Ben Lee *Ayahuasca- Welcome To the Work Doesn’t Quite work*

Messy hair and an overgrown beard, T-shirt and flowered guitar, Ben Lee looks like a back-packer hosteling through South America. Gone are the teeny-bopper polo’s, blazers and boyish face the world has come to associate with this Australian singer-songwriter, famous for hits like “Catch My Disease” and “Cigarettes Will Kill You”. As his exterior changes, so do the themes of his writing. At 34, Lee is a 20 year veteran of the music business and like many lifer artists before him,Lee has entered into his concept-album-transcendental phase. *Ayahuasca- Welcome To The Work* is a collection of ten meditative, mantra-laden songs designed to emulate the awakening one might experience while imbibing the Amazonian medical concoction ayahuasca.

Articulate and ever-effusive, Lee, in a recent interview on Music Feeds, explains his recent journeys toward enlightenment through ayahuasca this way: “( This album is ) a sort of coming out of the closet as someone who has used these medicines for my own spiritual and psychological growth”. Songs like “Thank you” and “The will to grow” attempt listeners into a similarly trance-like state but there is a lack of creative depth that disallows the conversion. If Lee is attempting to open a window, he and collaborator Jessica Chapnik Kahn do little production –wise to hold it ajar. One is more tempted to tune back in into the more seriously sonic acid trips of The Doors, the Beatles, The Dead or even the more recently psycho-stimulating Mazzy Star or Radiohead than they may be to follow Lee down the rabbit hole.

At times seven minutes long and predominantly instrumental, this ten song collection from the multi-ARIA-award winning artist fails to take the listener along on his quest for something deeper. The treatment of the songs doesn’t diverge dramatically from anything Lee has done in the past. It’s acoustic and major harmony based .The production is stark but not stark enough to be musically daring. The lyrics are repetitive and obvious with nothing particularly insightful to add.

Ben Lee has famously covered a song by low-fi punk outfit The Ataris called “Ben Lee Sucks”. Look it up by title on the internet and you’ll be challenged to find a version by The Ataris. In an exhibition of humility and sarcasm, Lee has made it his own and has garnered the good-natured respect of his fan base by doing so. If his humble attitude toward his career has carried him this far, fans of his work will surely continue on their path, maybe hoping for a return to his previous easy rhyme sing-alongs or for the heartier-at heart,: maybe hope for a heavier look inside, medicinally supported or not.