

VISUAL CLIFF – “COLLECTIVE SPIRIT”

Review By: Jason Limbaugh

The re-emergence of Visual Cliff was a welcome one. Fortunately for fans of the band, Rob Perez hasn't been idle in the interim, releasing other band projects and an excellent 2008 instrumental solo album during Cliff's hiatus. As satisfying as those other projects were, Visual Cliff still has a sound and style all their own - so the December release of a new Cliff project was a great Christmas gift and an exciting end to an all-too-bland musical year.

Of course, when any band drops off the radar for an extended period expectations can be unrealistically high for a new release, and I think my expectations were as high as any Cliff fan's could've been. Add to this the fact that Perez is not a very formulaic composer. All his projects have a different focus and feel, and even within the boundaries of Visual Cliff's immediately recognizable sound, he is prone to experiment with and expand the band's horizons (see the addition of vocalist Shane Lankford after beginning as a completely instrumental ensemble). When you really dig an outfit, this is always cause for a bit of nervousness. More than a few bands have totally lost me by straying too far from what drew me to them in the first place.

So what is the verdict on Visual Cliff's new release, "Collective Spirit?" The short answer is that "Collective Spirit" is Visual Cliff's finest hour, and I defy anyone who would challenge this statement. Cliff is simply the best unsigned Christian progressive rock/metal band out there right now, and "Collective Spirit" only proves to amplify this assertion.

"Collective Spirit" up's the ante for Visual Cliff on three fronts: production, instrumental prowess, and the most important element of all – songwriting.

One thing that has always been immediately apparent with Visual Cliff's output is that they've never sounded like an independent band. But "Collective Spirit" really could be mistaken for a big label release. Everything sounds larger and meatier, but not at the expense of their trademark clarity and crispness, which is so essential for effective and listenable progressive rock/metal.

Regarding the performances, "Collective Spirit" marks a big step forward. Most immediate is the addition of three new members: Mike Florio (keys), David Michael (bass), and Thomas Schuffert (drums).

Florio is a monster player who is already making a name for himself in progressive rock circles as a solo artist and "gun for hire." Prior to "Collective Spirit", Cliff's keyboard elements were generally used as a background texturing agent. Florio, by contrast, sounds like an actual band member (which he is). I think the best part about Florio's contributions is that he really does insert a heavy dose of that "classic prog" sound, and because Visual Cliff is truly a progressive band at heart, it really brings the vision of their sound to life in a new way.

David Michael is also a standout as one of Visual Cliff's newest members. I am a fan of "busy" bass players, as well as more rhythmic players. Michael is from the latter camp, but he's not boring about it. He focuses on holding down the bottom end, but with some good melodic sensibility. I was at a clinic a few years ago listening to bassist Dave Ellefson's complaint that bassists are always fighting to be heard. One of the cool things Perez does with "Collective Spirit" is to bring David Michael up in the mix at critical moments, when the bass is really doing something deserving of attention.

Rounding out the new recruits is drummer Thomas Schuffert. Schuffert probably marks the biggest overall change in Visual Cliff's delivery. Prior to "Collective Spirit," the band employed programmed drums, but you probably wouldn't have ever known without being told. The acoustic drums definitely bring a more "live" and less processed sound, and Schuffert truly is an excellent player. His parts complement the songs tremendously, showing the humility of restraint when called for, but expressing technical wizardry when needed (the hallmark of a truly great player).

Of course, vocalist Shane Lankford (see also "Orphan Project") is in fine form as always. His clarity and range make him one of the best in the business, in my opinion, and even though roughly half of Visual Cliff's material remains instrumental, it has become difficult to think of Lankford as anything less than an integral and necessary component of Visual Cliff's style. His haunting and emotive delivery on "Turning of the the Gears" is evidence of his talent and irreplaceable position in this band.

On top of this, it is no exaggeration to say that Rob Perez has turned in his best performances yet on "Collective Spirit." Perez has always been distinctive as a player. He is extremely textured in his chording, drawing from a strong jazz-fusion influence, but equally skilled in churning out hardcore metal riffs. With this release Perez seems to strike a new balance with his influences, displaying more intentionality and skill with their melding. It is no secret that progressive rock can often digress into a series of "parts" glued together to make a song. This can result in some feeling of randomness or even excess (resulting in the accusations of self-indulgence and pretension often thrown at the genre). With "Collective Spirit," Perez really shows that he understands how to serve the song by knowing when to go out on a limb and when to stick with the classic "rock song template" (a strategy long used by bands like Rush who straddle the rock/progressive line). What really stands out, though, is the quality of Perez's solos on this album. These are simply the best guitar solos he's cut to date. Smooth, fluid, and both technical and melodic.

But as we've all experienced, a band can have it completely together in the production and performance arenas, and still just not have the songs.

This is about as simple a summation of "Collective Spirit" as I can give you: it is the best batch of Visual Cliff songs yet. Ultimately, it is the melodies here that are going to get you. There are a lot of bands in this genre who can bring you back to a song with a cool lick or an awe-inspiring instrumental section. Precious few can lay claim to songs that bring you back over and over by way of a hook. "Collective Spirit" has hooks for days...those progressions and melodies that make you temporarily forget the playing and force you to focus on the SONG. A personal highlight for me is the "return to form" contained in a couple of the instrumentals. If you are a Visual Cliff fan who still enjoys "Lyrics For the Living" and "Key to Eternity," you're going to be thrilled with a couple of the numbers on "Collective Spirit."

"Collective Spirit" is a must have for any Visual Cliff fan and highly recommended for fans of the progressive rock/metal genre seeking a new "favorite band." Great work.