

Live Skull
Positraction
Caroline Records

From the stewing cauldron of gloom and the chilly icebox of enigma comes Live Skull's latest record, *Positraction*. It's a festering, appropriately black-colored slab of grinding, slash'n'drone (stop me if you've heard these adjectives before) East Village-trash-shit noisecluster rock.

Frequent comparisons to Sonic Youth and the decibel-happy downtown New York City crowd stem more from geographic and underground stereotyping than any musical similarities. Like those other "pigfuck" bands (a mock-genre created by reactionary critics) Live Skull emits an overtly "heavy," "fringe" attitude. But *Positraction* clearly shows that dissonance and outness are just elements within their (non-mainstream) pop song structures and sensibility.

Positraction invokes a wealth of disparate musics, from the Byrds, the Psychedelic Furs (jangle/revisionary jangle, now post-revisionary) and Joe Jackson to Glenn Branca and sundry quality headbangers.

The signature sound from seven previous records remains: subtle but almost orchestrated guitar interplay drenched in chorus and reverb-fueled overtones, straddling a thick and thudding rhythmic pound. The barbiturated feel that prevailed on prior albums has almost been replaced by rockier midtempo. There's a few surprises thrown in too, like a nifty harmonica groove on "Riches House," and a very nice John Caleish Middle Eastern modal drone at the beginning of "Caleb."

Vocalist Thalia Zadek benefits from a cleaner mix than before (with abrasion-mongers like Live Skull, this is often mistaken for increased "accessibility" or, for shame, commercialism). A lyric sheet is also included, a drastic change from the sparse packaging and murky din that always rendered the band's decidedly morbid themes an expressionistic grab bag.

The vagueness remains but the physical presence of the lyric sheet pushes Zadek and Skullmates' unequivocally grim worldview (if such narcissism can be called a worldview) into the forefront. Live Skull, particularly Zadek, are obsessed with The Modern Malaise and know how to drop howling vignettes of decay and alienation onto your already soiled party without degenerating into self-parody. The first verse from the first song sets the tone throughout: "There's a place/left for you in my mind/like a hole." Classic couplet from "Riches House": "A change in the tension/just blew me out of my suspension/but the vacuum has no mercy/don't get sucked in my descension."

Positraction conjures a hermetic world where dread reigns and demar-



Michael Levine

Live Skull contemplating the power of positive thinking (l-r): Thalia Zadek, Mark C, Sonda Anderson, Rich Hutchins and Tom Paine.

cates boundaries far beyond the mere revelation of unpleasant truths. A battered psyche survives the barrage only to face an existence like a sieve, one that holds nothing.

The intensity of waiting for a sick friend to die ("Sunday Afternoon White-out") melds into ongoing, mundane dissipation. Betrayal and inertia dominate (replace?) emotions and possession, among other strangers, has replaced the self: "My heart is in my throat/but I can't swallow, must spit it out/I am in the hands of a demon" ("Demon Rail").

With Zadek's psychic bedsores word-scabs Live Skull has found a drafty home within the walls of the citadel of pain, and further ghettoized their brand of boho/fringe despair.

The unmitigated hopelessness and abrasion that defines bands like Live Skull often exasperates critics who seek some sort of emotional balance, some accurate representation of the flux and diversity of the world "out there." Live Skull is not a band to fulfill such a lofty responsibility. They've staked out the charred landscape of personal misery and emptiness as their stomping ground. Despite *Positraction's* whiplash-inducing nods to hooks and sonic refinement, the monolithic approach of such committed grimness often lapses into pure tedium. But junkies and depressants need mood music too.

—Adam Quest

SPIN