

GO FORTH, YOUNG MAN

TEN YEARS IN THE WAITING AND THE VERVE RETURN WITH A NEW ALBUM. *GERAINT PRICE* WONDERS IF IT WAS WORTH THE WAIT.

FOR a band hardly known for their wit, it's somewhat appropriate that The Verve's fourth release should be called *Forth*. It's been over ten years in the coming and clearly has proved to be a bit for a challenge for the self-styled "greatest band in the world" (not just in the mind of lead singer Richard Ashcroft, but also to a fair few music journalists, too). The Verve, if you recall, are probably best known for *Bitter Sweet Symphony*, a wildly successful song that generated huge sums of money for its writers – who unfortunately for The Verve were Mick Jagger and Keith Richards. Key samples of an orchestral version of the Stone's *The Last Time*, which had been adapted by the Andrew Oldham Orchestra, were the cornerstone of the production and consequently the courts awarded the credits (and fees) to Jagger and Richards. Although success continued with *The Drugs Don't Work*, *Sonnet*, *Lucky Man* and *Velvet Morning* (all from the *Urban Hymns* album), the band split in 1999.

The idea for the new recording came late last year when the band announced a UK tour (which sold out in 20 minutes flat). When Ashcroft learned that his

long-term friend and drummer on his solo albums, Peter Salisbury, had been in contact with Verve guitarist Nick McCabe proposing they do a side project, he decided the time was right to heal the rift that had grown between himself and bassist Simon Jones and reform the band. Sensibly, *Forth* (and I know you're going to hate me for saying this) avoids a repeat of what has gone before and is quite reassuringly refreshing: *A Northern Soul* redux it is not, in fact, it's more comparable to 1997's *Urban Hymns*. The album kicks off with *Sit and Wonder*, a track that lives up to the reunion hype with an edgy lilting refrain, while *Love is Noise* is vintage Verve. What follows is a procession of meandering fillers (with the exception of the *Lucky Man*-esque *Valium Dreams*) each well over five minutes long until we reach two pearls of closing tracks in *Columbo* and *Appalachian Springs*. The former is all soaring vertiginous vocals (dare I say it, reminiscent of Robert Plant?) that morphs into an almost early Charlatans vibe. The latter is an epic. That's not to say the album as a whole is an epic, however. There is an awful lot of self-indulgence at play: critics often remark that *Urban Hymns*

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(and *Northern Soul* before it) felt like the band had thrown the metaphorical kitchen sink into the mix, so heavily textured was the production. *Forth* is more of the same but less successfully executed, turning to musical gibberish at points.

If *Forth* is to be The Verve's grand farewell, it's a fitting tribute and by no means a bad record. For a man with an ego as big as Richard Ashcroft's, though, one wonders whether this will hit quite the heights he has come to expect. ■

