

POP MUSIC REVIEW

Salem's dark brew bubbles over at last

The doom-driven trio's show at the Echoplex proves it has thrills to offer live.

AUGUST BROWN

An unexpected guest hung out in the Echoplex lobby Tuesday night just before Salem's headlining set at the goth-appropriate after-midnight slot — Tyler, the Creator of Odd Future. For fans of modern rap built on dessicated synths and a fascination for grim sexual violence, this was something of a Justice League-level meeting of the minds.

But the encounter also underscored the difficulty Salem has had in capitalizing on the intrigue and originality of its sound, one dubiously credited with spawning the "witch house" scene and a thousand hokey imitators ("GLSS 1337H," anyone?). Inventing a wholly new style, as the Michigan trio arguably did on its early EPs such as the delightfully titled "Yes, I Smoke Crack," is a laudable goal, and Salem has a riveting back story of drugs, prostitution and white-trash Midwest mythology that adds an emotional resonance to this cryptic music.

But that's the thing with music's cutting edge. Someone's always waiting in the wings to overthrow or undermine your vision. Where Salem runs into some trouble, especially onstage, is with the question of "what now?"

The early rub on Salem was that it couldn't play live. Not in the sense that the performers are unskilled or un-compelling, but that a huge portion of their set is prerecorded backing tracks. Fortunately, they've fixed that problem — or at least made it less problematic — with enough fog machines to qualify as atmospheric disturbances and a fluorescent strobe setup that creates the vibe of a dentist's office in hell.

The group is also rare among its grisly peers in that it truly sounds good. The full-length "King Night," released on the local indie label IAMSOUND, clarified its smeary synths and drum machine clatter inspired by Southern rap producers like Shawty Redd and Drumma Boy. But live venues rough it up again to a very moving effect; when co-vocalist Heather Marlatt coos reverberated nothings atop gauzier tracks, like "Frost," the emotional abyss of this music comes into sharp relief. "King Night's" title track overwhelmed with the sheer

will of its choir-of-the-damned vocal samples and synthesizers that sound like they have a blood disease.

But then there are the songs on which Salem turns from rap-signifying beat-makers and into an actual rap group. On record, singer John Holland pitch-shifts his vocals down to a bass register, and it feels convincingly obscure and affected. Live, however, he sounds every bit the stoned Midwest kid failing to keep up with a Southern bounce record, and it kills the mood on cuts like "Trapdoor." Which is a shame, because his lyrics are halfway between Darby Crash and Dennis Cooper — at once completely nihilistic about sex yet implacably brokenhearted.

Salem's commitment to its own aesthetic may be what undermines it in the end — bands built on the idea that the world is too horrible to endure aren't exactly prone to long careers. Tuesday's set showed some steps toward stability, but the sight of Tyler, the Creator nodding along to its doomed machinery only accentuated what Salem's still looking for. It's not enough to have a myth, mystery and blinding originality. You also need a plan for the future.

august.brown
@latimes.com

latimes.com/lanow

LAST

EMPOWERING ARTISTS AND ENGAGING