Synth-pop stylings not so modern

Modern English, with Vinny at the Paradise, Wednesday, April 4. Ricochet Days, Modern English on Sire Records.

The once-expressive quintet Modern English has apparently opted to become just another slick '80s British Invasion English has apparently opted to become.

Ricochet Days, Wednesday, April 4.

Synth-pop stylings not so modern.

The once-expressive quintet Modern English on Sire Records. The former, nearly seven minutes long, opens with a beautifully-arranged string quartet and oboe lead-in whose theme is later picked up by Stephen Walker's synthesizer. This moody piece shows signs of having been influenced by late-'60s psychedelia.

Still, Modern English maintains a distance from its guest string and woodwind players; the whole number is quirky mixed so that either the strings and oboe or the rest of the band are in the foreground, but never both at the same time. This separation is even more blatant in "Chapter 12," where the strings play a brief intro followed by three seconds of silence (so that the AM DJs can cue it up past that part); for the next three-and-a-half minutes the vocals, guitar and synthesizer all whine along, punctuated by synth riffs not-too-freely adapted from old Cars tunes.

Modern English maintains a strong following in the Boston area, as evidenced by the sellout crowd at the Paradise last Wednesday night. The band's older material, drawn primarily from their album After the Snow, was the most successful in terms of audience reaction. The energy of "Life in the Gladhouse" stood out in sharp contrast to the numbers from Ricochet Days (here sans guest instruments) which all too often involved Walker and guitarist Gary McConnell playing who could out-smooth the other. Also, Grey's idea of stage presence consists of little more than complaining between songs that the crowd isn't dancing enough.

Boston's Vinny opened with fun but uninspired new wave and white-boy funk, then settled comfortably into what sounded like just overamplified Van Halen outtakes.

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