Greenslade at the BBC

*Greenslade at the BBC*, Greenslade (Repertoire Records)

In 1972 Greenslade arose out of the ashes of Colosseum, adopting an unusual line-up of two keyboard players (one of whom, Dave Lawson, was also the vocalist), bassist and drummer. By 1973 the band had recorded and released their eponymous album, complete with regulation progrock Roger Dean art work and a gatefold sleeve, and saw in the new year by recording a session for BBC 1's *Sounds of the 70s* programme early in January, returning in April for *In Concert*.

Later that year they released a second album, *Bedside Manners Are Extra*, and were welcomed back that autumn by Bob Harris for another *Sounds of the 70s* session. These three recordings comprise the first CD of this new double album, with the second comprising a 1973 *Old Grey Whistle Test* session, a 1974 *In Concert* and a Radio 1 session for Bob Harris, who clearly liked the band. The tracks are mostly from the first two albums, with a few selections from *Spyglass Guest*, their third album, which means quite a lot of repeat tracks.

I knew about Greenslade because one of my school friends had an older sister who had bought the first album, and he delighted in copying out – in Deanesque script – excerpts of the lyrics of 'The Drowning Man'. I didn't know anything more about them until 1975 when I heard my favourite Greenslade track, 'Catalan', from their fourth and final album *Time & Tide*, on Nicky Horne's Capital Radio show.

Soon after of course, punk arrived, and secondhand copies of old progrock albums could be picked up cheap, and were by me, including the four Greenslade offerings. They, of course, became collectable, had CD reissues and the band briefly reformed in 2000, although I think only Dave Greenslade and bass player Tony Reeves were original members. Some of the band's CD reissues included bonus BBC tracks which are reissued here, and there was also a legitimate CD of a complete concert from Stockholm in 1975, although it was one of easily available bootlegs in circulation, and an anthology of live tracks from 1973-75.

So what do we get here? Well, kind of what you'd expect, although the keyboards are leaner and bluesier than the likes of Yes or ELP. There is little sense of self-indulgence and no symphonic rock to be found. The band definitely rock, even when keyboards are to the fore. This is pretty much due to the combination of Reeves and drummer Andrew McCulloch, both superb players, and thanks to remastering now much higher in the mix. (A big thumbs up too for Martin Briley – who replaced Reeves for the final three tracks here as well as the original band's final album – and his soaring guitar parts.)

One of the problems Greenslade faced were that many people couldn't cope with Lawson's vocals, which were often quite extreme in the studio recordings. Here, it has to be said, his voice is lower in the mix, and suits the live environment far more. It also feels like he has settled in to the songs, bringing a surprisingly warm and mellow tone to proceedings. Even 'Red Light', a forerunner in subject matter to The Police's 'Roxanne' is not the strangled rocker it is on *Spyglass Guest*.

For the most part, it is the instrumental songs and song sections that rock out, with the latter taken at a less frantic pace. All three versions of 'Bedside Manners Are Extra' here are almost seductively melancholic, as are the two versions of proto-eco song 'Feathered Friends' with its prophetic questions about the chosen few who have poisoned the planet. Even the vocals on 'The Drowning Man', which is quite a hard song to listen to on the debut album, are in tune and sung not squealed.

Downside for me is 'An English Western', a track I've always disliked, as well as two versions of 'Pilgrim's Progress', an instrumental I have always found overlong and full of twiddly-widdly keyboards; and the BBC introductions are a bit grating too and could have been edited out. I'd liked to have heard more from *Time and Tide*, which I think is a much better album than *Spyglass Guest*, but the Beeb obviously had other bands in their sights by 1975.

The upside is, of course, finally having clean, remastered, legitimate copies of all this stuff, especially – as noted above – with regard to drums and bass. I can't of course, and wouldn't wish to, overlook the magical interplay and occasional sonic duelling of the two Daves – Lawson and Greenslade – with their different choices of keyboards and very different playing styles. This is a welcome and well overdue release, which has been on repeat play since it came through the letterbox.

Rupert Loydell

(800 words)