having enjoyed unprecedented success with Deep Purple and Rainbow, Blackmore gave up his guitar heroics for the lute and lire and started playing and recording medieval-inspired folk music with Night. Blackmore's Night continue to churn out new CDs, while gaining great acclaim in Europe and a cult status in the States. They have truly carved out a niche as one of the only groups playing this kind of music with a bona fide rock star on the frontline.

If you're like me, aching to hear Ritchie Blackmore wail, *Secret Voyage* may not be for you. Even with some electric guitar here and there, you mostly get acoustic, mandolin, violin and mandola. The single "Locked Within The Crystal Ball" "features some fantastic vocals from Night. Blackmore's playing sounds more akin to Mike Oldfield than Deep Purple, but it's inspiring playing all the same. The lilting "Gilded Cage" is filled out with some fine acoustic guitar, intricate violin workings, and a solid backing percussion, also played by Blackmore. "Prince Waldeck's Galliard," an acoustic instrumental, is exactly the kind of thing I was hoping to hear from the former guitar god. Following this, we get a dash of electric guitar on "Rainbow Eyes," originally recorded by Blackmore's Rainbow on the 1978 album, *Long Live Rock 'n' Roll*. This might be the best tune here, well served with Night's soothing voice.

But it's back to mead-quaffing and dragon-chasing on "The Circle," embellished with some tasty electric guitar and solid harmonies on the choruses. An uneventful version of the Elvis Presley hit, "Can't Help Falling In Love" is the nonetheless an intriguing departure. Overall, *Secret Voyage* does in fact touch on many styles, yet stays pretty faithful to the concept of Blackmore's Night. I found myself wanting for more electric guitar, but will admit this is interesting stuff played by musicians who have an obvious passion for it. They really have the whole thing down perfectly. Seeing how much they have matured over the years, I'd have to say that any Blackmore's Night release is not so much an oddity, but a natural progression of what may prove to be a long and prosperous career.

~ Ralph Greco, Jr.