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Sugar Ray - Music For Cougars

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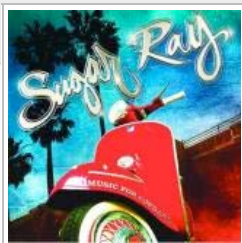
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Sugar Ray - Music For Cougars

Reviewed by: Chris Fallon (07/19/09)

Sugar Ray - Music For Cougars

Record Label: Pulse Recordings

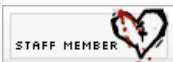
Release Date: July 21, 2009

Author's Rating

Vocals	8.5
Musicianship	7.75
Lyrics	6.75
Production	8.25
Creativity	7.5
Lasting Value	8
Reviewer Tilt	8.25
Final Verdict: 79%	

Member Ratings

Vocals	4.58
Musicianship	4.92
Lyrics	4.83
Production	4.58
Creativity	3.33
Lasting Value	4.67
Reviewer Tilt	4.83
Average: 45%	



Strange to think the 90's were nearly ten years ago. Still feels like it was yesterday when Spice Girls and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles were on the face of every cereal box, and interns fellating presidents was still the punchline of every late-night talk show host in America. By the time grunge had perished and nu-metal & boy bands were just starting to squeeze their way into the TRL rotation, radio exploded with a crop of alternative rock bands from all over the map -- and while many of them only managed to milk a few hits from an album or two, their legacy on every young person's iTunes playlist continues to live on. So much in fact, that it appears on this tenth anniversary of 1999, they are all making another valiant effort to splash around in the modern music scene.

Third Eye Blind, Vertical Horizon, Marcy Playground, Collective Soul, Our Lady Peace -- even Sister freakin' Hazel! Each band scored at least one lucrative hit between 1996 and 1999, and each is returning this summer with a new album in tow. Coincidence? Perhaps... or maybe this whole neon/crunkcore business is just not cutting it for these former VH1 mainstays -- not to mention *the entire world!* That's why it's somewhat of a surprise to see Sugar Ray joining the same ranks, presenting the world with their first record since their last abysmal release, 2003's *In the Pursuit of Leisure*, which was -- for whatever it was worth -- a failed execution in pop experimentation.

Sugar Ray might be seen as a frat boy playlist band, thanks to their stack of late-90's hits like "Fly" and "Every Morning," but in all actuality, this O.C. quintet knows their way around a solid hook and doesn't shy away from being influenced by the radio-pop of the '60's and '80's. *Music For Cougars* (one of the most straightforward, and aptly-named, album titles in recent memory) makes it clear that the band is keeping things bright & formulaic in the best way possible, much like their criminally-underrated self-titled 2001 album. Chockful of whimsical, sunshine-drenched pop numbers, *Cougars* is tailor-made for any fan of summertime ecstasy. First single, "Boardwalk," sounds like the kind of bubblegum hit that oldies radio feasts upon, and Mark McGrath's soulfully sweet vocals have just the right touch of tenderness to make songs like "Love 101" soar.

Admittedly, there are a few missteps along the way. As we all know, the devil is in the details and Sugar Ray aren't fond of sidestepping any issue that doesn't deal with love, the pursuit of love or something that has to do with a girl. However, as tiresome as this theme becomes, it works with their ultraviolet-soaked sound. With that said, "Morning Sun" ought to be the moral compass of this record, but suffers from autotune hangover, drifting by like a passed out Kanye West leftover during a summertime rafting trip. "Closer" does the same thing, substituting organic material for too much studio-produced mechanics, taking away any of its potential. "Dance Like No One's Watching" is harmless, but comes off like a laid-back Jack Johnson diddy, without much charm. Not everything is a bust though: "She's Got the (Woo-Hoo)" is the sort of empty-headed pop song that skates by on it's ability to be carefree, and "Girls Were Made to Love" mixes dancehall flair with late-50's nostalgia, hinting at exactly what kind of pop endeavor Sugar Ray is going for (which, sadly, just might not click with anyone under 30, unless they can appreciate the classic pop style).

Even without a David Kahne or Don Gilmore behind the boards, the band is able to achieve some impressive moments of splendor. "Love is the Answer" is transcendent alt-rock built on a massive chorus, and "When We Were Young" is a blend of disco bass and Joe Jackson/Elvis Costello pop-rock, making for the kind of theme song you'd expect to hear at a high school reunion. Dismissing Sugar Ray as strictly a 90's radio band would be a bountiful mistake for any pop music lover, as the band has ditched the studio-format of their last album and gone for just as much pop with little artificial flavor. *Cougars* is genuinely bubbly and may not stand the test of time as a masterpiece, but stakes its claim as carbonated satisfaction that's refreshing when all else is stale.

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