

Jellyfish

Spilt Milk

This group of power-pop purveyors is long gone, but its songs—and monster stand-up drummer/singer—are far from forgotten.

It's a crime Jellyfish never found a bigger audience during its brief run in the early '90s. But echoing Supertramp, pre-disco Bee Gees, the Beach Boys, and Harry Nilsson while dressing like they'd raided the wardrobe closet at a Sid and Marty Krofft production was a tough sell in the era of grunge. Jellyfish just wasn't made for its time.

The collateral damage relative to this crime is that Andy Sturmer, the band's singing drummer, isn't more widely acclaimed. More than just a great drummer who happened to sing lead, Sturmer was the chief architect behind the Jellyfish sound, writing or cowriting (with Roger Manning Jr.) all of the band's material, in addition to orchestrating many of the bells, whistles, and vocal harmonies.

Sturmer's work on the kit reveals a student of classic pop-rock drumming. On Jellyfish's two studio albums, 1990's *Bellybutton* and 1993's *Spilt Milk* (both reissued as deluxe editions last year on Omnivore), Sturmer plays with a swinging feel and joyful flair reminiscent

Hot Stuff

SWEET FILLS. Sturmer plays a mean "falling down the stairs" fill, none meaner than the one at the 3:06 mark in "Joining a Fan Club," as the band is transitioning from the double-time instrumental section back into the chorus.

MORE...CASTANET? *Spilt Milk* features lovely percussion throughout, but the castanet rattles in the choruses of "New Mistake" are particularly tasty, taking nothing away from the chimes and bongos that appear in various spots throughout the tune.

GREAT SOUND. Sonically, *Spilt Milk* is a dense affair. But the drums cut through in a crisp and punchy manner that's in your face without being overwhelming. Credit coproducer/engineer Jack Joseph Puig for milking such a great tone from Sturmer's tubs, a sound Puig would utilize on a handful of other productions during the '90s.

of Hal Blaine, Ringo Starr, and Bun E. Carlos, delivering fills as melodic and memorable as the songs themselves. (And live he was a master multitasker, standing center stage and playing a kit that was mostly rack mounted—toms and cymbals to his right—while singing like a raging angel.)

Of the two albums, *Spilt Milk* is the better showcase for Sturmer's timekeeping talents. Not that anything is lacking on *Bellybutton*. (The fills in the bridge of "The King Is Half Undressed" are totally bananas.) But on that album the emphasis is on hook-heavy songs that hit you immediately—there isn't much cause for the drums to be featured. There's all kinds of room for ambitious drumming, however, on *Spilt Milk*, an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink production with songs that are alternately bombastic, intimate, and playful.

The sequencing of *Spilt Milk* allows Sturmer's drums to make a grand entrance. Mere seconds after the album-opening lullaby "Hush" concludes—all blissful harmonies, twinkly strings, and one dynamic timpani crescendo—Sturmer is smashing his cymbals to accent the power chords that introduce "Joining a Fan Club." He plays the meaty rocker with a perfect balance of brawn and finesse, strategically tumbling through the 7/4 sections of the bridge, while elegantly playing through the multiple stops with an impressive variety of punctuations.

After that heady one-two punch of an opening comes an abrupt change in tone with "Sebrina, Paste and Plato," an unabashedly nostalgic confection that sounds like it was conceived by Lennon and McCartney in Brian Wilson's sandbox during the spring of 1967. Sturmer shows an ear for symphonic touches as overdubbed timpani—played against a marching snare pattern in one spot—add a murky percussive rumble to the sunny song.

On tracks that call for more subdued drumming, Sturmer's subtlety and ease still stand out. As his pleading vocal in the drum-less opening verses of "Glutton



Spilt Milk (1993)

Hush • Joining a Fan Club • Sebrina, Paste and Plato • New Mistake • Glutton of Sympathy • The Ghost at Number One • Bye Bye Bye • All Is Forgiven • Russian Hill • He's My Best Friend • Too Much, Too Little, Too Late • Brighter Day

Andy Sturmer: vocals, drums, guitar, keyboards

Roger Joseph Manning Jr.: keyboards, vocals

Tim Smith: bass, vocals with Lyle Workman (guitar), Jon Brion (guitar), and T-Bone Wolk (bass)

Produced by Albhy Galuten, Jack Joseph Puig, Andy Sturmer, and Roger Joseph Manning Jr.

of Sympathy" ends, his three-note snare and hi-hat combination (snare on 3, open hi-hat on the "&" of 3, snare on the "&" of 4) is the perfect setup for the sublime chorus. Even when the fills get busier, they never gum up the transitions or step on the melody. And if a Lava Lamp had a sound, it'd be the groovy swing Sturmer puts to "He's My Best Friend," a cheeky ode to handling something other than drumsticks.

The feel is so free and easy that even when Sturmer is dancing across the toms and snare in a syncopated pattern to drive "All Is Forgiven," he's not pushing the 6/4 song. He's merely guiding the roaring chaos—a roar that stops cold with the beginning of the dreamy "Russian Hill," on which he enters halfway through to lend beautiful brushwork behind strings and woodwinds that sound like something out of a vintage Disney soundtrack.

In less capable hands than Sturmer's, a record like *Spilt Milk* could've collapsed under the weight of its own ambition. But those hands were not only responsible for incredible drumming, they helped to craft the songs and the sound that could measure up to such ambition. In doing so, Sturmer created an album for the ages.

Patrick Berkery