

Castle - Welcome to the Graveyard (2016)

Written by bluesever

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01. Black widow 02. Hammer and the cross 03. Welcome to the graveyard 04. Veil of death 05. Flash of the pentagram 06. Traitors rune 07. Down in the cauldron bog 08. Natural parallel Liz Blackwell - Vocals, Bass Mat Davis - Guitars, Vocals

Welcome to the Graveyard was easily one of my most hotly anticipated releases of the year. As a big fan of Castle's eclectic take on occult doom rock since their 2011 debut, I couldn't wait to see what they would come up with after 2014's mammoth Under Siege. Said album showed an interesting progression in their style and an overall streamlining of their sound and that continues here in small ways as we get another high-quality dose of moody, dark tales spun by the creative powerhouse duo of vocalist/bassist Elizabeth Blackwell and guitarist Matt Davis. It's classic Castle but a bit more stripped down while somehow remaining intriguingly nuanced. It's also quite heavy and yet deeply soulful. And the paradoxes are rampant as Castle's deft touch pays big dividends and assures them a place apart from the rest of the occult doom genre for yet another release cycle. Let's see why!

Welcome is an admirably short, concise album clocking in just shy of 40 minutes and they use every second to effectively paint their grim tapestries. Opener "Black Widow" erupts with simple but impactful riffing and when Elizabeth's passionate bellow appears, all is right in the metal world. The song has a strong 80s Sacrilege vibe and reeks of vests and trveness and wow, that chorus is something else. This may be one of the best tunes Castle has penned to date and it sucks you into the album.

Follow up "Hammer and the Cross" is a slow burner with malice, edge and Sabbath-y riffs aplenty. Elizabeth's vocals are ominous and powerful and when she declares "I am the hammer," you definitely believe her. Davis uncorks a series of interesting guitar embellishments, most of them just little details and flourishes rather than showy solos and the whole song is

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based around dramatic leads and fat grooves. The title track is slightly more sedate but very moody and eerie with a strong 60s rock vibe and the chorus is so simple but so effective it should be dissected and examined fully. Other gripping moments arrive with the rocked out power of "Flash of the Pentagram" which could have been on their debut, the gripping dark balladry of "Down in the Cauldron Bog," and the odd Jefferson Airplane-like hippie flower power of closer "Natural Parallel" where Elizabeth gets to spread her wings and soar vocally.

There is no filler or weak tracks, but a few songs fall a bit below the high levels heard on stellar albums like Blacklands and Under Siege. Another issue is the production, which is a somewhat muddy. It isn't a deal breaker by any means, but a bit more clarity would really bring the little details out in a positive way.

Elizabeth Blackwell remains one of my favorite vocalists and she spends much of Welcome reminding me exactly why. Her delivery is more and more like that of Janice Joplin with each release, but she has a much darker, more ghoulish side to her voice than Ms. Joplin ever did. There's just something about her voice that hypnotizes and terrorizes and she gets better over time. Wily and unorthodox guitarist Matt Davis is the perfect match for her voice, wrapping her vocals in what seem like simple riffs and ideas, but they have surprisingly depth and grace. He's always been good at crafting the odd, offbeat lead, but as time goes on he's perfecting an understated but unusual playing style that really rewards attentive listening. Take the title track for example – the riffs themselves are the height of simple but they stick so deep. They're a potent pair musically and it informs every song.

I doubt there will ever be a bad Castle album. They simply have too much working in their favor to fail and that's not something I would say about many acts. Welcome to the Graveyard features some of their best songs, but overall it's a slight drop off from prior outings, though that black magic is still flowing strong. If you haven't caught onto Castle yet, you're not taking a thing about your career as a metal fan seriously and I just won't stand for that. Hear this, feel the power and glory and put on the vest! --- Steel Druhm, angrymetalguy.com

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