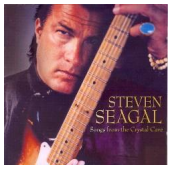
Steven Seagal - Songs From The Crystal Cave (2004)



1 Girl It's Alright 3:50 2 Don't You Cry 4:58 3 Music 4:13 4 Better Man 4:29 5 Route 23 4:31 6 My God 3:57 7 Lollipop 4:34 8 Not For Sale 4:56 9 Dance 3:32 10 Jealousy 4:21 11 War 3:46 12 Strut 3:05 13 Goree 5:59 14 The Light 4:54 Steven Seagal Clay Pot, Drums, Guitar, Guitar (Rhythm), Producer, Vocals Al Anderson Guitar, Guitar (Rhythm), Producer Babakar African Drums Rose Banks Vocals (Background) Greg Barnhill Guitar (Acoustic) Sharon Bryant Vocals (Background) Dana Calitri Vocals (Background) Patrick Carroll Bass, Percussion Programming T.H. Subash Chandran Bowls, Ethnic Percussion, Jew's-Harp, Percussion, Tabla Russ Desalvo Arranger, Guitar (Acoustic), Guitar (Electric), Synthesizer Ripley Fairchild Vocals (Background) Habib Faye Bass, Keyboards, Percussion Programming Shaun Fisher Bass, Drums, Keyboards, Producer, Vocals (Background) Lisa Frazier Vocals (Background) Marty Grebb Keyboards, Organ (Hammond) Tommy K Guitar, Guitar (Acoustic), Guitar (Rhythm), Wah Wah Guitar Remi Kabaka Talking Drum Curtis King Vocals (Background) Michael Okri Vocals Tony Rebel Rap Janice Brocking Renn Vocals (Background) Veit Renn Keyboards, Producer Rhonda Smith Bass Kavita Subramaniam Vocals Mani Subramaniam Violin Frank Valardi Drums Stevie Wonder Harmonica

Never released in America -- perhaps for good reason -- actor Steven Seagal's debut album as a musician is a kind of wonderful mess: it's so all over the place, it can't make up its mind what it wants to be. There are so many styles here -- from adult contemporary to soft rock, triple-A format pop tunes, rock tunes fused with Jamaican dancehall (no kidding!), softcore, nocturnal urban blues, and faux soul -- that finding the album's center is difficult, to say the least. None of these songs are written particularly well, but that's endearing in its own way, and Seagal isn't the greatest singer, but that's nothing new among movie actors -- remember Philip Michael Thomas' and Don Johnson's solo albums back in the '80s? Or Keanu Reeves' rock & roll band efforts in the 1990s? OK, on to the music itself. There are a slew of players on these sessions, but Seagal holds down the lead guitar chair for the entire record and plays plenty of rhythm guitar as well; he gets help from some fine backing vocalists including Janice Renn, Sharon Bryant, Dana Calitri, Curtis King, and Shaun Fisher. The set kicks off with the faux soul shuffle of "Girl It's Alright," written by Seagal with Greg Barnhill -- who is a most worthy collaborator and

his melodies are infectious. Seagal's singing is a tad flat, but it's got some emotion going and it's believable. Veit Renn's keyboards are a bit intrusive -- it might have been nice to hear just a couple of guitars and somebody playing a conga instead of a canned drum loop, but what the hell. The ringing rockistry of "Don't You Cry" (also written with Barnhill) could have come right out of the Counting Crows fakebook at their most Beatlesque and excessive. It's still got a fine melody and the wide-open guitar sound has lots of charm, but the actor's voice has a hard time carrying it in front of such a big mix.

The bluesy (but still not blues) "Music" mixes funky grooves, stinging guitars, shimmering hip-hop shuffles, LaBelle-esque backing vocals, and Jamaican dancehall in its knotty sermon on how "music is a language of the people." The Buddhist overtones in all of these songs is refreshing because they don't beat you over the head but still come across as optimistic, while still being rooted in personal responsibility. The Americana-kissed "Better Man" was written with Barnhill. As for the steamy nighttime blues of "Route 23" and the funky, reggae-tinged "My God," Seagal wrote them himself. They're interesting if a tad monotonous, but again they drip with sincerity to the point that they're completely believable. But it must be stated that the latter track's lyrics are almost embarrassing -- they're obvious to the point of overkill. What saves it is a killer harmonica solo by Stevie Wonder and a fine rhythm guitar track by Al Anderson. "Lollipop" is a straight-up reggae-pop tune with burning dancehall by DJ Lt. Stitchie (who also appears on "War"). Lady Saw, another Jamaican DJ, appears on "Jealousy," an attempt at dread reggae fusion with Kavita and Mani Subramaniam and Sabash Chudrun on vocals, violin, and tabla, respectively. It's one of the strongest things on the set. Lady Saw also appears on "Strut," which is where the disc begins to run out of steam with absolutely laughable lyrics. "The Light" works because of Chudrun and the Subramaniams and the genuine emotional content of the words, and is a fitting closer to an album that mostly misses but has moments worth engaging. The strange thing is that two years after this set was issued, Seagal issued his "blues" album, Mojo Priest. The latter album sounds like he learned nothing from this experience and traveled down a road of cynical excess, forgetting much of the good-vibes experience that Songs from the Crystal Cave exudes. ---Thom Jurek, AllMusic Review

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