

Surfer Blood EP Review

"If you're moving out to the west, then you better learn how to surf," the chorus of the first track on Surfer Blood's 2010 debut commands. It's an excellent example of a great band getting by just fine without having much to say. Not that the lyrics on "Astro Coast" were at all bad. In fact, I always sort of loved that surfing line, but it was always clear that the real reason it made such a splash last year was the catchy and intricate guitar interplay between frontman John Paul Pitts and guitarist Thomas Fekete.

At the end of their new "Tarot Classics" EP, Pitts sings "At least I know who my friends are," and repeats it several times. The lyric ends with a vocal drone that is uncharacteristic for the band. On "Astro Coast" vocal melodies were fleet and concise, and, where previous subject matter kept a respectful distance with vagaries and fiction, Pitts has now added spite, regret and sadness to his emotional palate. The new release is only four tracks long, but it shows serious development for the band on several levels.

Maybe I'm waxing a little poetic. This is still upbeat riff rock. No wheels have been reinvented. But you can feel Surfer Blood's bag of tricks deepening. On the endearing three-chord "Miranda" we hear what feels like their first true guitar solo, which breaks ranks just enough to be refreshing without threatening to slow the pace. Opener "I'm Not Ready" immediately finds Pitts stretching his falsetto talents pretty thin, straining for the highest pitches. It has an excellent effect. He instantly sounds more sincere than ever before, strangely reminiscent of Motion City Soundtrack's Justin Pierre. The highlight "Voyager Reprise" has a better lead riff than anything on "Astro Coast" and the vocals follow suit. But it really shines when subtle harmonica, strings, and synth are added to the mix. These soften the sound, fittingly, for the sorrowful song without compromising Surfer Blood's 90s college rock inspired aesthetic.

2011 has been great for the EP (Jens Lekman, Dom, Dum Dum Girls, to name a few), but Surfer Blood's "Tarot Classics" is probably the best of the year. In four songs short songs, it connects them to the strongest parts of their debut and distances them from the weakest. Those who used "promising" to describe the band a year ago will be happy to see the potential they saw tremendously fulfilled.