



BLACK SABBATH

13

REPUBLIC/MERCURY

Back from the grave. The first Sabbath album with Ozzy for 35 years. *By John Robinson*



7/10

OVER 40 YEARS since their formation, the question Black Sabbath asked on the first line of the first track on their first album remains a valid one: what is this that stands before me? Purportedly, this is Black Sabbath in its original and most

potent form, in which the downtuned guitar riffs of Tony Iommi soundtrack the apocalyptic visions of Terry "Geezer" Butler, as vocalised by the siren wail of Ozzy Osbourne. It's not punk, it's not prog, and it's not disco, but it assuredly is one of the defining sounds of the 1970s.

And sure enough, that is what the trio, working with producer Rick Rubin, have set out to recreate here. If he was making an album with Jesus Christ, Rubin, as we know, is the guy who would say: "I appreciate your input, but I'm really more a fan of your early work." Here, this means Rubin has attempted to isolate and redeploy the band's classic

qualities. Chiefly, this means Tony Iommi's riffing (opener "End Of The Beginning" recalls the electric soup of *Master Of Reality*). The quiet "Zeitgeist", meanwhile, nods dreamily to the jazz and bongos vibe of *Paranoid*'s "Planet Caravan". Ozzy's vocals throughout 13 are double-tracked in convincing homage to the classic 1970s works, and the album ends with the heavy rainfall and depressing church bell chime that began their debut album.

The elephant in the room, or rather not in it, is Bill Ward. Although present at early stages of the reunion negotiations, the absence of the band's original drummer (Ozzy's closest friend in the original band; the one who in 1979 had to inform the otherwise oblivious singer that he had recently been sacked from the group) is a major loss to the project. Rage Against The Machine drummer Brad Wilk, who sits in, is a fine technician, but

Black Sabbath's historic footprint derives not just from their enormously heavy boots, but also from their paradoxically agile swing, to which Ward's contribution was pivotal. 13 on occasion still manages to brew some of this elusive quality, but the key word here is probably "consistency".

This is a long and solid album (like *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath*) rather than an erratically brilliant one (like *Volume 4*). On "Age Of Reason", Ozzy lets go a whoop of "All right, yeah!", but this cues up more mid-tempo riffing rather than an expected guitar meltdown. "Live Forever", a song about seeing life flash before your eyes when dying unleashes a "Children Of The Grave"-era galloping riff but still updates things lyrically: "I don't want to live forever/ But I don't want to die," Ozzy bellows. "I may be dreaming/ But whatever..." "Loner", a good riff, reprises the strangely positive message that was lurking under the surface of "Paranoid". It finds Ozzy addressing a hypothetical outsider and urging

them not to surrender to their darkest side. Throughout, one imagines the band throwing in elements specifically to please their core audience rather than cravenly trying to grow a new one.

Which is just as well. Loyalty is as big a deal to a hard rocker as it is to the Mafiosi; still no wise band imagines an audience's patience is infinite. Penultimate track "Damaged Soul", the best thing on here by a long way, repays the waiting time in full. Proceedings open with downtuned riffing, and the description of a hopeless soul in purgatory ("I'm losing the battle," Ozzy sings, "between Satan and God..."). There is an odd, compelling harmonica/vocal tune at about one third through, followed by an hors d'oeuvres of Hendrix guitar solo. At around six minutes, things really begin to shake, and for what occurs at the seven-minute mark, you should clear the room, and give yourself up to air guitar.

It's a truly great moment, although it arrives a little late in what is a long album (there are eight tracks on the regular edition, most of them over seven minutes; the Deluxe Edition adds three additional shorter ones, including one called, preposterously, "Methademic"). The closing "Dear Father", a topical tirade against abusive priests, fathers, and ultimately God, is certainly a sinister point of departure: "You knew what you were doing," it goes, "You left my life in ruins..." An appropriate moment for the bell to peal and the torrential rain to fall.

In principle, at least, this is very nearly the bereft, godless place where we came in 43 years ago, the band setting themselves up in harsh

opposition to the anodyne, utopian chart pop that surrounded them. Of course, Black Sabbath can't fully turn the clock back to the beginning – but they can still do a pretty good job of sounding like the beginning of the end.

SLEEVE NOTES

Produced by: Rick Rubin; mixed by Andrew Scheps
Recorded at: Shangri-La Studio, Malibu; additional recording at Tone Hall, Warwickshire
Personnel includes: Ozzy Osbourne (vocals), Tony Iommi (guitar), Terry "Geezer" Butler (bass), Brad Wilk (drums)