

Critics' Forum
Film and Music
Let the Hostilities Begin
By Sam Ekizian

Balancing commercial success with substance and vitality is a difficult feat. The band System of a Down seems to have achieved this equilibrium.

Following a nearly four-year absence since its critically acclaimed *Toxicity* album, System of a Down released *Mezmerize*, the first installment of a two-album set—*Hypnotize* will follow sometime this fall. Despite this long absence, the band—which features lead vocalist Serj Tankian, guitarist Daron Malakian, bassist Shavo Odadjian, and drummer John Dolmayan—shows no signs of slowing down. Indeed, *Mezmerize* showcases the band's uncanny ability to effortlessly blend diverging styles and influences to achieve its emblematic sound.

Mezmerize is also a vehicle for System's razor-sharp commentary. It is an unflinching indictment of the sociopolitical landscape—a diatribe of anti-war, anti-corporate and anti-celebrity sentiment. This is readily evident in such songs as “B.Y.O.B.,” “Sad Statue,” “Cigaro,” and “Radio/Video.” However, it is the fierce musical content that ultimately dominates *Mezmerize*.

Other than the brevity of the new album (a mere 36 minutes long), its only shortcoming is that it suppresses the band's previously ever-present frontman, Serj Tankian. Tankian's iconic voice has lent much to the band's unique sound. But it drifts to the background on *Mezmerize*. Guitarist/co-songwriter Malakian takes added lead-vocal time on this album, which compensates only somewhat for the noticeably diminished vocal role of Tankian.

Mezmerize is not as melodic as System's previous release, *Toxicity*. As a result, passively listening to the album can lead to the conclusion that the guitar riffs are redundant and the sound formulaic. However, a more conscious effort reveals the album's nuances and intricacies.

Mezmerize is at once a savage and frenzied sonic outpouring and a delicately crafted totem. Grinding and vicious guitar rushes interspaced with deliberately poppy interludes somehow seamlessly hold together, despite the obvious tension. The songs are equal parts discord and harmony. The album's tracks are also peppered with System's operatic and Middle Eastern flourishes. All of this combines to create an album that is both an organic whole as well an assemblage of individually viable songs.

With the final song, the album shifts gears, closing with the melancholic “Lost in Hollywood,” depicting the seedy underbelly of a city that consumes the unwary. This somewhat jarring transition from the previous onslaught provides the opportunity to reflect and take in the true depth and forceful delicacy of *Mezmerize*. But we realize that, in the end, this is merely a temporary cessation of hostilities.

Hypnotize is due to be released in November.

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