
Deer Science

Reviewed: Crystal Antlers' *Tentacles*

By Brent Burton
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Tentacles

Crystal Antlers

Touch and Go

Tentacles, the first full-length from [Crystal Antlers](#), is the rare psych-punk record that tempers raucousness with rue. Both traits are apt, given the circumstances surrounding the album's release. Back in mid-February, not long after promos were sent to reviewers, the band's record label, Touch and Go, announced that it would lay off most of its staff and cease new signings. What this recession-era move means for bands already signed to the influential and long-running indie is anyone's guess. But it's possible that *Tentacles* will be the last noteworthy release in a catalog distinguished by the likes of Big Black, Jesus Lizard, and the Yeah Yeah Yeahs. Like all of those bands, Long Beach, Calif.-based Crystal Antlers tackles its music with a ferocity that can make an underwritten song come across like a fully formed idea. On 2008's EP, the hirsute band sounds as if it's teetering at the edge of chaos. The songs aren't as memorable as the energy. But, thanks in no small part to Crystal Antlers' two guitarists (Andrew King and Errol Davis) and two drummers (Kevin Stuart and Damian Edwards), the energy was high enough to garner a fair amount of hype. The new album proves that, even if it was a bit premature, Crystal Antlers deserved the praise it got. *Tentacles* strips away some of the EP's undisciplined oomph, and, in doing so, reveals a band capable of writing an album's worth of hooks. Much of the melody, as well as melancholy, can be found in bassist Jonny Bell's vocal lines. The longhaired front-man is possessed of a full-throated yowl that evokes Ethan Miller, the singer-guitarist who fronts the psychedelically-inclined California outfits Comets on Fire and Howlin' Rain. Like Miller, Bell is seldom subtle; he often sounds like a '60s soul singer blasting out of a busted car speaker. But his willingness to go over the top and stay there enables him, paradoxically, to find nuance in settings that are sometimes more abstract than tuneful. When Bell sings, "Now it's too late/To find our way/Back home," he transforms the freewheeling "Time Erased" into something resonant and well-rounded. Good rock bands always have a distinctive talent—a vocalist or instrumentalist who can be picked out in a blindfold test. Crystal Antlers has two. There's Bell, of course, and then there's Victor Rodriguez. The organist not only links the band to California hitmakers of yore—groups such as the Doors and Iron Butterfly—but also, at times, provides the only audible structure. On "Glacier," Rodriguez's merry-go-round riffage gives form and shape to a psychedelic morass. If his wheezy chords and arpeggios are sometimes reminiscent of a time when getting signed to the right label was still a ticket to fame, he does nothing to detract from the song's most potent lyric. "Goodbye," Bell sings. "Goodbye."

