

LIVE

Secret Samadhi (Radioactive)

Rating: ****

By Craig Rosen

"Selling The Drama" was the name of one of the big hits on Live's 1994 breakthrough album *Throwing Copper*. Rarely has a song title so aptly captured a band's *modus operandi*. This quartet, comprising four earnest, small-town Pennsylvania school chums, writes big bombastic songs filled with passion, angst and, yes, drama.

That's not necessarily a bad thing in a day filled with cutesy Weezer wannabes and one-hit wonder novelty acts, but when listening to the 12 songs on *Secret Samadhi*, Live's third album, you can't help but wish that singer/lyricist Edward Kowalczyk would lighten up a little. On occasion, Kowalczyk--now known as Edward, rather than Ed, thank you--drops a funny line. He rhymes "church" with "Lurch" (as in *The Addams Family*) in "Rattlesnake," complains that "puke smells like beer" in "Century" and ponders the hypothetical scenario, "If the mother goes to sleep with you /Will you run and tell Geraldo?" on "Freaks." Yet Kowalczyk sings those lines with all the solemnity of a judge delivering a death sentence to a serial killer, rather than deflating some of the histrionics with a nod and a wink.

While Kowalczyk sticks with the ultra-serious tone throughout the album, Live does mix things up a bit musically. "Lakini's Juice" rocks with Chad Taylor's grinding guitar. "Ghost" is buoyed by the hypnotic backing vocals provided by Elysian Fields singer Jennifer Charles and "Merica" swings with a looseness inspired by an R.E.M.-like instrument switch. In addition, the bittersweet "Turn My Head" should join U2's "One" in prom-dance heaven.

In all, even if there's no fun allowed, *Secret Samadhi* proves that Live remains a very good rock band. They won't be truly great, however, until they discover that drama is even more effective when it's mixed with some humor.