



CRITIC'S PICK

For the past two years queer music critics from all over North America have been pining over the Blur that could have been. It all started with the hit song "Girls And Boys," teasing us all with that girls-who-are-boys-who-like-boys-to-be-girls business. That strong spark of queerness stayed with the band for both their 1994 release *Parklife* and 1995's *The Great Escape*.

Those slickly produced, glam-basted albums gave the community such hope for a possible second coming of a younger, hipper Pet Shop Boys (who actually mixed "Girls And Boys" for Blur on *Park Life*) or even a rebellious Erasure. . . . Hell, at that point, we would've taken a punky Bronski Beat, rather than hear another Brit band trade in synth melodies for more of that oh-so-boring carpenter-jeans rock.

Unfortunately, this inevitable rock-change is just what happened to Blur in 1997. As the band went through its pop puberty, Blur became as diverse as the Eaton's diversity clothing line.

They de-cheeked and de-camped their lyrics and strangled their signature synth with a typical self-titled album of "grunge" music. Their nouveau alternative album had enough artless campus-twang to make even the Labatt's beer company buy the woo-hoos off their hit, "Song 2."

Then, just when you thought all was lost, the Blur boys decided to team-up with the high-priest of electronica himself, William Orbit, to make their newly released album, 13.

Stripped of all the androgynously coated lyrics and drained of all the pop-sneers that made Blur famous, 13 may not be half as fabulous as *Parklife* or *The Great Escape* but, musically, it's a step in the right direction.

"[Thirteen] challenges people to sit and concentrate on the music," explains Damon Albarn, the band's lead singer and composer. "You have to engage the music."

Graham Coxon, the band's guitarist, agrees that 13 may not as "chirpy" as their earlier sissy-boy sound Blur, but he says the change was "inevitable, since it is too hard to act and sing like a bunch of fey boys when you're passing 30."

So what are his thoughts on how Boy George is still Boy-ing it up in his pop now? "I fancy that we appreciate Boy George's music more than he appreciates ours," says Coxon. "And I hated Culture Club. Besides, Boy George is one of those boys-who-are-girls-who-like-boys-to-be-girls, anyway."

Oh, well.

So what if the sissy-boy charm that made Blur — the Blur we know and love, not the beer-Blur — has been buried so far and deep into the gender-bender pop cemetery that even Marc Bolan is on higher ground?

This new, loungier Blur, boasts some elements of glamour too, but this time it's a low-key, ambient-fused kind of sound-flair. Songs like "Tender," "Coffee And TV" (featured on the soundtrack to the vampy movie *Cruel Intentions*), and "Optigan 1" (on 13) build on some interesting fuses of dance, rock and pop.

Thirteen is what it is. And Blur will never be what it was. And that is something (beer commercials notwithstanding) we are all going to have to accept.

— Elio Iannacci

13.

Blur. EMI.

\$15.99.