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No.43 January 2012

## The Year In Music 2011





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PUBLISHER Jeff Dorgay

EDITOR Bob Gendron

ART DIRECTOR Jean Dorgay

MEDIA SUPPORT Terry Currier  
Tom Caselli

RESEARCH Earl Blanton  
Ken Mercereau

SENIOR CONTRIBUTOR Ben Fong-Torres

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS Bailey S. Barnard  
Lawrence Devoe  
Andy Downing  
Kevin Gallucci  
Steve Guttenberg  
Jacob Heilbrunn  
Ken Kessler  
Jim Macnie  
Mark Marcantonio  
Todd Martens  
Jerold O'Brien  
Paul Rigby  
Jaan Uhelszki

UBER CARTOONIST Liza Donnelly

WEBSITE bloodymonster.com

ADVERTISING DIRECTOR

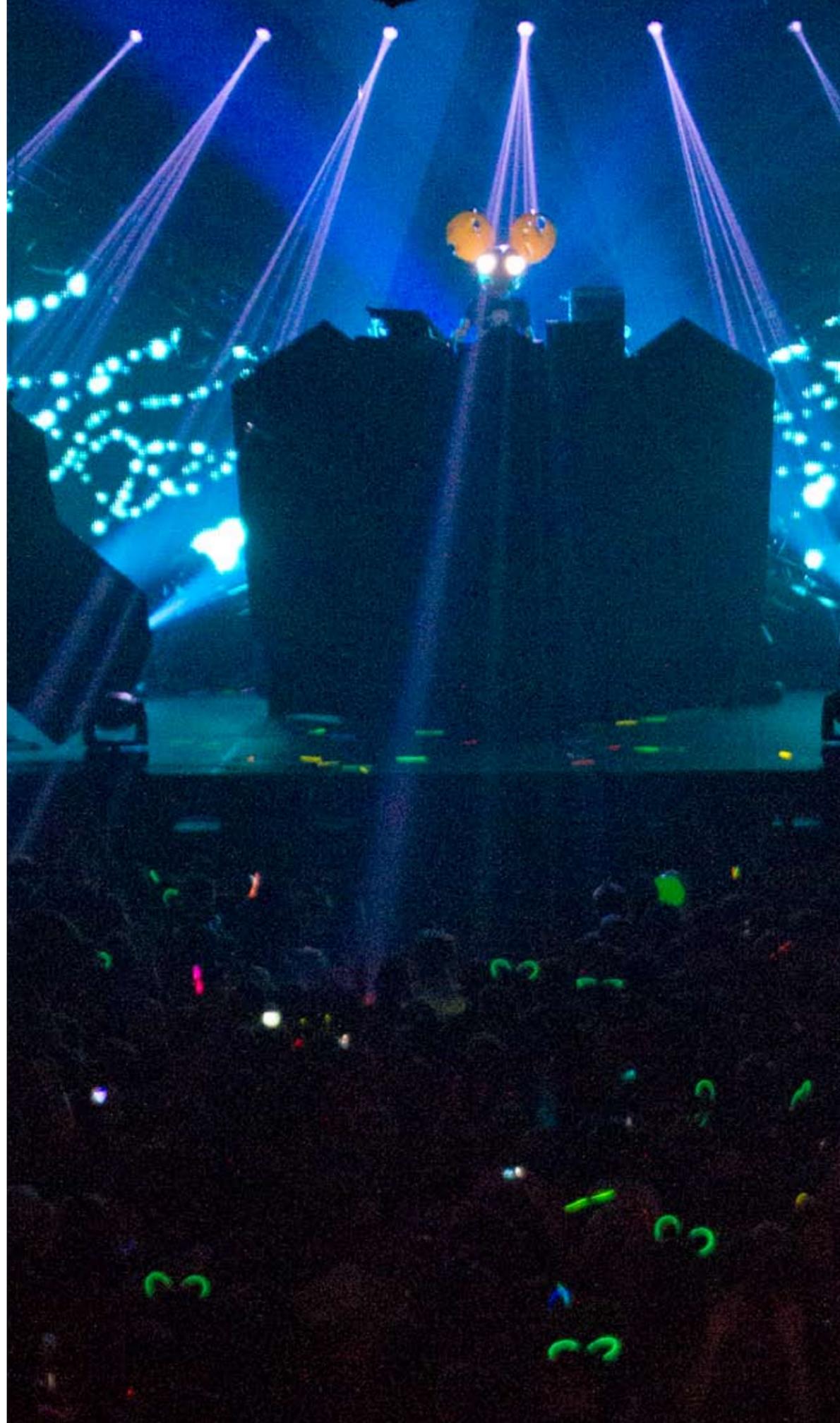
Christina Yuin  
toneaudiosales@gmail.com

**tonepublications.com**

Editor Questions and  
Comments:

tonepub@yahoo.com  
800.432.4569

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## PUBLISHER'S LETTER

**H**appy New Year! For *TONE Audio*, 2012 is off to a tremendous start.

We're thrilled to announce an expansion of our publishing schedule as now, this very Music Annual—a standalone purchase last year—is part of our regular and iPad/Zinio editions. All of our music reviews, as well as a major portion of our live music coverage, is contained within. We hope it might help you with music purchases and discoveries. Ever get in a record store or search online and have your brain freeze? I know I do. And, with the Adobe Reader available on most smartphones, you can keep this issue on your phone. Record shopping couldn't be easier. Gear reviews, Style, and other standard features will resume next month in Issue 44.

As always, thank you for reading, and for your continued feedback. I'd also like to give special thanks to our music writers and our editor, Bob Gendron, who has the most voracious appetite for music of anyone I know. A special contributor to the *Chicago Tribune* for the past ten years, Bob manages to see more than 250 bands a year and not only keep it all straight, but maintain his objectivity and enthusiasm. He and *Chicago Tribune* critic Greg Kot's 2011 Lollapalooza coverage garnered more than 1.5 million views on the paper's Web site. I think that says it all.

The rest of our music staff is equally prolific. Todd Martens is a music critic (and genuinely funny guy) for the *Los Angeles Times*; Andy Downing, who also used to work for the *Chicago Tribune*, is now a full-time scribe for the Madison, Wisconsin outlet *77 Square*; and Jim Macnie covers jazz for *Downbeat*. Not to mention Jaan Uhelszki, one of the founders of *Creem* with the legendary Lester Banks, and the almost-famous Ben Fong-Torres, the backbone of *Rolling Stone* for many years. Both have been on the scene since the scene began. Now that they've several big projects out of the way, each will contribute more to *TONE Audio* this year.

In 2011, we managed to cover shows from coast to coast in the US as well as some major events in Europe and Canada. Thanks to everyone's hard work, we've also managed to bring quite a few major record reviews to print before street date. We will continue to seek out more music from around the world (regardless of genre) and bring back great analysis and photos for your enjoyment.

If I sound like a proud publisher, it's because I am. It's a privilege to work with such talented people. I hope they've turned you on to as many good records as they have for me. Rock on.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'JD', written in a cursive style.

# The Year In Rock and Pop

## 2011 Albums and Concerts

2011 is already being remembered by many as the year in which record sales rebounded and interest in vinyl continued to spike. How refreshing: Despite unsubstantiated claims to the contrary, new music is anything but dead.

Indeed, our collective passion for fresh sounds and desire to communicate insightful expertise are two of the primary reasons we exist. *TONE Audio* continues to strive to make your life better by turning you on to some of the world's best sounds and must-hear art—and making sense of it all with in-depth and authoritative writing by esteemed critics that value context, vocabulary, integrity, diversity, and originality.

In addition to the surfeit of remarkable albums that greeted 2011, myriad festivals and concerts testified on behalf of live music's inimitable expressive potency. We had the privilege of attending more than a few of them. For your convenience, we've included nearly all of our reviews of these shows and records in this handy special issue that serves both as a buyer's guide and go-to cultural resource.

Enjoy, and turn it up.



**Vic Theatre**

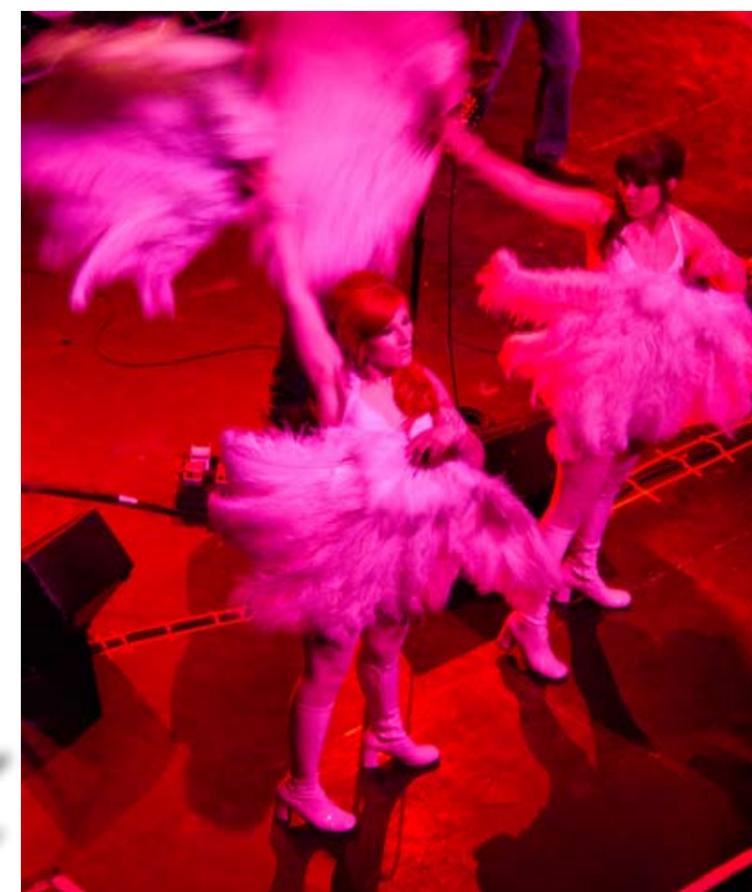
Chicago, Illinois

**February 25, 2011**

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Jeff Dorgay

**“Whatever you paid to get in, it wasn’t enough.”** Drive-By Truckers guitarist/vocalist Mike Cooley’s impromptu statement at the first concert of a two-night stand his band played at Chicago’s Vic Theatre may have referred to the additional sideshow attraction of female feather dancers. But it could’ve just as easily described the group’s raw, unshackled, and positively brilliant 140-minute performance. The members of the Truckers are far too modest to ever make such a claim, but few groups are better suited to back up braggadocio remarks.



# Drive-By Truckers



Since its 1996 origin, the Georgia sextet has cut its teeth in venues ranging from cramped bars to plush theaters to faceless outdoor arenas, touring as both headliner and opener while putting upwards of nearly 2000 gigs in its collective rearview mirror during the past decade alone. Amidst myriad lineup changes—Cooley and fellow guitarist/singer Patterson Hood constitute the remaining original personnel, although current multi-instrumentalist John Neff was involved at the start before taking a break—the ensemble is responsible for several of the best records of the last 30 years. *Southern Rock Opera*, *Decoration Day*, and *The Dirty South* constitute a trifecta on par with any other one cares to name.

A tremendous asset, the band's robust catalog heavily factored during a set in which the Truckers seemed out to reaffirm their bond, chemistry, and vitality. In opening with the one-two-three punch of the raucous "Puttin' People on the Moon," romping "Get Downtown," and spunky "(It's Gonna Be) I Told You So," the collective immediately displayed core strengths in the form of three capable lead vocalists, vivid narratives, and broad sonic palettes. Watching the Truckers interact conveyed a rarified impression that most bands never attain: Refusing to settle for being merely good, the group attacked songs and targets with the express purpose of wanting to be great.

Merely firing off songs in a loose, gritty manner wasn't enough. Completely caught up in the moment,

Hood occasionally fell to his knees, swiping at his guitar strings as if he was violently pulling a reluctant starter cord on a lawn mower. Cooley would stand toe-to-toe with his burly mate, each unfurling mean, snarling passages that tugged like a dog yanking to break free of a restrictive chain. When freed of sit-down pedal-steel duties, Neff joined in the fray, swaggering as part of a three-guitar army whose screaming volumes, crunchy distortion, and greasy leads stomped, bounced, and rattled on behalf of celebrating a ragged glory.

With protests for working-class rights occurring in a state capitol just a few hours north of Chicago, and the glaring reality that the corrupt business executives culpable for the economic collapse won't receive punishment beginning to stare frustrated Americans in the eye, the Truckers' evocative character-sketches of low wages and difficult times ("This Fuckin' Job"), tough luck and improper recompense ("Carl Perkins' Cadillac"), trigger-finger impatience ("Guitar Man Upstairs," "Ray's Automatic Weapon"), hard living ("Women Without Whiskey"), and scandals ("Go-Go Boots") took on profound meaning. Even more so because the band's proficiency in Southern boogie, country soul, hardscrabble folk, yearning gospel, ominous balladry, and bluesy hard rock afforded each tune requisite sentiment, mood, and atmosphere. Hood's down-home drawl, Cooley's reedy timbre, and Jay Gonzalez' lynchpin piano and organ fills did the rest. *(continued)*

**Watching the Truckers interact conveyed a rarified impression that most bands never attain: Refusing to settle for being merely good, the group attacked songs and targets with the express purpose of wanting to be great.**



## Beauty, Brains, and Muscle!

I'm really proud of AudioQuest's new series of audio interconnect cable. I consider the essence of good design to be making rational and informed compromises, balancing all ingredients and compatibility requirements. It's not a perfect world ... if one isn't aware of imperfections and degradation, one can't design a superior product. The truly good-news is that the necessity to design cables which accommodate 3.5mm Mini-Phone plugs and 30-pin iPod/iPhone/iPad connectors in addition to RCA plugs, pushed me to create cables which are also significantly higher-performance than the larger cables they replace.

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## CONCERT

Whether experienced on the hard, darkened riffs driving "Where the Devil Don't Stay," horse-bucking chords shaking "Feb. 14," or bruised soul grooves affixed to "Mercy Buckets," the Truckers dug deep into arrangements, taking advantage of the available instrumentation and investing gutsy emotion into every song. The band blurred the line between fictional and personal matters to the point Cooley shared the same wearily compassionate feelings as the stripper in "Birthday Boy" as Hood did when stepping into the role of a son of a preacher man on a heartwarming rendition of Eddie Hinton's "Everybody Needs Love." Battered, scarred, and broken—but never defeated.

Lasting salvation and release also came in the form of explosive, no-bullshit anthems and the Truckers' continual penchant for championing survival amidst all odds. A rousing cover of Warren Zevon's "Play It All Night Long" oozed the kind of piss, sweat, jizz, and blood referenced in the lyrics. Hood's biographical "Let There Be Rock" name-checked the Clash, AC/DC, Ozzy Osbourne, and Bruce Springsteen while bursting forth with redemptive purpose, its swampy accents and sweet-tea flavor further stoking the momentum. Mirroring the band's own attitude, "Shut Up and Get On the Plane" let it all hang out, a quit-your-bitching slap to the face of whiners and complainers. The defiant message: Reality often bites, but if you're too scared to live and love, you might as well drop dead. And what better way to taste what life has to offer than turning up the amps, railing against what brings you down, exorcising aches, and wailing 'til you drop. What a show.

So much for debating the merits of Truckers' present lineup versus those of prior casts. Case closed. Applying for the job of the best live rock band on any given night? The line starts here. ●



# 2011 Releases

By the TONE Staff

**G**reg Dulli is the rare kind of artist who invites audiences to peer into the nether regions of his darkest thoughts. He uses albums as cathartic therapy, often teetering next to perilous edges and occasionally stepping across them. At his best, the vocalist/multi-instrumentalist provides listeners the type of intoxicating thrill that accompanies taking impetuous risks, witnessing back-alley exchanges, and being privy to secretive codes that reveal sensitive information.

In song, Dulli deals with lingering personal demons in the manner that professional athletes confront their most lethal opponents: Head-on and fully engaged, nerves raw and exposed, his mind solely focused on the subject at hand. Determined to do whatever it takes to prevail, he'll pay the costs later. When his cinematic records conclude, you're thankful for the visit albeit grateful that your soul doesn't reside in such haunting places. But the rush and reward one gets from going there? Addicting.



More than a decade removed from playing bravado frontman for the Afghan Whigs—a peerless group that still stands apart for resisting the nostalgic reunion circuit currently courting and bedding almost every other 90s rock band—Dulli remains invested in leading the Twilight Singers while also taking time for the Gutter Twins (his side project with Mark Lanegan) and pursuits as a photographer, writer, and bar proprietor. Nearly five years in the making, *Dynamite Steps* checks in as the Twilight Singers' most cohesive, diversified, dynamic, and captivating record. It's also among Dulli's most confessional, stark, cautionary, and savage works; no small feat for a musician who once admitted to feeling as if he was "pulling the bones out of [his] skin" onstage every night in 1993 while touring behind the Afghan Whigs opus *Gentlemen*.

## Twilight Singers

*Dynamite Steps*

Sub Pop, CD and 2LP

Never at a loss for biting one-liners and penetrating storytelling, the 45-year-old *enfant terrible* on *Dynamite Steps* inhabits the roles of a malicious provocateur, tortured spirit, calculating predator, and undercover rival—identities he's assumed before, but seldom as viciously, passionately, or authoritatively. "Born a liar, obfuscate/Step aside while I manipulate," Dulli hisses as if embodying the scourging voice of an evil subconscious, brushing aside any hope for peaceful reconciliation on "Waves," a heat-blistered tune whose lashing violence and distorted commotion match the threatening wordplay. Not that he's always in control of the sinister menace or afflicting situation. "Baby pulls me even closer/Tangled like the web she weaves/Shaking off her demons/Now they're coming after me" Dulli divulges amidst the down-home pluck of dobro strings, mournful sigh of violins, and floating vocal refrains on "Never Seen No Devil." Throughout, Twilight Singers contrast beautiful melodies and vulgar intentions to supreme effect.

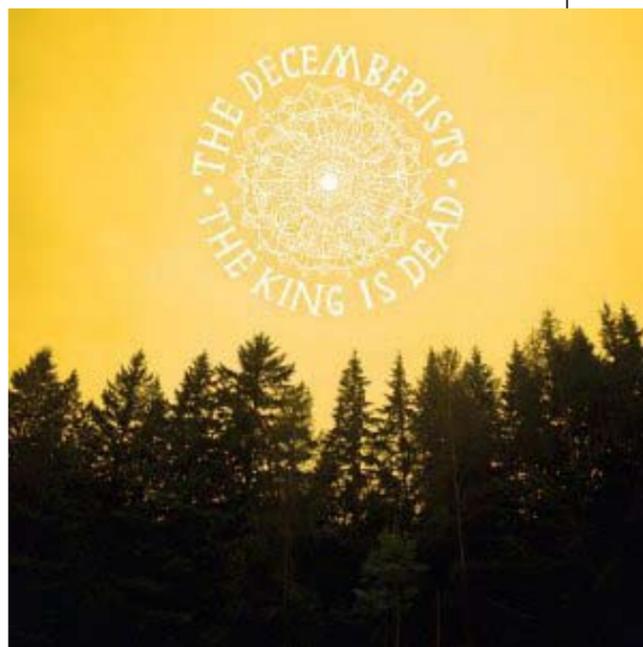
"You'll be lied to/You will suffer/I'm gonna get you back/Wait and see," Dulli cries in his distinctive soulful croon on "She Was Stolen," a sanguine piano-driven ballad that doubles as a *fete accompli*. On the hook-laden summons "On the Corner," he juxtaposes gospel commands with lustful declarations, instructing a target to "Spread your legs/Insert your alibi" as a Mellotron hums and guitars rattle in the background. Sent up with the singer's falsetto, the soaring song bears resemblance to the

R&B-leaning material off the Afghan Whigs' 1995 LP *Black Love* and draws from the same well of sources.

As has always been one of Dulli's trademarks, black-music strains swirl amidst highly atmospheric soundscapes inked with electronica, rock, chamber, symphonic, and psychedelic colors. Arrangements flirt with densely packed layers of sound while exhaling spare, fragile accents that augment rise-and-fall crescendos and built-in drama. Textures abound; notes practically take on a physical shape. And vocally, Dulli is in peak form. He demonstrates a poise that casts looming shadows on ominous fare such as the creeping "Get Lucky," funk-throbbing "Last Night In Town," and "Be Invited," a spooked fever-dream duet with Lanegan that's washed with uneasy vibes and murderous implications.

Filled with scourge, deception, danger, revenge, death, and sin, Dulli's narratives are nonetheless less linear and direct than in the past. He now pens verses in a more abstract fashion, connecting words via feeling and setting, the bundling together of individual words or short phrases intensifying the degrees of intrigue, coercion, and surprise. Seldom is the approach more effective than on the title track. A widescreen epic that finds the protagonist gain the upper hand by elimination, cunning, and circumstance, it closes *Dynamite Steps* with the cautious optimism of a vampiric figure who's seen and knows too much to vest blind faith in relationships or love.

—**Bob Gendron**



### The Decemberists

*The King Is Dead*  
Capitol, CD and LP

**T**he Decemberists' sixth album is most remarkable for what it's not. It's not a multipart suite built around an Irish mythological epic. It doesn't take inspiration from Japanese folklore, draw upon Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, or include obscure references to the Siege of Leningrad. Instead, the Portland crew strips back the artifice, breezing through ten deceptively simple folk-rock ditties with the air of a group entwined in a pleasant afternoon stroll.



©Photo by Autum DeWilde

It's a much-needed retreat following 2009's willfully impenetrable *The Hazards of Love*, an album that pushed both the band's musical ambitions and singer Colin Meloy's Scrabble-champ vocabulary to comic levels. "Thou unconsolable daughter," said the sister," Meloy sang on "A Bower Scene," crooning like a Renaissance Faire player moonlighting as an indie-rock frontman. "When wilt thou trouble the water in the cistern?"

Contrast such phrasing with the acoustic simplicity of *The King Is Dead's* "January Hymn," on which Meloy tenderly sings,

"On a winter Sunday I go/To clear away the snow/And green the ground below." Then there's the gorgeous "Rise To Me," a lullaby awash in piano and warm sighs of pedal steel where new-dad Meloy appears to directly address his infant son, singing, "Oh Henry, can you hear me?/ Let me see those eyes."

The band sounds similarly unburdened, as though members took to heart Meloy's words on the album-opening "Don't Carry It All:" "Let the yoke fall from our shoulders." In turn, "June Hymn" shuffles softly through, alight in breezy harmonica and delicate finger picking. "All Arise" approximates a fall harvest celebration, rolling along on barrelhouse piano and playful fiddle. R.E.M. guitarist Peter Buck directly contributes to three tracks, including the shadowy "Down By the Water" and "Calamity Song," a thumping end-times tale that sounds like a long-lost *Reckoning* B-side. Singer Gillian Welch plays an equally important supporting role, her earthy vocal harmonies buoying Meloy's reedier pipes on a handful of cuts.

Of course, Meloy being Meloy, *King* is not without its arty flourishes. When birds disrupt his rest on "June Hymn," he calls out the window: "The thrushes bleeding battle with the wrens disrupts my revelry again!" But these Shakespearean asides are rare on a set that finds the Decemberists forgoing their usual finery for their Sunday morning pajamas. Turns out it's a good look for them. —**Andy Downing**

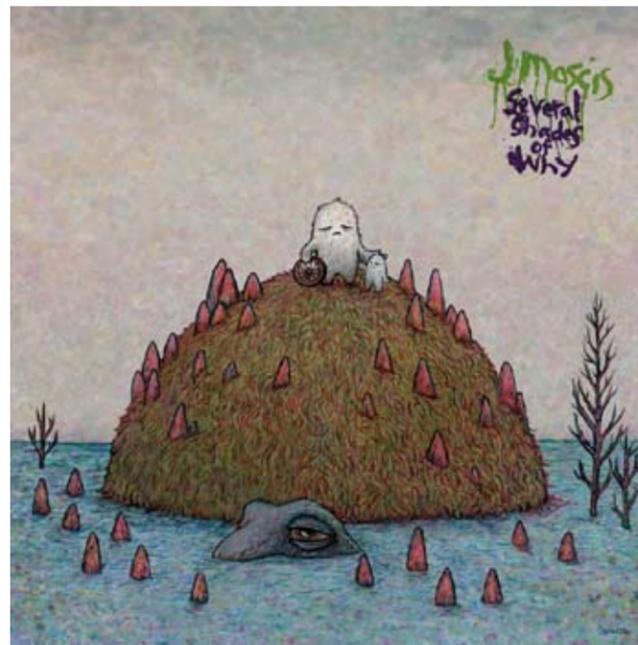


©Photo by Timothy Herzog

**J**Mascis isn't regularly associated with tranquil acoustic music. Conversely, the silver-haired guitarist built a career around unleashing piercing, volume-screaming riffs and high-gain solos in Dinosaur Jr. as well as in side projects such as the Fog, Witch, and Sweet Apple. Influenced by Neil Young's noisier work with Crazy Horse, Mascis' biting tones and fierce, amplified playing are consistently placed upfront in the mixes of the records on which he's featured. Moreover, in the 90s, nobody onstage bled ears with more decibels than Mascis, who matched or exceeded the power summoned by the most extreme metal bands.

The indie icon's feedback-is-back reputation has only grown. While normally an honor reserved for classic rock and blues stars, his name graced a custom model Fender Jazzmaster in 2007. More recently, he's been creatively invigorated by the reunion of Dinosaur Jr.'s original lineup. Yet a gentler muse lies behind those curtains of wailing distortion. The Massachusetts-born instrumentalist unplugged as early as 1993 at a CBGBs gig documented more than a decade later on a limited-edition disc. In 1996, Mascis' *Martin + Me* presented interpretations of Dinosaur Jr. material and various covers recorded on an acoustic tour. A handful of delicate efforts with the Fog followed. Yet none bear the intimacy, cohesion, and sincerity present on *Several Shades of Why*.

Mascis' first solo acoustic album and Sub Pop debut, the ten-song set further exposes the beautiful tunefulness and pained

**J. Mascis**

*Several Shades of Why*  
Sub Pop, LP and CD

emotionalism at the root of his craft. While often concealed in fuzz or chaos, many of Mascis' best songs over the past 20 years capture the lifetime-lasting wounds related to longing, wondering, and searching. Such emotional themes recur on *Several Shades of Why*, which finds the singer/guitarist striving for degrees of destination, closure, companionship, and certainty without ever arriving at any agreed-upon understandings or firm conclusions.

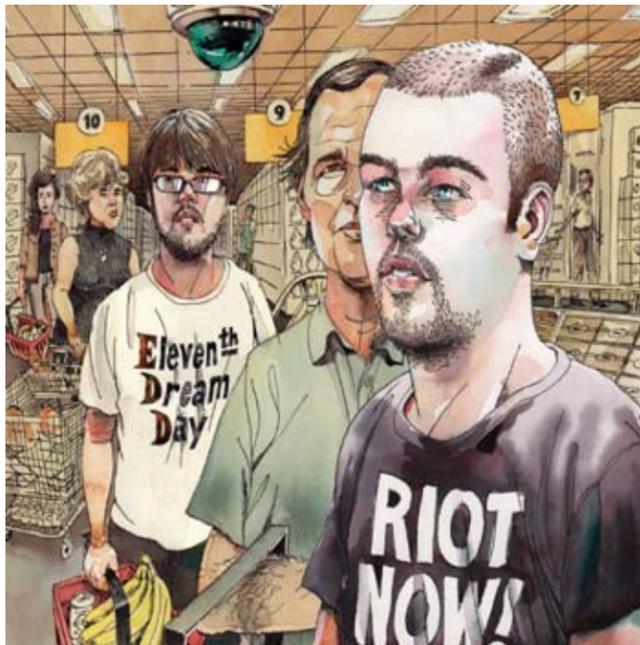
"Turn the stick into my soul/ Hasn't changed much getting old," Mascis reticently admits on the laser-focused "Too Deep," a persistent hurt echoing in his achy voice, his reeling sentiment the residue leftover from freshly seeing a former partner and not entirely knowing how to proceed or what to say. Similar episodes of disorientation, wanting, waiting, and vulnerability distinguish a majority of the narratives. Darkness enters and leaves

Mascis overwhelmed on the aptly titled "Very Nervous," punctuated with brief spots of disturbing calm and elegant percussive touches that lend a mythic atmosphere suggestive of a room appointed with a rustling beaded curtain and potent incense. The singer seems equally lost on "Make It Right," the minimalist piano and strings reinforcing the solitary mood.

Throughout, Mascis transfers his restlessness into minor-key tension and pensive arrangements. On occasion, his trademark electric guitar enters the fray to advance the song or underscore a point. A gritty solo on "Is It Done" contributes to a contagiously progressive build; a few quick, nimble fills on the upbeat, bright "Where Are You" augment Mascis' cloudy, foggy thought process. He also gets assistance from Band of Horses leader Ben Bridwell, Broken Social Scene member Kevin Drew, Kurt Vile, and a few other

contemporaries, but primarily, the album retains a stripped and pure aesthetic. Mascis' songwriting bows to English folk, cozy country, and shuffling rock structures, his patient strumming usually taking the physical form of lapping waves. When employed, his note-picking techniques mesh into peaceful beds of soft rhythm.

Guitar heroics aside, *Several Shades of Why* puts Mascis' charming warble and slightly faded whine on display like never before; he's rarely, if ever, sounded so tender or mature. No wonder, then, that in spite of troubles and challenges, he celebrates survival in admirably modest fashion on the back-and-forth sway of "Can I," an anthem for the lost and lonely that seek reassurance and hope.  
—**Bob Gendron**



### Eleventh Dream Day

*Riot Now*

Thrill Jockey, LP and CD

**H**istory can be deceiving, even if chronicled or recorded by some of the better minds. Consider the plight of Eleventh Dream Day. Sure, there are

numerous bigger, well-known bands from the underground's peak era. There's also a litany of other groups to which more credit for developing the alternative scene is ascribed, thirteen of which are rewarded with a chapter in Michael Azerrad's oft-referenced *Our Band Could Be Your Life* book. And there's a long line of artists that receive constant mentions on concertgoers' wish lists of older acts they'd like to see perform at high-profile festivals. But no indie guitar-rock band from the period's 1986-1990 heyday still sounds as vital and unchanged as it did back then as the Chicago-based ensemble.

Led by former husband-and-wife duo Rick Rizzo and Janet Beveridge Bean, the quartet has never broken up in spite of just sporadically getting together for the past 15 years. Hence, no fruitful, nostalgic cash-in reunion tours are waiting on the table. Not that the offers would be very lucrative. Survivors of major record-label politics, personnel turnover, and apathetic mainstream climates, Eleventh Dream Day remains under-the-radar heroes to a limited audience yet continues to play as if its very existence depends on it. Devoid of the cuteness, trendiness, and image-conscious posturing adopted by far too many acts in today's indie community, the band embodies the strengths of D.I.Y. spirit and uncompromising craft.

Indeed, from the drumstick snap that opens the record to the headlong rush that closes it, *Riot Now* echoes all that is great about Eleventh Dream Day. Raw, gritty, noisy, resilient, and particularly urgent, the album sparks with an edginess that suggests anything can happen at any time. A majority of the songs were recorded in just one take; on-the-floor vibes, lifelike tonalities, and amplifier hum are palpable throughout, contributing to a sonic environment that's often as unsparingly visceral as the band's mood.

Extending a point strongly suggested by the humorous cover art, Eleventh Dream Day addresses the overwhelming feeling of dissatisfaction sweeping the nation while refusing to overlook the ironic fact that most citizens are reluctant to sacrifice anything for desired change. A surfeit of biting lyrics serves as metaphorical barbs. "Satisfied as I was/Time to cut it down" directs a revision-minded Rizzo on "Damned Tree," an angry tailspin of snarling melody, cracking percussion, and adamant vocals that ends up in a heap of sensory-blurring distortion. "There's something sad about America/In a check-out line watched from above" observes Rizzo on "Divining for Water," a smartly written call to action that hedges its bets on Bean's wordless bop-bop-bop backing refrain and Douglas McCombs' needling bass line. More directly, the calmer albeit dark cautionary tale "That's

What's Coming" warns of rifts and divides, Rizzo singing like a spooked prophet who's seen the future and is too frightened to divulge what lays ahead. "The old exits are gone/No matter which side you're on," he wearily discloses, laying waste to any hope for partisan protections or easy escapes.

Thematic cohesion aside, the stripped-down *Riot Now* is even more striking for the assured manner in which it blends group chemistry and incisive musicality. Bean bashes, thwacks, and strikes at her drum kit with relentless zeal. Her vocal rejoinders often overlap Rizzo's leads, resulting in a timbral diversity that assumes various forms. Wordless choruses resonate with angelic softness on a stomping "Cold Steel Grey" that, courtesy of secret-weapon organist Mark Greenberg, hops along like an unexpected parade proceeding straight down the main street of a dead-end town. Meaner and leaner, Bean matches Rizzo yelp for yelp on "Damned Tree," her pepped-up commands evoking a cheerleader on a sugar high after sucking down four cans of Red Bull. The six-minute lament "Away With Words" thrives on vocal contrasts, Bean poignantly cooing and spiritually crooning as her partner sing-speaks in a contemptuous tone, the song confronting the aftermath of tremendous disappointment and exiting on a spiraling outro that twists and turns like a corkscrew plunging into a vacuum-sealed wine bottle.

Time off hasn't hurt Rizzo's virtuosic abilities. The equal of any guitarist born since the Beatles invaded America, he shreds, dices, and jostles notes with understated technique and reality-checking toughness. In his hands, the instrument becomes a device for tuneful mayhem and the language of the damned. Guitar lines pounce, scrape, and drone; solos blaze, sear, and slice; effects whir, spin, dizzy, and cough. Just when it seems Rizzo can't do more with six strings, a few pedals, and an amp, surprises emerge. Witness the spring-loaded bomp of "Satellite," on which Rizzo's guitar and Bean's percussion orbit in a parallel universe before the former takes control by mimicking the whooshing, chirping sound effects of a speeding spacecraft that, akin to Eleventh Dream Day, seemingly knows no bounds. —**Bob Gendron**

**Indeed, from the drumstick snap that opens the record to the headlong rush that closes it, *Riot Now* echoes all that is great about Eleventh Dream Day.**

# REFERENCE 150

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**M**ore than 15 years removed from its last studio album, Gang of Four returns with a prickly effort that—more often than not—rips through the speakers like jagged shrapnel. The legendary Leeds post-punk outfit, which debuted in 1979 with the sociopolitical time bomb *Entertainment!* (an impossibly influential record due every bit of praise heaped upon it), comes out of the gates firing with the spastic “She Said,” showing little sign of rigor mortis after a prolonged period of inactivity.

Most of the tension emerges from the pitched battle between the band’s lone remaining founding members—guitarist Andy Gill and singer/yelper Jon King. The latter, delivering his cryptic poetry in either sharp, short bursts or in a creepy drawl, finds himself locked in never-ending conflict with the modern world (the rumbling “Who Am I”), religion (a weirdly hypnotic “A Fruitfly in the Beehive”) and, at times, even himself (“I never called the shots,” he wails like a drunken, despondent robot on the Auto-Tuned “It Was Never Gonna Turn Out Too Good”). On “I Can’t Forget Your Lonely Face,” he briefly inhabits the guise of the biblical serpent tempting Eve. “Just reach up,” he intones, “Pick the fruit from the tree.”

Gill responds to his partner’s exultations with equally jarring output. The guitarist, who tortures his instrument more than he actually plays it, conjures an array of gnarled textures and slicing riffs that echo all manner of horrifying machinery: dentist drills, assembly lines, jetliners scraping by overhead. At times, it can all seem a little dire, like surveying the London landscape following Nazi Germany’s bombing blitz in the 1940s.



## Gang of Four

*Content*

Yep Roc, CD and LP

Indeed, the crew comes closest to letting down its hair on the robo-funk of “I Party All the Time,” which opens with the line, “We are not prisoners.” Well that’s, um, good?

Elsewhere, the band lashes out at those who trudge through the monotony of day-to-day life (“Sleep/wake/sleep/wake,” King chants like a cult leader on “Far Away”), flashes a fatalistic streak on the metallic “Never Pay for the Farm,” and mimics an authoritarian regime on the sneering “Do As I Say.” Unsoftened by middle age, Gang of Four somehow maintains the same attack pose it did more than three decades back—an exhausting state that might go a long way towards explaining the extended wait between albums. Rest up, boys, global circumstances don’t seem to be improving.

—Andy Downing



©Photo by Robert John

**S**ome things will never change. George W. Bush is still a Republican, Cal Ripken retains the consecutive games played record, and Fred Phelps continues on as an idiotic religious zealot that protests soldiers' funerals. Oh, and Motörhead remains loud, hard, unsubtle, grimy, and refreshingly tethered to the fundamentals of rock and roll.

As it nears its 40th anniversary, Motörhead is enjoying a momentous run. The streak began when leader Lemmy Kilmister's virtual likeness got reproduced in the *Guitar Hero Metallica* video game, exposing new generations to the group's highly influential albeit underappreciated legacy. Following a mediocre spell, the band stepped it up on studio albums, spanning 2004's *Inferno* to 2008's *Motorizer*. Moreover, the critically acclaimed Kilmister documentary, *Lemmy: 49% Motherfucker, 51% Son of a Bitch*, recently gained traction at nationwide screenings and international festivals; it's now available on DVD.

Independent of interactive visuals and film tributes, however, Motörhead is best experienced onstage and on record. Admittedly, the English institution hasn't produced a front-to-back classic in decades. Despite keeping its efforts lean and concise, the trio normally rounds out LPs with a few tracks that don't lack passion but want for completeness or differentiation. That said, anyone expecting Motörhead to vary its approach is listening to the wrong band; Kilmister and Co. just need to deliver its classic face-melting sound, brash humor, and nose-punching rhythms.

Driving with a bruising intensity and bludgeoning aggression that persists through a majority of the set, *The World Is Yours* raises a ruckus, waves a clenched fist, and scorches tympanic membranes. Songs relate to the usual topics—death

(the slashing "I Know How to Die"), music (the instant anthem and biographical statement "Rock N Roll Music"), rebellion (the rumbling "Outlaw"), fate (the hammering, hook-laden "Born to Lose"). Kilmister's black comedic wit rears its ugly head at opportune moments, as does his to-the-victor-go-the-spoils mentality and take-no-prisoners attitude. In today's politically correct environment, good luck finding another group that not only sings a menacing, chugging, ram-rodding payback tune called "Bye Bye Bitch" but also leaves absolutely no doubt about whether or not it means every word. Motörhead might be the last band anyone would ever want to dare cross.

Retribution and justice, long-time Kilmister concerns, also ignite "Get Back In Line," a pulverizing slice of bluesy, overdriven speed-boogie rock that's the most gratifying tune yet about the ransacking of the middle class and depletion of business ethics; with all apologies to his similarly themed *National Ransom*, Elvis Costello should take a lesson on the brevity and punch demonstrated here. "If you think that Jesus saves/Get back in line," growls Kilmister in his characteristically gruff voice, uttering phrases with do-or-die conviction. The band channels similar mettle on raging declarations that seem to chug motor oil and spit gray exhaust fumes. Rough-running grooves, decibel-choked heaviness, and Kilmister's gargling timbre define material that amounts to the

strongest, most consistent work Motörhead has yielded in recent memory.

For the time being, the trio has abandoned its penchant for novelty acoustic numbers. Akin to running into a brick wall and living to tell about it, *The World Is Yours* channels vengeance as sonic catharsis and adds another memorable chapter to the annals of the planet's preeminent live-fast-and-hard underground group. Play it loud.

—Bob Gendron



**Motörhead**  
*The World Is Yours*  
Motörhead Music, CD and LP



©Photo by Sam Holden

# Standalone Motherfucker

A Conversation With Twilight Singers Leader Greg Dulli

By Bob Gendron

**A**s soon as I learned what ten-digit phone number—the three middle figures were “666”—to dial, I knew the call with Greg Dulli would be a doozy. Not that there was ever a doubt. Conversations with the globetrotting Twilight Singers vocalist/guitarist are always refreshingly humorous, unsparingly honest, revealingly unpredictable, and full of awakening pop-culture references.

Reached at his home in Los Angeles three weeks before the release of his group’s excellent *Dynamite Steps*, the provocative frontman talked about a wide range of subjects. The new Sub Pop set represents Dulli’s first new record since he co-helmed the Gutter Twins’ opus *Saturnalia*, and the talk was our first since we met in the summer of 2007 in New Orleans while I was working on my 33 1/3 series book *Gentlemen*.

[Note: This is an abbreviated version of the full conversation, which can be read in its entirety on the TONE Website.] [www.tonepublications.com](http://www.tonepublications.com)

**B:** Talking to you already reminds me that I need to go back to the Royal Street Inn & The R Bar [Dulli’s bar/inn in New Orleans] now that you’ve got everything completed.

**G:** We finally finished it. Being a first-time innkeeper, the one thing that I had never seen is that with people constantly being there, they beat everything down. Just three and a half years in, we’ve already had to swap furniture because it’s constantly used. At my houses, because I live in two different towns, I get more wear out of things because I’m only home for certain amounts of time. In some of the more popular inn rooms, we’ve already swapped out coffee tables twice. I’m like, ‘What the fuck is going on in here?’ I’m not part of the cleaning crew, but I always ask: ‘What did you find?’ [Laughs]

And?

Blood, ropes, handcuffs, bindles [small envelopes used for powdered drugs], including people flat out forgetting large amounts of whatever they bought and all that stuff. God, wow. I’m glad I’ve moved past all that. I’d be following the maid: ‘What did you find? What did you find?’

*Sounds like everything is going well.*

Oh, it’s going great. The only sad thing is that I used to come into town, and I have a great house, but I always liked to stay in the big room—the big rock and roll room. I used to stay there for two or three days upon arrival and it would be my home vacation. But I can never stay in that room now. It’s always sold-out.

*Do you still have the same house at which I visited you in New Orleans?*

No. I moved to a much nicer house. And I didn’t really like that other one. That was my business partner’s house, and it wasn’t for me. I’m not a duplex-y guy. I don’t need to hear the fighting or the fucking going on on the other side of the wall. I’m a standalone motherfucker. [Laughs]

*You mentioned you recorded several tracks for Dynamite Steps in LA. But when we talked in New Orleans, in August 2007, you were working on material in a studio there as well. Was that for Twilight Singers?*

**I was in Turkey. Everybody smokes there. There's a reason cigarette packages say "Turkish Blend." And I'm in an elevator. And they fucking have ashtrays in the elevator. I'm like, 'Man, I reached the peak of smoking.' What more could I do?**

Yeah, maybe, but I think was still pretty deep in the Gutter Twins. I can tell you that I recorded the last songs of August 2010. That means that I must have begun in the fall of 2008. Eighteen or twenty months of songwriting, whipping things up, tossing them away. Two of the songs were at one point ditched because I couldn't unlock what needed to be unlocked on the songs. I brought them to a certain point and just got frustrated and quit. It was always a person who had heard the song and said, 'Dude, what happened to "Get Lucky?"' And I said, "'Get Lucky.'" I got frustrated with "Get Lucky." And they'd say, 'You should go back to it. That was a good one.' And then I'd go back. "Get Lucky" sat around for six months unfinished, because I didn't know how to finish it. It was someone else's enthusiasm for the song that made me want to complete it. "Last Night In Town" was the same kind of thing. I couldn't figure out how to finish that one either. There was a chorus of people who were all over that one. So I had to really grind on those two. Certain songs were really easy and written in a day. Like "Never Seen No Devil." "She Was Stolen" was written in an afternoon. Certain songs write themselves and they're ready to go. They are as is; some songs you have to sweat for a little bit.

*Dynamite Steps has that trademark Greg Dulli atmospheric feel. And there's a nasty streak running through some of the material that evokes your famously provocative personality. Does any of the vengeance relate to circumstances that were happening in your life?*

[Pauses] Anything kind of vitriolic, it had a target. Once I completed it, I called it even with the target. [Laughs] That said, there are parts of this record in particular that I think are optimistic and even transcendent. But I had a couple of things to work out. And I worked them out. And I will repeat that I'm going to call it square with the targets now.

*You mention transcendence. Some of the music, especially the scope and sweep of the symphonic arrangements, sounds like you recorded the album to be played back on a big film screen in a movie theater. Was this intentional?*

Yes. It also helps that I had great musicians. Amy Farris came in to play violin and cello; Petra Haden played violin. I have timpani and strings, because upon hearing it, I decided some songs needed strings. Some of the music just builds and builds. And Dave Rosser is fucking great on guitar. He's one of my favorite musicians I've ever worked with.

*Your voice still sounds tremendous and unaffected by age. Your falsetto and range on Dynamite Steps are as good as they've ever been. Are you doing anything to keep your voice in shape?*

I quit smoking a few years ago.

*I heard you quit because you got to smoke in an elevator and didn't think you could ever top that.*

Yeah, I was in Turkey. Everybody smokes there. There's a reason cigarette packages say "Turkish Blend." And I'm in an elevator. And they fucking have ashtrays in the elevator. I'm like, 'Man, I reached the peak of smoking.' What more could I do? *(continued)*

*So you're feeling the benefits of quitting?*

Oh yeah. All the time. I feel it when I go up the steps. And when I sing. But there are times that I really miss it. Sometimes I'll see someone with a cigarette and it's like seeing your ex-girlfriend with another guy. And when I'm having a drink. They go hand in hand. People think I quit drinking, too. I've read a few times where people said, 'Oh, I saw him with a drink.' And they're shocked. I haven't quit. If I quit, I'd sell the bars [Dulli owns three bars]. What would be the point of having them?

*Speaking of drinking, since your prototypical onstage persona involved smoking, boozing, and a debonair stance, are you enjoying Mad Men?*

You know what? I have watched only one episode but I can tell you this: Whenever I do bus tours, that's when I stockpile those shows. The only shows that I'm hooked on right now, and that I wait for from week to week, are *Breaking Bad*—a masterpiece of a show—and *Bored to Death* on HBO. I think it's amazing; Ted Danson in particular is fucking hilarious. *Eastbound and Down*, I like it, but I want to like it more. The shows I'm going to watch on the upcoming tour are *Mad Men*, *Deadwood*, and my friend Donal [Logue]'s show that got cancelled, *Terriers*.

*I haven't seen Terriers but I've heard it's excellent.*

Donal is my old roommate and one of my best friends of all time. I remember when he told me the name of the show. And he asked me what I thought.

And I said, 'Well, as long as you don't mind alienating the 18- to 50-year-old fan base that you're going to alienate with that title, you should be fine.' The advertising they did for it told you nothing about what the show was about. I watched the first episode and it was great. But the creator could not be swayed on the title. It's what happens when you call something a weird name. Trust me: Afghan Whigs, if I had that one to do all over again, I would have. But that's [former Afghan Whigs bassist] John Curley. That's not mine. I had *Twilight Singers* and then that fucking vampire bitch came along. What could I do? Gun in my mouth. [Laughs]

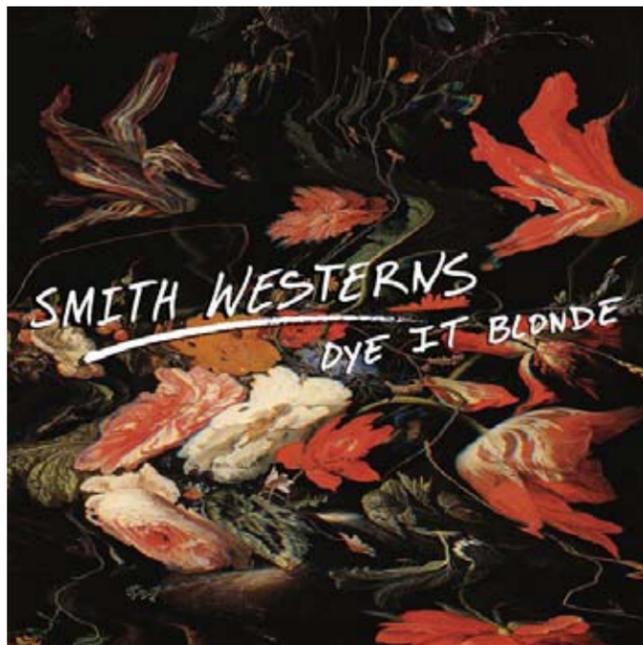
*Regarding the Whigs, I just want to say congratulations for spurning the 90s alt-rock nostalgia reunion wave that's claimed almost every other period band. Thank you.*

You're welcome. You can thank Bob Mould [Husker Du], Paul Westerberg [Replacements], and the late Joe Strummer, too.

*Rather than spend your time on a reunion jaunt, you spoke to me last time about wanting to eventually hang out in and play at a piano bar in Hawaii. Is that still the plan?*

I sort of still have visions on it. But now I'm kind of digging the Mexican coast. I've been frequently hanging out on the West coast of Mexico on the beach. That is ripe for the get-down down there too. One way or the other, I'll be an old beach dude. ●

**I've been frequently hanging out on the West coast of Mexico on the beach. That is ripe for the get-down down there too. One way or the other, I'll be an old beach dude.**



**Smith Westerns**  
*Dye It Blonde*  
Fat Possum, CD and LP

**T**hough these Chicago youngsters—still not old enough to legally knock back a few pints together—might be on the verge of a major breakthrough, it appears they currently have one much bigger concern on their minds: Girls. At least that's how it sounds listening to the group's sophomore album, a dreamy, guitar-driven effort that arrives dense with allusions to the fairer sex.

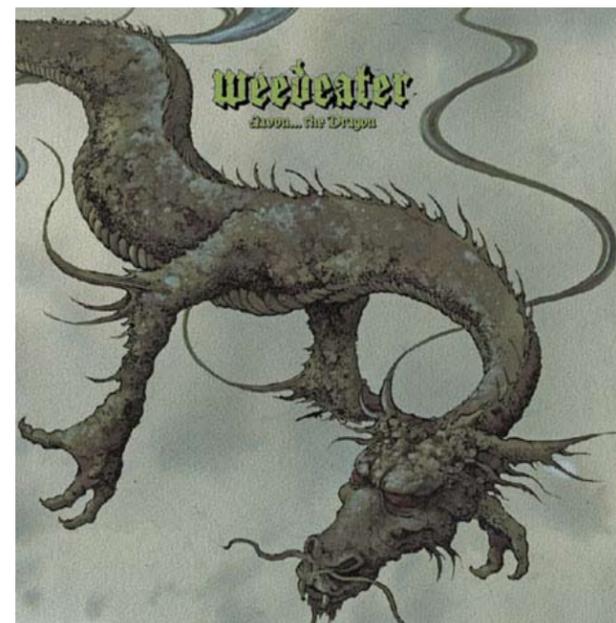
"Everything that I'm doing," sings Cullen Omori, the band's reed-thin, often bang-obscured frontman, on the woozy "Only One." "I do just for you." Similar sentiments abound throughout, the crew bashing through one love-struck nugget after another as if they prepped for sessions by reciting Shakespearian sonnets and immersing themselves in a slew of doe-eyed Drew Barrymore rom-coms. Witness "Still New," where Omori delivers his words as though his head is still dizzy from picturing that first kiss. "No doubt," he sings, "It's you I think and dream about."

Smith Westerns' blossoming ambition might be *Dye It Blonde's* biggest surprise—particularly to anyone who's ever heard/read the aloof, shrugging half-answers the mates supply in virtually every interview. Credit where credit's due. Instead of sticking to Chicago and again recording with a four-track in the Omori family home, the trio decamped to New York City with an actual producer (Chris Coady)—hardly a move befitting the slacker mantle thrust on the band immediately after its scuzzy, self-titled debut surfaced.

Fortunately, a layer of gloss does these kids good, blowing up the notion that they were satisfied with their image as *Nuggets*-obsessed garage rockers that willfully obscured a prettier sound beneath layers of sonic fuzz. Given access to a proper studio, Smith Westerns emerge with an array of glam-rock stompers ("End of the Night"), swirling funeral anthems ("All Die Young," colored here with rich church organ), and twinkling guitar pop ("Imagine Pt. 3").

Throughout, Omori and his cohorts continue to daydream of great romances to come without ever capitalizing on any of their advances. At times, it's a little like watching Kevin Arnold's boyhood flirtations with Winnie Cooper in early episodes of *The Wonder Years*. The band comes close to making a move on "End of the Night," Omori coyly asking, "Are you gonna go home?" No answer follows, but there's still plenty of time for real life to settle in down the road. Besides, who knows if Smith Westerns will stick with this music thing once the ladies actually start smiling back? —**Andy Downing**

**S**moking pot. Wrecking havoc. Collapsing eardrums with inhumanly high decibel levels filtered through SUNN and Marshall amplifier cabinets. Praising the joys of being stoned. Drinking copious amounts of alcohol, puking up green bile onstage, and continuing to perform as if it's another normal night out. Indeed, the dudes in Weedeater have some of the best jobs in music. Just not the best luck.



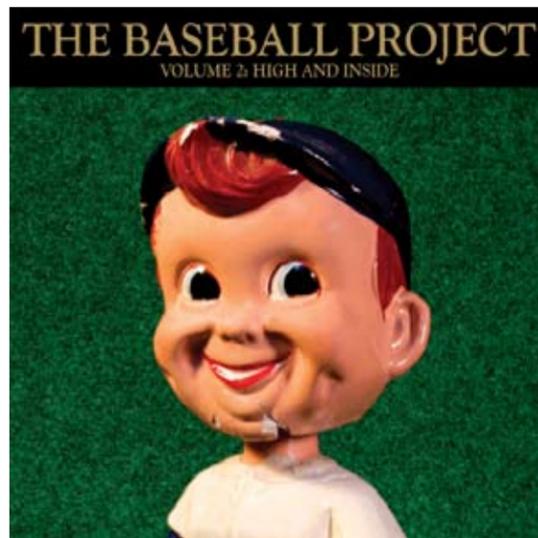
**Weedeater**  
*Jason...The Dragon*  
Southern Lord, CD and LP

A string of random injuries befell the North Carolina trio in advance of recording the ground-shaking, land-quaking, bowel-rattling *Jason...The Dragon*. Initially, bassist "Dixie" Dave Collins blew off one of his toes with his favorite shotgun. (Yes, this is a true story, and no, trigger-finger Dick Cheney allegedly wasn't in the vicinity.) Then, drummer Keith "Keko" Kirkum tore his meniscus while on tour, requiring surgery. And since bad things are said to happen in threes, guitarist Dave "Shep" Shepherd subsequently dealt with a broken pinkie finger that nearly derailed a European tour and further postponed the already deferred album sessions.

No worse for the wear, the sludge-rock band revels in the art of the dirge on its fourth LP, 34 minutes of songs overloaded with down-tuned distortion, rumbling balled-fist riffs, larger-than-life ride cymbals, and subterranean bass. While most drug-styled metal groups take their cues from England or New Orleans, and subscribe to slower tempos, Weedeater draws from Southern rock and injects swampy malaise into its burial ground of bruising rhythms, fuzz-seared melodies, and indignant screeds. Doubt the legitimacy of the good-ol'-boy heritage? "Whiskey Creek" features a traditional banjo line plucked over the pleasing sound of a crackling river and, after a break, leads into a hidden track anchored by a tack piano.

Far from espousing Confederate flag waving, however, Weedeater sees the humor not only in its culture but that of its approach. Arriving with the ruinous might and careless ferocity of an earthmover stripping bare a Kentucky mountaintop in the name of cheap coal, the thrashing "Mancoon" manages to broach the topics of homemade dynamite and bite wounds in the same song. The brain-deadening "Long Gone" bubbles with the ready anticipation of a water bong. So distorted that it's nearly impossible to discern individual notes, "Turkey Warlock" drives a proverbial stake into victims. "Too bad/Nice try/So sad," half-sings Collins in a damaged, resin-encrusted baritone rasp that evokes deceased AC/DC frontman Bon Scott—provided Scott attempted to sing with a 300-pound man pressing down on his chest. Painkillers leave Collins in a different mindset on "Palms of Opium," a psychedelic dreamscape rooted in woozy slide-guitar drunkenness and funhouse-mirror echo.

Weedeater's musicality and ability to surge separates the ensemble from a lesser pile of peers. As does the dampened, tonality-bursting production, courtesy of engineer Steve Albini, whose dry studio techniques are an ideal match for the staggered marches, crushing drones, and speaker-frying deluges that make *Jason...The Dragon* an addictively fun sonic narcotic.  
—**Bob Gendron**



**The Baseball Project**  
Vol. 2: High and Inside  
Yep Roc, CD and LP

**F**ew pursuits allow limitless opportunities to effortlessly reflect on the past, channel hopes, and trace personal events like baseball. Flush with countless metaphors and inextricably tied to fond memories of warm summers, local pride, innocent hero worship, crackling broadcasts, and the cathartic emotional highs and lows associated with investing oneself in a team's outcomes, the national pastime in many ways mirrors the joys of life itself.

Such insights—as well as a common love of the game—originally brought ex-Dream Syndicate guitarist Steve Wynn, Minus 5/Young Fresh Fellows leader

Scott McCaughey, R.E.M.'s Peter Buck, and drummer Linda Pitmon together as the Baseball Project. Filled with clever tales and catchy arrangements, the all-star quartet's excellent 2008 debut managed to avoid being pigeonholed as a novelty record. And its appeal to sports gurus ultimately resulted in the collective partnering with ESPN, writing more material, and embarking on a national tour.

The group's melodic sequel follows in the tradition-referencing and trivia-baiting spirit of its predecessor while witnessing a slight expansion of the sonic palette. While purists are more apt to gravitate to witty narratives concerning Seattle Mariners superstar Ichiro Suzuki (the surf-tipped "Ichiro Goes to the Moon," which comes on as a great lost Ramones track), San Francisco Giants personalities Pablo Sandoval and Tim Lincecum (via the gritty, scrambling garage-rock ditty "Panda and the Freak"), and early 20th century pitcher Carl Mays, the only hurler to ever toss a beanball that resulted in a player's death (a story framed as a haunting, from-the-grave ballad on the banjo-laced "Here Lies Carl Mays"), the band's appeal resides in its ability to create music and pen lyrics that speak to listeners on a basic human level.

Baseball Project members and a few high-profile guests turn their personal enthusiasm for particular players, clubs, and

stats into analogies for larger themes. Ostensibly about his passion for the Minnesota Twins, Hold Steady frontman Craig Finn's crunchy autobiographical anthem "Don't Call Them Twinkies" celebrates underdog success and teenage wonder. "I prayed more in the dome/Than I ever did in church," he confesses, hitting on an issue to which millions of superstitious folk can relate. Everyone takes a vocal turn on "Fair Weather Fans," which addresses the reality that, even if people geographically relocate, their hearts can always remain loyal to a hometown. Accented with steel-pedal guitar fills and cooing organ notes, the country-esque "Twilight of My Career" approaches the notions of dignity, challenge, and self-worth from the perspective of an aging veteran who's cast on the scrap heap and determined to prove detractors wrong.

*On Vol. 2: High and Inside*, the white line between baseball history and everyday life is thinner than that which runs between third base and home plate. And akin to the game itself, the imaginative tunes—ranging from violin-laced boleros to jangling roots pop—inspire healthy degrees of daydreaming, smiling, and nostalgia gazing.  
—**Bob Gendron**

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### Wanda Jackson

*The Party Ain't Over*  
Third Man/Nonesuch, CD and LP

# W

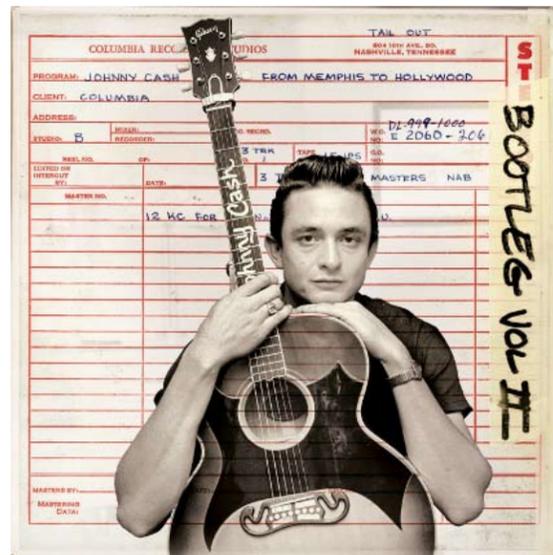
anda Jackson, the 73-year-old whirlwind alternately known as the First Lady of Rockabilly, strikes a defiant tone on her return to the spotlight, pledging to “rip it up” atop a flurry of sock-hop grooves that reek of black leather and hair pomade.

Still in possession of a disarmingly childlike croak, Jackson, her hair dyed jet-black on the album sleeve, shows little sign of slowdown as she slurs, exhorts, sighs, and coos through eleven vintage recordings that sound like they could have been uncovered in the bowels of some long-shuttered 1950s studio. Working with producer Jack White, who similarly spearheaded Loretta Lynn’s 2004 comeback *Van Lear Rose*, Jackson shoots for a retro sound reminiscent of the tattered garage nuggets (“Let’s Have a Party,” “Mean Mean Man”) that helped Jackson earn her nickname decades ago.

Although the singer has recently spent her time moonlighting on the gospel circuit, she expends far more energy here flirting with various paramours (“Teach Me Tonight,” “Like a Baby”) than exploring her reawakened Christian spirit (see the comparatively stilted “Dust on the Bible”). “He ain’t no angel,” she purrs on a cover of Bob Dylan’s “Thunder on the Mountain,” her voice stretching out like a sleepy feline as her backing band locks into a lipstick-smearing strut. “And neither am I.” Fair enough. She takes things one step further with a predictable (yet oddly effective) cover of Amy Winehouse’s damaged testimonial “You Know I’m No Good,” which seems to appear solely so Jackson can smack down the troubled tabloid presence. *You want to see real trouble, honey? Take a gander my way.*

At times, it’s an uneven ride, pairing unfortunate experiments (the seaside calypso of “Rum and Coca Cola”) with howling gems (“Nervous Breakdown,” a reverb-laden nugget destined to land on the soundtrack to a Quentin Tarantino film). Still, Jackson gamely throws herself into each twist and turn, emerging with a record that can comfortably rub shoulders with past releases.

Credit White with the assist. Minimalist to the point of non-existence on *Van Lear Rose*, here he utilizes his considerable bag of analog tricks to heighten the dramatic tension, layering Jackson’s voice with echo, piling on the horns, and dirtying songs with barbed guitar lines that circle and snarl like hungry mountain lions. —**Andy Downing**



### Johnny Cash

*From Memphis to Hollywood: Bootleg Vol. 2*  
Columbia/Legacy, 2CD

**J**ohnny Cash singing a duet with “Bonanza” leading man and native Canadian Lorne Greene? It’s one of the many rarities that comprise *From Memphis to Hollywood: Bootleg Vol. 2*, a sequel to 2006’s *Personal File*, which focused on solo performances captured between 1973 and 1982. By contrast, the latest posthumous vault collection goes back to the beginning of Cash’s career and concludes in 1969. Spanning demos, outtakes, B-sides, and non-album singles, the 57-track set counts 22 previously unreleased (in the U.S.) songs among an archival trove the primarily presents the Man In Black in two of his most famous guises: Country rebel and Wild West cowboy gunslinger.

The two-disc compilation is wisely divided according to record label. Encompassing sides cut for Sun Records, the first disc is chronologically organized into four segments—On the Air, Early Demos, Sun Rarities, and More Demos. Evoking the recently released collection of Hank Williams’ Mother’s Best Flour radio program recordings, a 15-minute live broadcast from Memphis station KWEM in May 1955 unveils Cash’s first-ever radio performance and recorded show.

Complete with advertisements—Cash actually worked for the sponsor, Home Equipment Company, located across the street from the studio, and reads the promotional copy—it serves as a time capsule into a truly bygone era, where the artist petitions requests and promises to learn the songs if his band doesn’t already know them. Amusingly, listeners are told to write (and not call) the studio, further proof of the technologically limited period from which the show stems. Moreover, a closing announcement hyping an upcoming country jamboree at which Cash and Elvis Presley are minor players serves as a harbinger of just how drastically the environment would soon shift.

A surfeit of intimate demos, featuring Cash and his guitar, proves equally insightful. Often shorter and sometimes in different keys than the official versions, tunes such as “Get Rhythm,” “I Walk the Line,” “Country Boy,” and “When I Think of You” display an intense focus and carved-in-stone baritone that belie Cash’s age. Also of note is a romping, guitar-distorted “Rock and Roll

Ruby,” which later became a smash for Roy Orbison. Seven full-band outtakes and a pair of previously unavailable early Columbia sessions, not the least of which is “Restless Kid,” written for the Howard Hanks film *Rio Bravo*, round out the historical roll call.

In comparison to the snake-bit snap and simple, dirt-kicking twang of the Sun material heard on the companion disc, the 25 Columbia-era selections on the second disc portray Cash opting for a more polished sound. Backing pop-vocal choruses, bigger arrangements, and thematic narratives (usually rooted in a Western or North Country aesthetic) pepper fare such as “The Frozen Logger,” “Johnny Yuma Theme,” and “Locomotive Man.” Not surprisingly, the period coincided with Cash’s move to Los Angeles and involvement in cowboy television series and western noir. A few songs—the horn-accompanied boogaloo of “Put the Sugar to Bed,” down-in-the-valley timbral range of “You Beat All I Ever Saw,” and string-laden rumble “Thunderball” among them—are more interesting as sonic novelties than memorable performances.

The B-side of “Folsom Prison Blues,” and co-written with Charlie Daniels, suffers no such fate. One of the most emotionally devastating, poignant, and plain-spoken songs Cash ever composed, “The Folk Singer” stands as the most valuable treasure unearthed on *From Memphis to Hollywood: Bootleg Vol. 2*, essential for die-hard fans and highly recommended to everyone else with a passing fancy for country music and the genre’s most definitive figure. —**Bob Gendron**

CONCERT

# Motörhead

**The Roseland Theater**

Portland, Oregon

**February 5, 2011**

Text and Photos by Jeff Dorgay

## “We are fucking Motörhead and we play rock and roll!”

That came from the mouth of Lemmy Kilmister, but truer words have never been spoken. Eleven years into the 21st century, at a time when most of the remaining bands with Motörhead’s tenure are shadows of their former selves at best and, at worst, caricatures, vocalist/bassist Kilmister and his mates (Phil Campbell on guitar and Mikkey Dee on drums) served up a distinctive brand of heavy rock that outpaced most, if not all, of their peers. The sold-out Portland crowd constantly roared back in approval.

Just few songs into the set, the trio launched into “Back in Line,” a blustery tune from the new album *The World Is Yours*. The evening’s biggest surprise? Motörhead only performed two songs from the satisfying new LP. In addressing this very topic, Lemmy laughed and said, “Well, the album is coming out Monday, I should at least play you a couple of fucking tracks.”



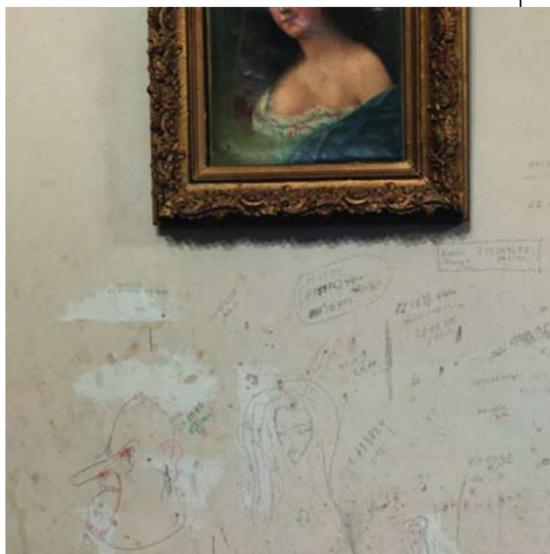
Rather than prance around like Mick Jagger, Lemmy primarily remained planted slightly to the right of center stage, his microphone in its trademark position: perched on a stand and situated above his head. The 65-year-old icon put every ounce of energy into the performance, playing with the speed and intensity of men half his age. After a set that lasted a few ticks beyond 90 minutes, he finished strong, his voice intact and barely breaking a sweat.

Meanwhile, Campbell stalked the audience from multiple vantage points while roaming around the stage and jumping up on the monitors. Thanks to an extra effects pedal installed right at the end of the stage, he was able to lean over within inches of maniacal fans and was almost scooped up by the crowd on more than one occasion. At the tail end of “Rock Out,” he unleashed a blazing solo that Dee later answered, complete with percussive pyrotechnics. Motörhead’s is truly a classic rock show, honed to perfection.

While one might not think much about the sound *quality* at a Motörhead show, it’s worth noting that the sonics were as magnificent as the performance. Imagine a Motörhead album recorded to the standard of the best audiophile pressings and played back with a 100,000 watts of power, providing the infinite dynamic punch that the band’s music demands. Such a scenario is why the only way to really experience Motörhead is to see the group live. No stereo system in the world can reproduce what the British legends do on a nightly basis at halls and theaters.



Appropriately, the band finished its normal set with the classic “Ace of Spades.” The double-fisted encore of “Born to Raise Hell” and “Overkill” perfectly described the evening’s performance. Spend an evening with Motörhead, and it becomes obvious as to why so many metal artists consider the British trio the penultimate standard.



**Dolorean**  
*Unfazed*  
Partisan Records, CD and LP

**W**hile it has been four years since Alex James has released a Dolorean record, one suspects the reason had more to do with the brainy musician's insistence on finding his way out of the maze of heartache he chronicled on 2007's *Can't Win* than a lack of inspiration. Rarely has resignation sounded so eloquent or as chillingly beautiful. But it's clear that James wasn't about to travel such a thorny path again.

In order to avoid the same emotional missteps that brought him to crisis, he engaged in rigorous self-examination—ruminating about who he was and what he needed in life. Then, only after he again felt whole—or, in the James universe, “unfazed”—was he ready to return to songwriting.

But while James claims to be pacific about the new phase of his life, he brings a little of past rancor along with him, opening *Unfazed* with a pair of songs that attempts to make sense of the war between the sexes while still obliquely dismembering the corpse of his past relationship. On the cowboy lament “Thin-Skinned,” the vocalist adopts a Tom Petty-like growl and dissects a couple from a Mars and Venus point of view. In what one supposes could be a scene lifted right out of the musician's own life, he proposes a solution to the constant bickering: “This old coast town is full of tavern and motels/Let's stay here for a while/I'll do my best to see your point of view/If you can do your best to see I'm not such a bad guy.”

Apparently, the sojourn fails to solve the problems, as on the following “Country Clutter” the protagonist moves out in what's one of the most elegant kiss-off songs since Alanis Morissette's “You Oughta Know.” “I have moved on, packed up my shit/If you find anything I left behind you can have it/Let it clutter up your life/The way you cluttered up mine.”

Having gotten those last dregs of bitter tears out of his system, James proceeds to reveal with great candor what he's learned in the past four years in a narrative arc that borders on a concept album. The bandleader shares in careful detail exactly how he has re-entered the social whirl, first courting a new woman in the title track to anxiously admitting in “Hard Working Dogs” that “love is frightening” to “Sweet Boy,” a modern rewrite of Peter Townshend's “Let My Love Open the Door.” And the revelatory “If I Find Love” follows a similar lyrical structure as Wilco's “I Am Trying to Break Your Heart,” each stanza a slightly different approach to chronicling what he will do if he finds love.

What also makes this album so fully realized is that James approached the recording process with a newfound freedom, giving long-time band members—keyboardist Jay Clarke, drummer Ben Nugent and bassist James Adair—license to approach the studio with an inventive, garage-rock spirit. What emerges is a more collaborative band effort than previous Dolorean albums past, the slow dance between James's austere, economical poetry and deceptively languid musical waves merging into a seamless, ascendant whole.  
—*Jaan Uhelszki*

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**D**uring its first decade, Low echoed its name, playing minimalist music at crawling paces that framed the haunting vocal harmonies of husband-and-wife leaders Alan Sparhawk and Mimi Parker. The approach caused a few problems in the group's formative years. In need of quiet, Low often competed with noisy audiences unprepared for the band's distinctive take on chamber rock. Having built a reputation on its stubborn commitment to a hushed aesthetic, the ensemble proceeded to throw listeners for a loop on 2005's explosive *The Great Destroyer* before returning to quiet violence and foreboding tempos on 2007's war-themed *Drums and Guns*.

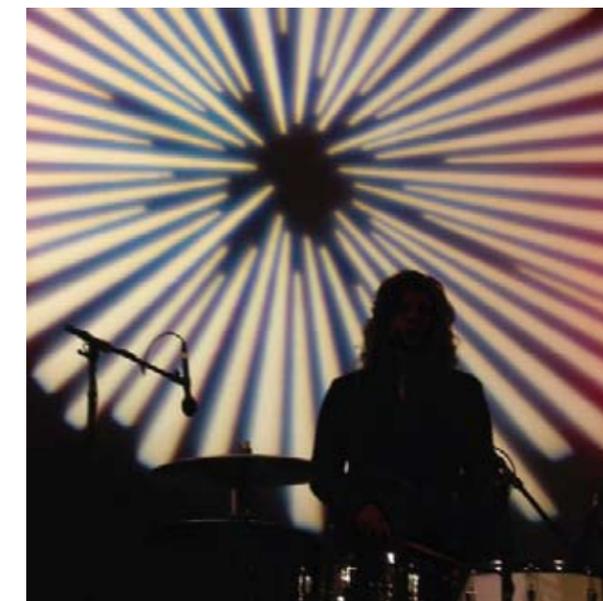
**Thematic candor aside, Low's songs resonate with a brooding tension and reserved uncertainty that makes each atmospheric note count.**

Recorded in a former Catholic church, the more intimate and pure *C'mon* marks a further retreat to the Duluth ensemble's core sound. Tunes are nearly devoid of electronic treatments or textural interference. The set also continues the band's subtle evolution—which, over the course of more than a dozen good-to-excellent LPs and EPs, seemingly progresses as patiently as its songs—into a group that harnesses acoustic environments and instrumental shapes as well as any of its contemporaries. On *C'mon*, these traits are enriched by reflective songwriting that addresses lasting personal relationships—and the challenges, feelings, and conflicts they bring forth.

The plaintive dynamic between Sparhawk and Parker comes to fore in various manifestations. Against an enchanting melody that evokes a tiny music box, the duo intertwines its voices on "Try to Sleep" in the manner in which a baby unconsciously burrows into a swaddling blanket. Glistening, somber, and peaceful, it's one of several lullabies that convey irony-free sweetness and delicate love. The gorgeous desert ballad "Done" aches with related hymnal overtones and poetic grace, a pedal-steel guitar reinforcing a poignant sympathy that mirrors Sparhawk's achy voice and weary condition. Biblical allusions adorn the narrative and, by extension,

the gospel arrangement. Sparhawk's protagonist is adrift in the wilderness; he's tired, yet his lone request pertains to his unnamed love, not for water or relief. And on the fragile "\$20," Low expresses a chilling degree of sincerity, the pair's singing coming across like the severe reading of an English sonnet, their eyes and seriousness burning holes in the text.

Thematic candor aside, Low's songs resonate with a brooding tension and reserved uncertainty that makes each atmospheric note count. Such apprehension spurred Robert Plant to cover two of the band's songs on his recent record, one of which led to a Grammy nomination. Low channels one of its own influences on the slight country stomp of "Witches," the chiming guitar chords and distorted fills an homage to Neil Young's "Cortez the Killer." Parker's layered choral voice within the dramatic chamber waltz "Especially Me" is equally glorious and edgy, the steady slow-building structure replete with sparingly plucked violins, calm percussion, and twanging guitar refrains that circle around a primary lyrical motif that underscores the anxiety and guardedness that all long-term relationships experience: "If we knew where we belonged/ There'd be no doubt where we're from/But as it stands/We don't have a clue."



**Low**  
*C'mon*  
Sub Pop, CD or LP

Throughout, the converted church's cathedral spaciousness contributes color and dimension to the sonic tapestries. Low randomly hit toy drums, boxes, and second-hand kick drums in the middle of the space, gauged their sounds, and elected whether or not to use them as accents. Similarly, volumes swell and recede to where that noise levels become auxiliary musicians. As far as the latter are concerned, jack-of-all-trades guitarist Nels Cline sits in on the epic "Nothing But Heart," his sonorous array of feedback and refracting solos floating over a constantly repeated refrain that warmly burns like embers and finds Low exiting on one of its most convincing and affirming highs yet. —**Bob Gendron**

THE  
MOUNTAIN  
GOATS  
ALL  
ETERNALS  
DECK

**The Mountain Goats**  
*All Eternals Deck*  
Merge Records, CD or LP

**O**n his Merge Records debut, the Mountain Goats' John Darnielle grows even more elusive and elliptical, his songs frequently cultivating the same sense of mystery and straight-up weirdness as a David Lynch film.

Darnielle, distancing himself from straightforward, über-confessional albums about his damaged childhood (*The Sunset Tree*) and broken relationships (*Get Lonely*), emerges as a more slippery presence even as the musical backdrop comes into tighter focus. In many regards, *All Eternals Deck* is the Mountain Goats' prettiest record, awash in gorgeous string arrangements, pristine acoustic picking, and delicate piano. True, there are few wrinkles for anyone already steeped in the band's catalog, but everything sounds just a bit more refined.

The coded imagery does little to deter from the overall effect of the music, as Darnielle conjures an array of moods and emotions with his deft wordplay. On "Birth of Serpents," he appears to slither through his own subconscious like Jim Carey in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, remembering himself as an awkward teenager ("See that young man who dwells inside his body like an uninvited guest") before moving on to even deeper, darker places. "The Autopsy Garland" opens like a scene from a Cormac McCarthy novel, red sun hanging ominously in the sky. But instead of grizzled gunslingers, the villains on the horizon are suited, cognac-guzzling businessmen. "You don't want to see these guys," cautions Darnielle, ever wary of man's true nature, "Without their masks on."

"Never Quite Free," built around tender piano, finds Darnielle offering comfort to a dying compatriot. "Right outside your window there's only friendly fields and open roads," he sings in his nasal tone. "The view goes on forever. And you'll never want for comfort. And you'll never be alone." Similar ideas of the afterlife echo throughout "Liza Forever Minnelli," Darnielle singing about the part "you braced yourself against" (death) and then "the other part." Perhaps this explains why the singer doesn't flinch in those moments when things appear bleakest. Witness "Beautiful Gas Mask," where he and a lover hold hands and continue singing as they plunge into the void.

Despite a name that sounds lifted from a cult sci-fi film, "Outer Scorpion Squadron" actually materializes as the album's most bruising moment, Darnielle recalling his most painful memories atop a lonely bed of piano and strings. He retreats even further on "Sourdoire Valley Song," pining for a simple life with "few friends and fewer closer friends." "High Hawk Season," by contrast, evolves into something of a call-to-arms, a choir of voices (think a barbershop quartet interpreting Pentecostal spirituals) surrounding the singer as he cautions, "We are young supernovas and the heat's about to break." It's a rare outburst on a record that's more about finding a way to live with yourself than trying to change the world around you.

"Why should we hide from anyone?," Darnielle asks on "Age of Kings." He doesn't stick around to answer his own question, stealing away to the catacombs with his lady as shadowy figures draw near. But the suggestion is clear: Sometimes the desire to enjoy those final few moments with a love can be reason enough to try and lay low. —**Andy Downing**

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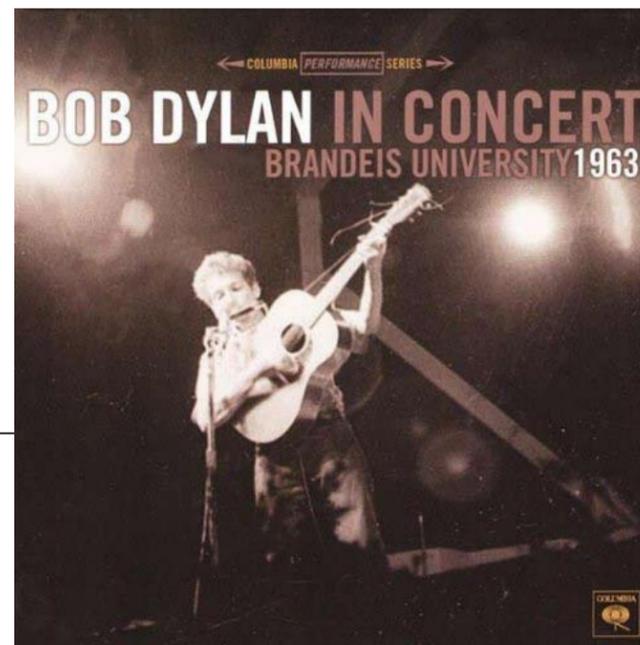
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**B**ob Dylan was all of 21 years old when he took the stage for two short performances at the Brandeis University Folk Festival on May 10, 1963. The highly touted singer-songwriter's 1962 debut album had flopped. He'd just wrapped up sessions for a sophomore record, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, which would see release later in the month. By no means was the Bard any sort of championed spokesperson or celebrity. All that would change within a few weeks.



### Bob Dylan

*In Concert—Brandeis University 1963*  
Columbia/Legacy, CD or LP

Indeed, it's the rare opportunity to hear Dylan during this early, transformative point in his career that makes *In Concert—Brandeis University 1963* a compelling experience. Recorded on a seven-inch reel-to-reel and possessing terrific clarity, the brief archival collection also hints at the vocalist's now-trademark puzzling habits. Despite having culture-altering tunes such as "Don't Think Twice, It's Alright," "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," and, most significantly, "Blowin' in the Wind" at his disposal, Dylan ignores them and instead gives the audience lighter-hearted narrative-based fare in the form of the farcical "Talkin' John Birch Paranoid Blues," "Talking Bear Mountain Picnic Massacre Blues"—a minor satirical classic in which Dylan couches socio-economic commentary amidst an amusing, over-the-top storyline—and "Talkin' World War III Blues," a topical comedy on

subjects ranging from conflict to paranoia.

Loose, relaxed, and jocular, Dylan revels in the humor. His voice, playing, and tone clearly sound more innocent, hopeful, and warm than they do after fame placed him at the forefront of the folk scene and triggered a personal cynicism that, if at all present in May 1963, is held in check. There's not much revealing banter, but even Dylan's witty between-song remarks take on a different tone than they would by the early fall and soon after, following, as Dylan expert Michael Gray points out in the liner notes, President Kennedy's assassination. In many regards, even with the presence of the weighty "Masters of War" and "Ballad of Hollis Brown" (which, akin to three of the other songs here, remained unreleased for the then-foreseeable future), *In Concert—Brandeis University 1963* marks one of the last

moments in history when Dylan feels he can afford to be a wide-eyed folkie and cautious optimist.

As for the kept-under-lock-and-key "Blowin' in the Wind?" By the summer, Peter, Paul and Mary turned the anthem into a smash that went on to sell more than two million copies and, in the process, propelled Dylan into the national limelight. While an impossible scenario, it's fun to imagine that the Bard somehow knew about all of the changes on the horizon and thus savored his normalcy at this intimate event before the storm's arrival. —**Bob Gendron**



**Bill Callahan**  
*Apocalypse*  
Drag City, CD or LP

**B**ill Callahan, who spent the bulk of his two-decade-plus career mining the shadows for songs as Smog, has carried a lighter load since dropping the latter moniker for his birth name on 2007's *Woke on a Whaleheart*. That approach slightly changes with the arrival of *Apocalypse*, a bruising, shell-shocked album defined by heartache and regret.

Things open on an ominous note with "Drover," a windswept tune that sounds like it could double as the theme song for some classic Western villain. The mood grows even more desolate on "Riding for the Feeling," which finds Callahan holed up in a lonely motel room reliving the final days of a broken relationship. "All this leaving is never-ending," he exhales in a mournful baritone. "Don't go, don't go, don't go." Just one song later, Callahan imagines himself in an open field, recounting his visions as though he's lying prone on a couch recounting a dream to his therapist. "I'm standing in a field/A field of questions," he croons atop a spring meadow of breezy flute, cricket chirps of guitar, and shimmering cymbals.

At times, the depression grows so severe that even menial tasks take on near-cosmic significance. On "Baby's Breath," he struggles to mow the grass ("I looked down at the lawn and wondered what all was gone") and equates weeding his garden with an inability to appreciate good things in his life before they've left him for good.

Callahan regains a little mojo on "America," a sardonic tune that arrives amidst a military march of drums and strutting rock riff. Along the way, the singer mocks the fetishization of patriotism ("I wish I was deep inside America tonight"), points to the country's repeated involvement in unjust wars (whether in Afghanistan, Vietnam, or with Native Americans) and argues that our cultural exports can do more to spark change than any number of bombs. After name-checking Kris Kristofferson, Mickey Newbury, and Johnny Cash, he proclaims "What an Army! What an Air Force! What a Marines!"

With just seven songs, Callahan doesn't overstay his welcome, though the relatively meager track list makes the odd misstep more pronounced. Witness the foggy "Universal Applicant," a regrettable bit of filler with lyrics that come across like the stoned ramblings of a 60s acid casualty. Better is the album-closing "One Fine Morning," a solemn acoustic number that finds Callahan staring down the Final Days and trying to regain his newborn sense of optimism. "When the earth turns cold...and black," he sings. "Will I feel you riding on my back?"  
—**Andy Downing**



**The Kills**  
*Blood Pressures*  
Domino, CD or LP

**S**he & Him are cuter, Matt & Kim goofier, Sleigh Bells noisier, Jenny & Johnny mellower, the Raveonettes slicker, and Wye Oak more intimate. But no co-ed indie-rock duo possesses the Kills' erotic dynamic and sensual danger. On *Blood Pressures*, the band's first release since singer Alisson Mosshart began moonlighting with Jack White's Dead Weather project, the trans-continental couple retains its noisy aesthetic while giving credence to adventurous possibilities wrought by Mosshart's sultry, sassy voice—particularly when abetted by partner/guitarist Jamie Hince's instrumental (and occasional vocal) responses.

The group's minimalist roots remain in place. Thrift-shop assortments of drum machine beats are intentionally crude, cut-up, scarred, and distorted. Rhythms rattle and creak akin to an old, faulty steam radiator that reluctantly coughs out heat. Filtered through reverb and dirt, the Kills' sonic gunk chuffs and chafes, touching on damaged reggae ("Satellite"), cranky dub ("Baby Says"), and barbed

funk ("Damned If She Do") vibes. Manipulated electronics and thick, fuzzed-out distortion contribute additional layers of abrasion, roughing up cleaner pop textures in the same way that urban streets scuff up a new pair of shoes. Such contrasts augment the Kills' trademark strength: Nocturnal dread, the sense that no matter how merry circumstances seem, ominous fates lurk in the future. It's no wonder that the lone unadulterated bright spot on the album, a British-reared psychedelic ballad named "Wild Charms" that comes on as a lost outtake from the Beatles' *White Album*, lasts for barely a minute.

"You can holler, you can wail/You can blow what's left of my right mind," declares Mosshart in an alluring, desperate timbre on the percussive stut-ter "Future Starts Now," the frontwoman testifying on behalf of an unhealthy obsession over a romantic partner she refuses to give up. Warning: Despite the crafty hook and hypnotic reverb, this is not the sort of love song you want to hear your mate whisper in your ear. Primal, raw, and distraught, it's more threat than dedication. Hince's underlying backing vocals add to the poisonous dynamic. Similarly, the arched choral breaks on "Satellite" and Mosshart's breathy, attitudinal swagger on the dancefloor-ready "Nail In My Coffin" register as warnings, the latter featuring an electro-shocked blues riff that resonates like a ship's throaty fog horn echoing in a harbor.

For all the compelling instrumental commotion—the Kills' grainy tapestries evoke the din of everything from spinning 78RPM records to corkscrews stuck in obstinate wine bottles—*Blood Pressures* boils down to solid songwriting and Mosshart's vocal performances. And she needn't cool art-punk dissonance, pulsing chants, or gothic refrains to be convincing. With synthesized strings hovering in the near-distant background, and a sorrowful piano melody acting as the primary stanchion, Mosshart channels Marlene Dietrich's smoky cabaret persona on the devastating slow-burner "The Last Goodbye," unleashing vulnerability in a song littered with broken hearts, reluctant farewells, and unrequited love. The duo has never sounded so seductive or exposed. It's the searing moment when the glitter, glamour, and grime give way to severe emotion, regret, and acceptance—and the from-the-heart confessions that it brings.  
—**Bob Gendron**

**G**reg Dulli and the Metro share a unique relationship. The Twilight Singers frontman has been good friends with the club's owner, Joe Shanahan, for more than two decades. Their association began when the inimitable Chicago venue—the Midwest passage that all up-and-coming rock artists must journey through on their way to mainstream fame—hosted Dulli's first band, the Afghan Whigs, on a monthly basis before they were even signed by Sub Pop. Dulli has gone on record saying that if not for Shanahan, the Whigs would've split up. Indeed, the pair's connection is just one of the reasons why, save for booking a handful of shows at the smaller Double Door, the singer/guitarist has appeared at Metro on every tour he's staged since 1993.

And while the Cincinnati native has logged a number of truly unforgettable performances there since, he's rarely been in better form than at a 105-minute concert in mid-May on the Twilight Singers' first U.S. tour in five years. A natural-born entertainer, Dulli picked up on the crowd's buzz from the start and reached back for something extra, pushing himself and his band to ecstatic heights. It was the kind of show you hope is being taped by someone in the crowd—the rare conflagration of sound, sight, sensuality, and sweat that renews one's faith in music and prompts them to binge on the performer's catalog for weeks.

"Whenever you're here, you're alive," whispered Dulli at the outset to the opening "Last Night In Town," the double-edged declaration arriving over an ominously spare piano line. The atmospheric minimalism quickly gave way to a budding, finger-trigger rhythm, gradually building in scope until it mounted a charge, the electricity thundering away overhead. Responsible for giving the tune and many that followed shake-and-bake vibes, drummer Greg Wieczorek served as the quintet's secret weapon. He approached his kit by feel rather than by protocol, peppering tunes with everything from funky fills to simmering breaks to contrasting textures, bringing down tempos at a finger snap's notice or hitting with dynamic force as emotions boiled. Wieczorek wasn't alone in projecting cinematic heft.

# Twilight Singers

## Metro

Chicago, Illinois

## May 17, 2011

Text by Bob Gendron

Photos by Jeff Dorgay





Multi-instrumentalist Rick Nelson's gorgeous violin passages gave much of the Twilight Singers' material deeper layers of melancholic beauty and sensitive romanticism; his sweet-toned lines during "Bonnie Brae" tinted the scraping rave-up with rapturous chamber-pop melodies that underscored the inherent regret and sorrow. Dulli seized the chance to push his voice into the stratosphere here and elsewhere, his fractured-soul baritone at times breaking into a passionate shout that shoved his singing to a precipice, the impact at once persuasive, demanding, arresting, and raw. Dressed in his trademark black shirt, pants, and shoes, and bathed in dim lights, the 46-year-old bandleader operated in the same extroverted manner that first made him a cult legend years ago: Cajoling with witty one-liners, losing himself in the moment, and sharing a few key words of wisdom.

Whether confessing episodes that trigger his OCD ("I will pull over...to clean the windshield for a little piece of sap. Even if the rest is clear.

And you are the sap, sir," he told a fan that was covering his ears as he handed the offender earplugs); discussing the finest musical fare a gentlemen could put on the stereo when a lady comes over to visit ("Sir Marvin Gaye, of course. Al Green. Roxy Music *Avalon* is always a classic. But this one is underrated here," he divulged, before nailing a falsetto version of Smokey Robinson's "Cruisin'"); or expressing sincere thanks to Shanahan, who watched from the balcony ("The world would be a better place if every town had a Joe Shanahan"), Dulli remains a straight-shooting provocateur and the epitome of a smooth operator. Not surprisingly, love factored into a majority of the songs—the love frequently tainted by betrayal, loss, suffering, and/or unhealthy addictions.

Swaggering and strutting, and augmenting his delivery with the occasional hip-hop inflection, Dulli inhabited the personalities of a variety of sordid characters. He prostituted himself on the funky sleaze of "Forty Dollars," entered a deadly urban underbelly that crossed (*continued*)

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film-noir darkness with blaxploitation R&B on “Fat City,” plotted in the shadows during the organ-driven “The Beginning of the End,” embraced immortality and sang Kanye West’s “All of the Lights” sans microphone in the midst of an epic “Too Tough to Die,” turned into a bloodthirsty mercenary on the New Orleans-styled “Decatur Street,” brooded during the dark communion of “On the Corner,” and foreshadowed the violence of “Gunshots” with a refrain from Prince’s “When Doves Cry.”

Renowned for an uncanny ability to mash-up classic songs into his own material, Dulli unveiled several surprises (Robert Knight’s “Everlasting Love,” Pink

Floyd’s “Another Brick in the Wall (Part I)” among them) that extended the running dialogues of tunes such as “Esta Noche” and “Never Seen No Devil.” A music aficionado whose performances are designed to get people to move—and opposite sexes to mingle—the frontman’s interpretive choices served multiple purposes. He preceded a medley of “Love” and “Annie Mae” with the Robinson cover, allowing the Twilight Singers’ thematic sequence on endearment to deftly move from cheerful to uncertainty to treachery without missing a beat, the procession mirroring the realities of countless relationships. No doubt Dulli knows the unbearable pain of having his world shattered.

As impressive as they were taking on all-comers in harder-edged arrangements, the Twilight Singers proved equally convincing when opting for restraint. “Deepest Shade,” an unreleased song played just for the second time ever, came on as the sound of longstanding hurt colliding with carnal need, Dulli’s swooning highs bringing the ballad to a shivering close. Similarly transcendent, the collective echoed conflicted desperation during the piano-based “Candy Cane Crawl,” on which Dulli, battling demons, abandonment, and realizations that accompany withdrawal, sought salvation in the form of anything he could find. Have mercy. ●



**C**hicago sister-brother duo White Mystery packs a relatively spartan setup—big sis Miss Alex White plays guitar and sings, and bro Francis plays drums and provides backing vocals—but don't think of the duo as minimalist. "I don't like to use the term 'minimalist,'" said Alex in an interview late last summer. "Because I don't consider [our music] that at all."

This is especially true of the pair's sophomore album, *Blood & Venom*, a garage-rock rumbler dense in howling guitar squall, echo-laden vocals, and primal, thundering drums. Indeed, this brawler of a record could double as an alternate soundtrack to the extended back-alley fight between Keith David and Rowdy Roddy Piper in the 80s cult classic *They Live*.

Alex White, who first cut her teeth in a trio of bands—Miss Alex White & Chris Playboy, the Hot Machines, and Miss Alex White & the Red Orchestra—finds the perfect foil for her flame-throwing fretwork in brother Francis, who pounds at his kit like a more muscular Meg White (no relation), leaving plenty of room for Alex to construct towering walls of feedback.

Just listen to the grimy "Smoke," a primordial thumper on which it momentarily sounds like she's wielding a chainsaw.

It appears that lo-fi is more than just an aesthetic for the pair. Much of *Blood & Venom* sounds like it was recorded on a budget four-track deep in some dark, dank sewer. The whole album rattles as though the needle danced in the red throughout the entire session—a fitting thought when visually confronted with the pair's matching ginger afros.

The lyrics are every bit as bare-knuckled as the sound, acting more as rallying cries than moments of intensive introspection. On "Smoke," Alex prowls the streets like an alley cat: "Looking for some trouble, know I'm gonna find it." "Good Girl" invites all the ladies to "raise your fists up [and] punch a hole in the world!" Sometimes the songs come across like fun little goofs. Witness the garage-punk of "Birthday," where Francis invites everyone to "boogie down in your birthday suit!" as Alex's guitar roars like a backfiring muscle car.



**White Mystery**  
*Blood & Venom*  
White Mystery, CD or LP

Noise abounds. "Dead Inside" comes across like the Who's "I Can't Explain" filtered through the Slits, Alex wailing as if she's trying to excise deep-seeded demons. Newborn theme song "White Mystery" lays out the pair's differences (she's into coffee, he likes his whiskey) and their shared vision. "My love for you is outta site," Alex wails before the two lock into a pummeling groove that mimics a drum kit being run through a blender. Sounds like love to me.

—*Andy Downing*

**The whole album rattles as though the needle danced in the red throughout the entire session—a fitting thought when visually confronted with the pair's matching ginger afros.**

# A New Wave of American D-Beat



## The Baptists

*Baptists*

Southern Lord, 7" LP single

Minimalist-styled record sleeves. Blurry photographs depicting live commotion. Sonic production that emphasized the lower ends of hard, sludgy, grime-caked rock played by guys that could pass as dock loaders and butchers. A communal bond with small club audiences that became willing participants in the alcohol-soaked shows. Long before Sub Pop became a household name, the aforementioned traits distinguished the label's late 1980s releases.

However different musically, the imprint's artists shared a similar aesthetic, and the records—most often, seven-inch singles—shared a related look.

Primarily known for cutting-edge experimental, doom, stoner, drone, and black metal, Southern Lord has recently turned its ear toward crust/hardcore metal that recalls the excitement and feel of early Sub Pop fare. While heavier, louder, and faster than the Seattle label's formative material, Southern Lord's hardcore-leaning artists possess an equivalent underground vibe, primal sense, and interrelated sound intent on shaking wax loose from listeners' ears. And, vinyl is the dominant medium.

Available only on seven-inch, the Baptist's self-titled single comes on like a cement mixer spinning at twice its regulated revolutions. Notes joust, collide, roll, and tumble, the instruments shrouding the volcanic vocal outbursts. Opening with sleeting feedback before hitting the wall at top speed, "Good Parenting" is the sonic equivalent of one of Charles Peterson's black-and-white pictures. "Bachelor Degree Burn" approaches with the ominous might of an angry Yeti spying its prey, the tune's midtempo stomp and viscous, thick tones adding to a formidable surge. Yet, akin to all four songs here, the rage and intensity don't prohibit an allegiance to structure and carefully considered volume swells. The Vancouver ensemble goes for the throat, but it also recognizes the importance of picking the right moments to do so.



## Lebanon

*Overdose/Overload*

Southern Lord, 7" LP single



## Trap Them

*Darker Handcraft*

Prosthetic, LP or CD

Not too far across the border, Portland's Lebanon—comprised of former members of From Ashes Rise, Hellshock, and Coldbringer—makes its Southern Lord debut with a seven-inch that immediately launches into brisk, speed-freak mayhem. Taking its marching orders from Motorhead and extending the D-beat tradition, the quartet approaches thrash-metal signatures on "Overdose/Overload," an aptly named garage-reared blast of ire that gets right to the heart of the group's reason d'être. Joel Smith maintains the D-beat regiment on drums, and Brad Boatwright and Josh Armstrong's guitars form an amphetamine-ripped, no-life-til-leather combination that finds one member swiping chords while the other punches his fist at them. "Mere demons in a devil's race," cries Boatwright, the band responding to the despondent claim as if they're rats desperate to evade being doused in gasoline.

Five-hour energy pills and successive Red Bull shots have nothing on Trap Them's *Darker Handcraft*, one of the most monstrous hardcore/crust records to emerge in years. It's no wonder that the first vinyl pressing sold out before the album's street date. The New Hampshire group records for both Southern Lord and Prosthetic, which are less in competition with one another than they are aligned towards the same goals. The quartet's new LP for Prosthetic is by far its most potent and focused statement.

Netting the same kind of face-melting impression as Nails' *Unsilent Death* and The Secret's *Solve Et Coagula*—each issued last year by Southern Lord and couched in relentlessness, violence, and brutality—*Darker Handcraft* functions like a bulldozer. The music has no regard for anything in its way, and possesses the strength to shove, push, and crush everything that crosses its path. However, Trap Them isn't content to simply aim for and achieve frenetic degrees of hyperbolic noise and head-on extremity. *(continued)*

## MUSIC

Deft time changes, strategic transitions, and taut interplay abound. Physicality isn't just limited to the songs, but their impact.

For all of its carnage, "Damage Prose" hums along akin to a locomotive eagerly devouring the coal in its engine. "Scars Align" grinds and digs, the weighty drums delivering blows to the head, the track monolithic in scale. The instrumental segue "Sordid Earnings" suggests the enemy at the gates, torches burning and fists pounding, ready to ransack the powers that be. "All By the Constant Vulse" is pure aggression, an assault that bashes skulls and pulverizes them until they're ash.

Along with superb songwriting, purpose, and execution, spot-on production elevates Trap Them above its peers. Converge leader Kurt Ballou bestows the LP with a remarkably solid dynamic foundation and percussive base that's positively lethal. Whether experienced on the stampeding "Slumcult & Gather" or pouncing "Every Walk A Quarantine," complete with back-and-forth guitar riff dialogue between the left and right channels, the sonics leave a lasting impression—literally and figuratively. Invigorating. —**Bob Gendron**



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## Beyond Sight and Sound

By Louise Brown

Photography by  
Christiaan Westgeest

**L**ocated in Noord-Brabant, a Southern province of the Netherlands, Tilburg is a cultural hive of Europe. Home to the jazz festival Stranger Than Paranoia, the world-music celebration Festival Mundial, and the renowned avant-garde arts expo Incubate, the city—with its myriad of street cafes and bars—is also home to the 013 Popcentre, and every April, the Roadburn Festival.

Walk down the pedestrian sidewalk, through the city center, and you'll find 013, an inviting albeit ominous venue, its black rubber-clad architecture complete with actual CDs worked into the façade, an outward sign of its dedication to music. The space has hosted artists from Nick Cave to Ice Cube, and invites 230,000 patrons through its doors every year. But in spring, there is a sonic awakening over a weekend, a blossoming of structured riff passages and discordant audio experimentation to which 3000 fans of doom, blues rock, and heavy metal flock.

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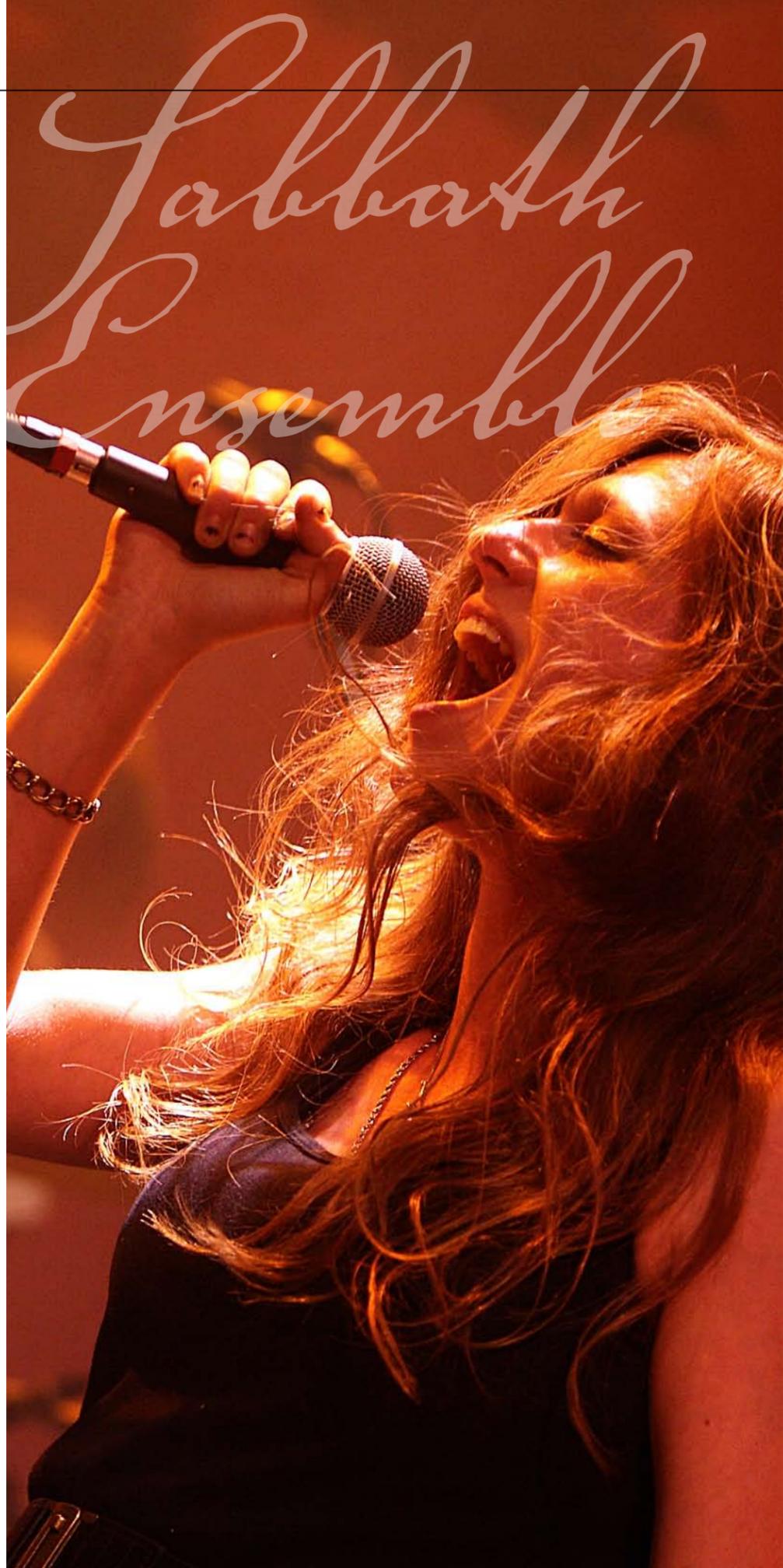
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Hailed as a pilgrimage for lovers of the riff, Roadburn Festival, which was set up in 1999 and boasted Cathedral and Orange Goblin among its initial lineup, has 13 years on become a Mecca for music lovers. Roadburn has since invited some of the world's most respected artists to perform across its four stages, whether it's the stoner rock of Monster Magnet, neofolk of 2008 curator Current 93, Norwegian black metal of Enslaved, occult death metal of Britain's Grave Miasma, traditional Scandinavian folk of Wardruna, or droning doom metal of this year's curators Sunn O))), The acts might be vastly different, but there is one common goal at Roadburn: a passion for music that transcends genres and boundaries.

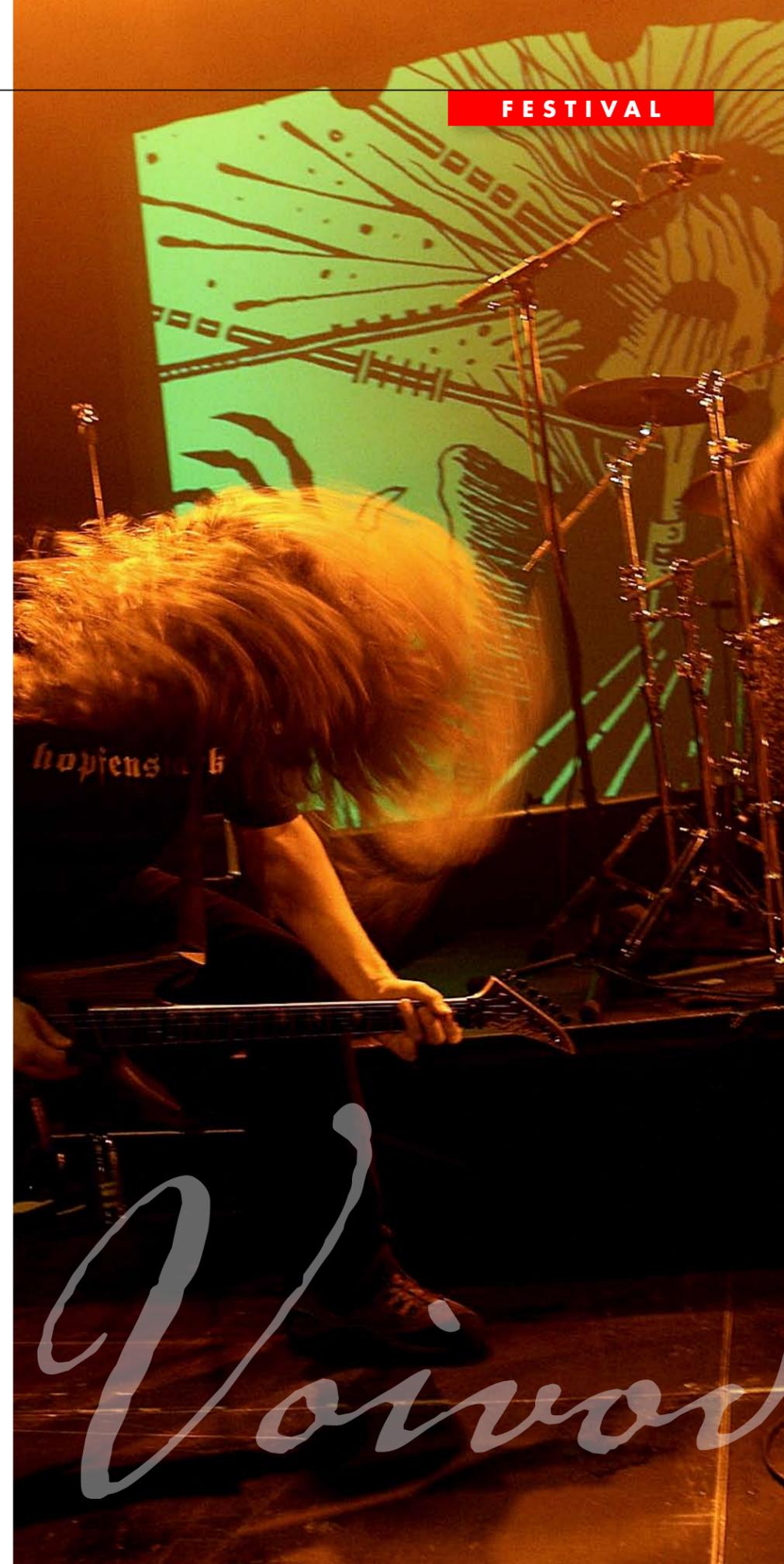
The festival also breaks down the boundaries between fan and artist. Stroll the main streets and you might see Japanese noise master Keiji Haino talking to friends, or Scott Kelly of post-hardcore duo Neurosis enjoying a glass of Belgian beer. Or, you could stumble across members of Canadian prog troupe Blood Ceremony as they watch Sabbath Assembly from the crowd and join English doom brigade Ramesses as they take advantage of the Netherlands' cannabis laws. There is no VIP bar; no "us and them" division.



Just a joint purpose to soak up every riff, every drum roll, every prolonged chord, and every soaring vocal.

Each year, the Roadburn billing becomes more and more beguiling, with bands tripping over themselves to get a sought-after slot. In 2001, eighty bands tread the boards over four stages. There's the gargantuan main stage at the 013, with its shimmering acoustics and enviable capacity for a heady light show, the latter a common sight during the weekend's artistically minded festivities.

The smaller Green Room usually sees desperate fans spilling out to into the corridors that host a bar filled with Belgian brews and some of the friendliest staff you'll ever encounter at a music fest. Meanwhile, the Bat Cave is a no-go unless you've prepared an hour in advance to get inside. Cave by name, cave by nature: If your must-see band is playing there, be forewarned that if 100 other fans share your thoughts, you might be out of luck. But if you find yourself amongst the throng, you'll be treated to intimate and intense performances that often become the stuff of legend. In 2008, Boris played to a packed room here, and three years later, it's one of those historic moments that 1000 people claim to have witnessed. *(continued)*





*Ghost*

In 2011, sets by In Solitude, Imaad Wasif, and Wolf People are destined to go down in the same annals of infamy.

Since 2010, Roadburn has also taken over the modern surroundings of the Midi Theatre, normally home to passing theatre troupes and stand-up comedy. Its lush sound is a perfect home for the subtle acoustics of drone lords Earth, Finnish experimentalists Circle, and stunning closers Uf-fomammut. No wonder this festival sells out in 15 minutes.

As 2011's event begins, it's the Midi that causes crowds to buzz. Rumours abound that you won't be able to get into the space unless you queue two hours prior. The calm panic arrives amidst myriad whispering, as fans are asking, 'Who are they?' Such excitement proves that the hype band of the festival, and year, is the mysterious ensemble Ghost. They're Swedish. Maybe Italian. No one is quite sure and hearsay claims that, beneath the macabre black robes, the musicians are all members of underground death metal bands. One thing is certain: Whoever they are, they are dabbling in the dark arts. With a menacing manifesto that claims to use pop music to entice the naïve to the dark, the band takes the template of Fleetwood Mac and Blue Oyster Cult, gives it a hard rock makeover à la Black Sabbath, and 10,000 record sales later, the group is worryingly close to its goal. It's true. The devil does have all the best tunes.



*Silent Green*

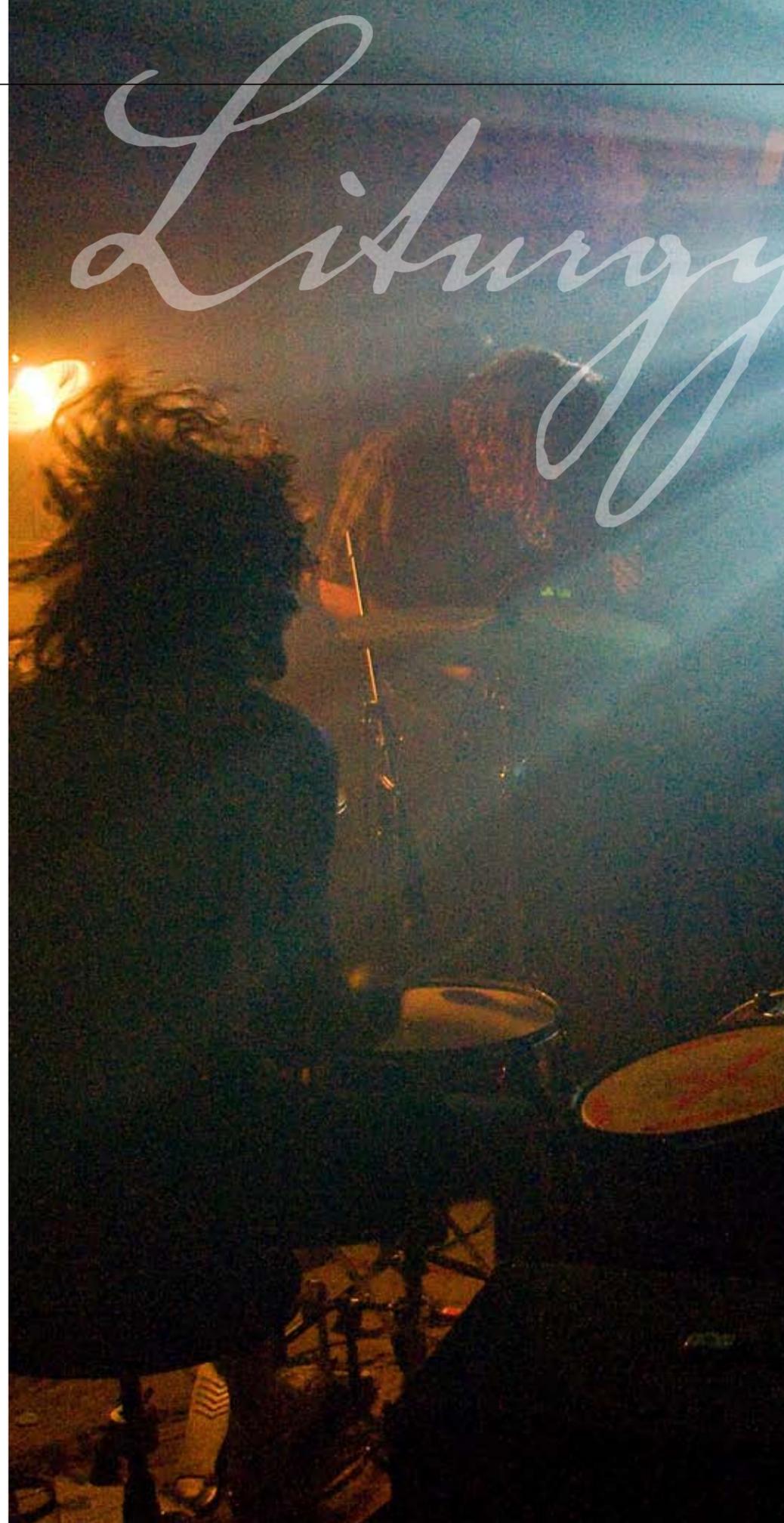
All Tomorrows Parties events made it their trademark feature, but now, bands playing classic albums in their entirety are a festival staple. Roadburn is no different, and many of the acts on the weekend's bill give fans exactly what they want, song for song. But it's the industrial marvel of Godflesh that stops lovers of discord in their tracks. Long hailed as a masterpiece, and taking its rightful place alongside Sabbath, Judas Priest, and Led Zeppelin as yet another groundbreaking work of art that gives its composers a glimmer of hope in the desperate desolation of Birmingham, UK, *Streetcleaner* is performed in the same order as it was originally heard on first-press scratchy vinyl in 1989. From the somewhat shaky start of "Like Rats" to the knee-buckling "Suction," this is a knockout event for fans of all the sub-genres of extreme music that Godflesh main architect Justin Broadrick helped birth—whether the style is deemed to be industrial, grind-core, post-rock, or anything in between.

With a painstaking devotion, the line-up for Roadburn is a bubbling cauldron of wonder, each band on the bill adding another layer to the sonic magic. And by inviting a curator every year since 2008 to bring their offering to the altar, the festival will forever stay fresh and exciting. *(continued)*



This year sees Seattle's amplified monks, Sunn O))), cast their wizard's spell over Tilburg and bring some lead weight to the lighter fare with a thunderous mix of deafening doom, monumental bass, and of course, their own brand of droning druidry. By resurrecting the dead in Winter, the lauded doom tyrants from New York, whose sole album *Into Darkness* changed the face of extremity in 1990, Sunn O))) scores a goal for the field of crust-ridden, bile-spitting metal. But the curators also add sugar to the spice with the sweet country blues of Jesse Sykes, going great lengths to keep Roadburn's eclecticism in check.

Another reunited band at the beck and call of Stephen O'Malley and Greg Anderson—Sunn O)))'s leaders and the robed masters of ceremony—is Corrosion Of Conformity, the North Carolina trio that, like many alternative acts of the period, surprisingly found itself on a major label in the 90s. Pared down to core members Reed Mullins, Woody Weatherman, and Mike Dean, the group delights in going back to punkish basics, churning out classics from its 1985 sophomore album *Animosity* while the collective enthusiasm rubs off on a crowd desperate for simple chord progressions on a day that is all about the avant-garde.



With a 20-minute dirge heralding Sunn O)))'s arrival, many waiting to watch this main event get bored, or tinnitus, or whatever comes first. They set off to watch the likes of textural tinker Caspar Brotzmann or Canadian future thrashers Voivod. But eventually, Sunn O))) resonates something other than guitar feedback, and the result is the elixir between noise and nuance. Sunn O))) gets caught up in smoke, literally, with dry ice filling the room to the same degree as its riffs. Those not wearing ear protection, beware. But it's not all decibel-shattering devastation. When the band brings it down a notch, it happens upon a bewitching mix of drama and exhilaration, especially when long-time collaborator Attila Csihar and Japanese noise icon Keiji Haino join together for a bizarre, electrifying duet.

Death metal, drone, doom, psychedelic, rock, blues: If a genre exists, it's welcome under the Roadburn banner, and even genres that don't even yet have names seem to crystallize in Tilburg. Chicago-based indie imprint Thrill Jockey took a risk when signing indefinable four-piece Liturgy, but word of mouth leads to a gathering crowd to spy the New Yorkers open up the Bat Cave on Sunday afternoon. *(continued)*

Deconstructing black metal from its caustic Norse roots and putting it through a filter where words like “burst-beats,” “hypnotic abstraction,” and “polyvalent alchemy” are bandied about seem to make so much sense when describing the group’s experimental take on a genre that was never meant to be dissected by music students or played by people named Tyler or Hunter. Nonetheless, 20 years later almost to the day that a man called Dead from a band called Mayhem took his life and, in the process shone a glaring torch on an underground musical movement, black metal is cast once again into the spotlight. And although Liturgy splits opinions, it begs the question about the next evolution of such a fascinating form of aural anarchy.

With the festival drawing to a sorry close, highs (fighting through the crowd to get into the Green Room for jazz weirdos Yazuka) and lows (a disappointing and long-awaited Shrinebuilder set, the only bad sound mix of the weekend) abound as the last day crawls to its zenith. Finally, Michael Gira—flanked by



musical minions that gather in a semi-circle around him like worshippers of a bizarre sect—strums his first chord and immediately, contrasting feelings of sadness (that the festival is almost done) and relief (taking a breath after anticipating such a legendary band) collide.

As Gira screams for Jesus Christ to “come down” he, himself, is messianic in his demeanour. No disharmonious noise-for-noise’s sake, no experimental rambling, just an ebb and flow of melody and transcendental melancholy. Take the best of Roadburn—the width and breadth of bands who played, the fans, the hang-outs, the good beer, the even better weed, the art exhibitions, the film screenings, the conversations with strangers that shared your most obscure musical obsession, the friendly staff, the dedicated crew that made all this happen. Swans condense it all into a musical whole that makes the ensemble worthy of the headline slot, and forces everyone to start to countdown the days until April 2012, when they can do it all again. ●



# 2011's Best Rock and Pop Albums

By Bob Gendron

**L**ed by newer names such as Teri Suarez (Le Butcherettes), Kristen Gundred (Dum Dum Girls), Merrill Garbus (Tune-Yards), Zola Jesus, Erika M. Anderson (EMA), and Lydia Loveless as well as established names like St. Vincent, Feist, PJ Harvey, Carrie Brownstein, and Janet Weiss, 2011 was the year of the woman. The year's best albums tended to come from female artists and, unsurprisingly, indie labels, with Seattle-based Sub Pop turning in one of the most creatively rich periods in its acclaimed history.

While listening to every record released in 2011 is literally impossible, the following titles loom large now—and will also in the future. The same cannot be said for the year's most overhyped efforts and colossal disappointments, which should be avoided at all costs.

Happy listening.



## The Best

1. Fucked Up: *David Comes to Life* (Matador)
2. Girls: *Father, Son, Holy Ghost* (True Panther Sounds)
3. The Roots: *Undun* (Def Jam)
4. Le Butcherettes: *Sin Sin Sin* (Rodriguez Lopez)
5. Fleet Foxes: *Helplessness Blues* (Sub Pop)
6. Wild Flag: *Wild Flag* (Merge)
7. Trap Them: *Darker Handcraft* (Prosthetic)
8. Twilight Singers: *Dynamite Steps* (Sub Pop)
9. Dum Dum Girls: *Only In Dreams* (Sub Pop)
10. Wolves in the Throne Room: *Celestial Lineage* (Southern Lord)

## The Rest of the Best

11. The Black Keys: *El Camino* (Nonesuch)
12. Feist: *Metals* (Interscope)
13. Josh T. Pearson: *The Last of the Country Gentlemen* (Mute)
14. PJ Harvey: *Let England Shake* (Island)
15. Lydia Loveless: *Indestructible Machine* (Bloodshot)
16. Pistol Annies: *Hell on Heels* (Sony)
17. Drake: *Take Care* (Cash Money)
18. Tune-Yards: *Who-Kill* (4AD)
19. St. Vincent: *Strange Mercy* (4AD)
20. Zola Jesus: *Conatus* (Sacred Bones)
21. Tom Waits: *Bad As Me* (Anti-)
22. Handsome Furs: *Sound Kapital* (Sub Pop)
23. Das Racist: *Relax* (Greedhead)
24. Danger Mouse and Daniele Luppi: *Rome* (Capitol)
25. The Decemberists: *The King Is Dead* (Capitol)
26. EMA: *Past Life Martyred Saints* (Souterrain Transmissions)
27. Eleventh Dream Day: *Riot Now* (Thrill Jockey)
28. Tombs: *Path of Totality* (Relapse)
29. The War on Drugs: *Slave Ambient* (Secretly Canadian)
30. Craft: *Void* (Southern Lord)

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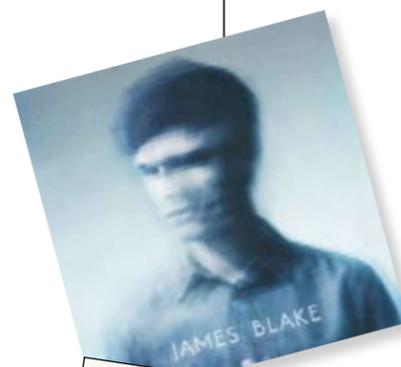
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## Please Go Away: 2011's Most Overhyped Sets

James Blake: *James Blake* (Atlas)  
No amount of floral language or hipster fawning distracts from this album's primary ability: boring listeners to sleep.

Bon Iver: *Bon Iver* (Jagjaguwar)  
Mediocre folk-pop sensitivity that, because of its indie status, gets away with bad 80s adult-contemporary synths and cringe-worthy lyrics.

Real Estate: *Days* (Domino)  
Music doesn't come blander. Snore.

Jay-Z and Kanye West: *Watch the Throne* (Roc-A-Fella)  
A missed opportunity of immense proportions, made worse by the self-serving attitudes of each headliner.

Gang Gang Dance: *Eye Contact* (4AD)  
Ensemble counts a member whose only task is to wave incense. Enough said.



## How Could You: 2011's Worst Disappointments

Coldplay: *Mylo Xyloto* (Capitol)  
Dull, uninspired, uninspiring. How can Brian Eno put his name on this?

Lou Reed and Metallica: *Lulu* (Warner Bros.)  
The pairing sounds bad on paper. But it's much, much worse in execution. Unlistenable, and riddled with lyrics that make the Penthouse Forum seem mature.

Lady Gaga: *Born This Way* (Interscope)  
A rush job that, rather than push any envelopes, tests patience and steals from predecessors like Madonna—and Poison.

Red Hot Chili Peppers: *I'm With You* (Warner Bros.)  
For all their faults, RHCP albums once stuck with you for weeks. You'll forget this one in an instant.

The Strokes: *Angles* (RCA)  
Coulda, shoulda, woulda.





©Photo by Lance Mercer

**P**earl Jam owned the early 1990s. The group smashed records for most first-week sales by a single album, sold-out every concert it booked, and became reluctant role models for a generation hellbent on embracing Seattle-reared rock during a brief period when underground music ascended to mainstream status. Yet the band rebelled against its own success, pushing back with a series of decisions that served to alienate a large contingent of its fan base and almost caused the quintet to implode. Questioned by many at the time, the hard-line stances and anti-commercial behavior seem necessary when viewed in retrospect on the eve of Pearl Jam's 20th anniversary.

In celebration, *vs.* and *Vitalogy*, the two albums written and recorded during the contentious era, have been remastered and reissued with bonus tracks. Available separately, as a lavish 5LP/3CD box replete with memorabilia, or as a superb three-disc set that includes a scorching 1994 live show captured in Boston, the full-length efforts seethe with the frustration, vitriol, duress, pressures, and tension that largely informed their creation. Both are historical snapshots of an unforgettably rich cultural episode as well as classic statements that have lost none of their original luster. Fiercer, more raw and personal than the group's blockbuster debut *Ten*, they remain Pearl Jam's finest hours.

Born out of experiencing an immense rise in stardom that witnessed the band ascend from playing 500-capacity clubs to arenas at Lollapalooza within a span of several months, *vs.* is true to its title and "five against one" refrain on the heel-nipping gallop "Animal." The fenced-in sheep attempting to break free of its confines on the album cover isn't there by sheer coincidence. Boiled down to its core, *vs.* is Pearl against the world, a record that attempts to maintain sanity amidst an environment of hangers-on, leeches, and soul-robbing expectations.

Vocalist Eddie Vedder rages with a level of nerve, passion, and menace that offsets the few hints of self-righteousness and narcissism. Slash-and-burn riffs ("Go"), locked-down grooves ("Rearviewmirror"), and snarling funk motifs ("Rats") up the energy quotient. Lyrically, the group puts a handful of common targets—gun violence, corrupt law enforcement, slimy politicians, clueless pundits—in its crosshairs but also turns out a pair of sensitive acoustic tunes (the haunting "Daughter," the heartwarming "Elderly Woman Behind the Counter In a Small Town") that foreshadow the stylistic expansion that blossomed on *Vitalogy* and beyond. And with the closing ballad "Indifference," Vedder and Co. sound an alarm on par with that of Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind."



### Pearl Jam

*vs.* and *Vitalogy: Deluxe Edition*

Epic/Legacy, Deluxe Edition 3CD or Deluxe Edition 5LP + 3CD Box Set; also available as individual CD or 2LP Sets

Soon after *vs.* topped the charts, Pearl Jam retreated and began attracting more attention for its oppositional methods. Having already refused to shoot videos, the ensemble withdrew from interviews and started a direct-to-audience approach that it maintains today. Pearl Jam also took on Ticketmaster, ultimately canceling an entire tour in protest of the monopoly's policies while also refusing to perform at venues associated with the company. Nirvana leader Kurt Cobain's April 1994 suicide further thrust Vedder into the limelight as spokesperson—a position he detested more than the contradictory Cobain who, years prior, blasted Pearl Jam for advancing a corporate agenda. Internal band strife also prompted the dismissal of drummer Dave Abbruzzese. (*continued*)

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— Michael Fremer, *Stereophile* (January 2011)



Pulsar Phono Stage

*Vitalogy* reacts and responds to these circumstances.

Not surprisingly, the 14-song set is rife with savage rhythms, dark sentiments, and caustic vibes. The stripped-back production—exposed to even barer regard on the reissue—clearly conveys the group's unyielding attitude and walk-and-talk-it conviction. Save for “Spin the Black Circle,” an homage to vinyl, and the accordion-accompanied fun goof of “Bugs,” the album bares its collective teeth via Stone Gossard and Mike McCready's increasingly defiant guitar interplay, Vedder's possessed singing, and a broadened songwriting palette. The momentum-building lament “Betterman” perfectly unites an unforgettable melody with universally understood emotions; “Not For You” endures, along with Mudhoney's “Overblown,” as the most eloquent and merciless condemnation of the mainstream's dalliance with the Seattle scene; “Nothingman” and “Immortality” seize quiet textures and introspective poetry to transcendent effect.

Songs from both records, along with four deep cuts from *Ten*, a cult-favorite B-side, and two covers comprise *Live at the Orpheum Theater, Boston, April 12, 1994*. A widely sought-after bootleg, it now takes its place as one of the great live records, a forceful portrait of a band creating its own identity and strengthening its bond, throwing itself into a fire and emerging the better for having done so. Vedder, then prone to scale venue scaffoldings and beat microphone stands into floors, won't be denied. At times, he gives the impression of a man about to explode, calling out the crowd and detractors like a fighter willing to take on any challenger. Versions of Rocket from the Tombs' “Sonic Reducer” (with Mudhoney's Mark Arm) and Neil Young's “Fuckin' Up” act as sharp lances to the senses; “Release” and “Oceans” function as cathartic escapes.



©Photo by Lance Mercer

Despite the strength of the other bonus material—an acoustic rendition of “Hold On,” a previously unreleased organ/guitar-only mix of “Betterman”—on the reissues, there's no substitute for hearing a phenomenal band onstage precisely at its coming-of-age moment. With *vs.* and *Vitalogy* as bookends, the Boston concert serves as the exclamation mark on a crucial point in time that both America and the music world have yet to see equaled.  
—Bob Gendron

# Gregg Allman

## Soul Survivor

By Jaan Uhelszki

**G**regg Allman never planned on becoming one of America's most recognizable white blues singers. In fact, in the early days of his career, it was his brother Duane who did the singing in the Allman Joys, one of the first incarnations of the bands that the brothers put together prior to founding the Allman Brothers Band.

"I don't think I really grew into my voice until I turned 50," claims the 62-year-old icon, speaking by phone from his home in Savannah, Georgia while preparing to release his first solo album in 14 years. "I've always been my worst critic and would tell myself that I sound like a million other people at once. But then one day I woke up and said, 'Well, by God I do have a style all my own.'"

© Photo by Danny Clinch



Of course, many consider Gregg Allman's most significant contribution to rock's historical record is his role as the lead singer, organist, and principle songwriter for the archetypal Southern band founded by his older brother Duane in 1969. Yet the younger Allman had a parallel career as a solo artist almost from the onset of the Allman Brothers, an outfit that proved its mettle with an organic synthesis of blues, jazz, folk, rock, and country influences—and the exquisite dual guitar interplay between Duane and Dickie Betts, a tandem that got so heated on some nights that a listener couldn't tell where one musician started and the other left off.

Ironically, it was because of these very strengths that one of the band's most obvious gifts—Gregg Allman's languid blues pacing and mournful growl—was often overshadowed. Allman's solo work gave him the recognition that he sorely deserved.

"I started thinking about my solo album long before there even was an Allman Brother Band," he remembers. "A lot of the songs I'd written just weren't right for the group. I took one of the songs I wrote to the band and they didn't care for it. It was 'Queen of Hearts.'"

That winsome love song to his former wife became the cornerstone of a solo career that produced seven solo albums over the next four decades. Hardly a prolific output, but if Allman is anything, he's careful with his words. A recurring theme in many of his earlier songs is the thundering sound of silence, and his quiet resolve to communicate in spite of it.

"I was so anesthetized for so long. I just wanted to be away from it, but I wanted to *still* be there. Check in on reality, but to do that, you get loaded. A lot of people have great losses. "I didn't do the best I think I could've done." *(continued)*



© Photo by Jeff Dorgay

Allman realized he finally had to clean up when, at the Allman Brothers Band's induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1995, Willie Nelson came up to him and asked if he was all right.

"No. I am not all right', I told him," Allman recalls. "I think it had something to do with the vodka bottle sitting next to me. I was off dope, but I was a mess. I never believed in God until this point, but I asked him to bring me out of this or let me die before all the innings have been played. I just wish we could redo it that night. You know, let me have another crack at that acceptance speech."

Allman's life became further complicated when he learned he needed a liver transplant, brought on by the complications of Hepatitis C. The singer received a new liver last July. Before the operation, he recorded his first album since 1997, *Low Country Blues*, with Grammy-winning producer T-Bone Burnett. All but one of the songs on the record is a cover. Yet the way Allman inhabits them, you'd think that he wrote every single one.

"I did think about mortality quite a bit when I was recording. It certainly affected my song choice. But oddly enough, I was not worried. I felt protected. Plus, the doctors are such masters at doing this [operation] now, I wasn't scared."

**JU:** *When do you know when it's time to record a solo album? Do songs keep forcing their way into your psyche, or does pressure just seem to build up?*

**GA:** A lot of these poor slobbs have a contract that calls for a certain amount [of albums] every certain amount of years. Of course, those ways are pretty much dying out. But it's just like you said. All of a sudden, it starts eating at you a little bit and it comes and goes. Then two, three more years pass and you feel, "Hey, boy, it's time." Those feelings won't go away, like unfriendly ghosts. You say to yourself, "What is it that I do, except travel around the freaking world busting my ass playing songs?" Then, on the other hand, you'll get a bunch of feelings like, "Gosh, I wish we played some new songs." Then, all of a sudden, you kind of have this epiphany: "Oh, I get it, it's time to record."

*On Low Country Blues, except for one song you wrote with Warren Haynes, you play all covers. That's a first. How do you inhabit other people's songs? How do you know what to cover?*

Well, you have a real connection with the song, and of course you have quite a yen for it, and you know immediately what you want to do with it. If you don't, you shouldn't cover it. Songwriting is such a vague damn subject. The song's there and it's not there, you know? It can go in any given second.

*You teamed with T-Bone Burnett, who has thousands of songs stored on his computer. He said he went through them and chose some for you to sort through. Was that an efficient way to work, with T-Bone doing the heavy lifting of whittling down the songs for you?*

Heavy lifting? The heavy lifting was trying to make something out of that damn thing that he sent me because there were things like old Billie Holiday songs. You could hear scratches and crackles on the old 78s that I trudged through. Plus, I didn't know it was coming to me digitally. It was tiring to go through all of that.

*You start the record off with "Floating Bridge," told from the perspective of a man drowning.*

That's a good song. That's the first one we cut, and I think it was one of the ones we did it in just one take. First takes just scare the hell out of me. I went out to LA and had just had met the guys I was going to record with. Well, I already knew a couple of 'em. But I got out there and I say, "All right guys, let's run this first one through."

They had already heard the same tired versions of this song that I had, so I wanted to just rehearse it to see what's happening with all of us together. As we ran it down I was thinking, "Man, this sounds good." You can tell right away when the musicians meld and when they don't. And they really did; it was just uncanny. We got through the song and I asked, "How's it sound in there, T-Bone?" "Come on in and hear for yourself," he says. I thought he was kidding, right? So I said, "Turn on the red light and let's take one." "No, you're finished. You've already got it," T-Bone says. "Wait a minute, man. Half of us don't even know the son of a bitch yet," I replied. He'd recorded it, and that's what you hear on the record.

*That's a Sleepy John Estes tune. For being so young, you and Duane always had sophisticated musical tastes.*

There used to be this radio station called WLAC that was in Gallatin, Tennessee that we'd listen to at night—that was the only time you could get it. They would play Howling Wolf and Little Walter and Sleepy John Estes and Magic Sam, Muddy Waters, and Bobby Bland. Everybody that today I just really revel. I was 17 years old, we were on the chitlin' circuit, playing all these funky little clubs. We had to play Beatles songs just to be able to stay in the clubs. Because if you didn't play so many Top 40 and so many Beatles songs, they'd say "You can you hit the bricks." So we did, but then on the side, my brother and I would play the blues. We had so much energy back then. We worked six nights a week and rehearsed in the afternoon. So this album [is about] the songs that I couldn't play in the clubs back then. *(continued)*

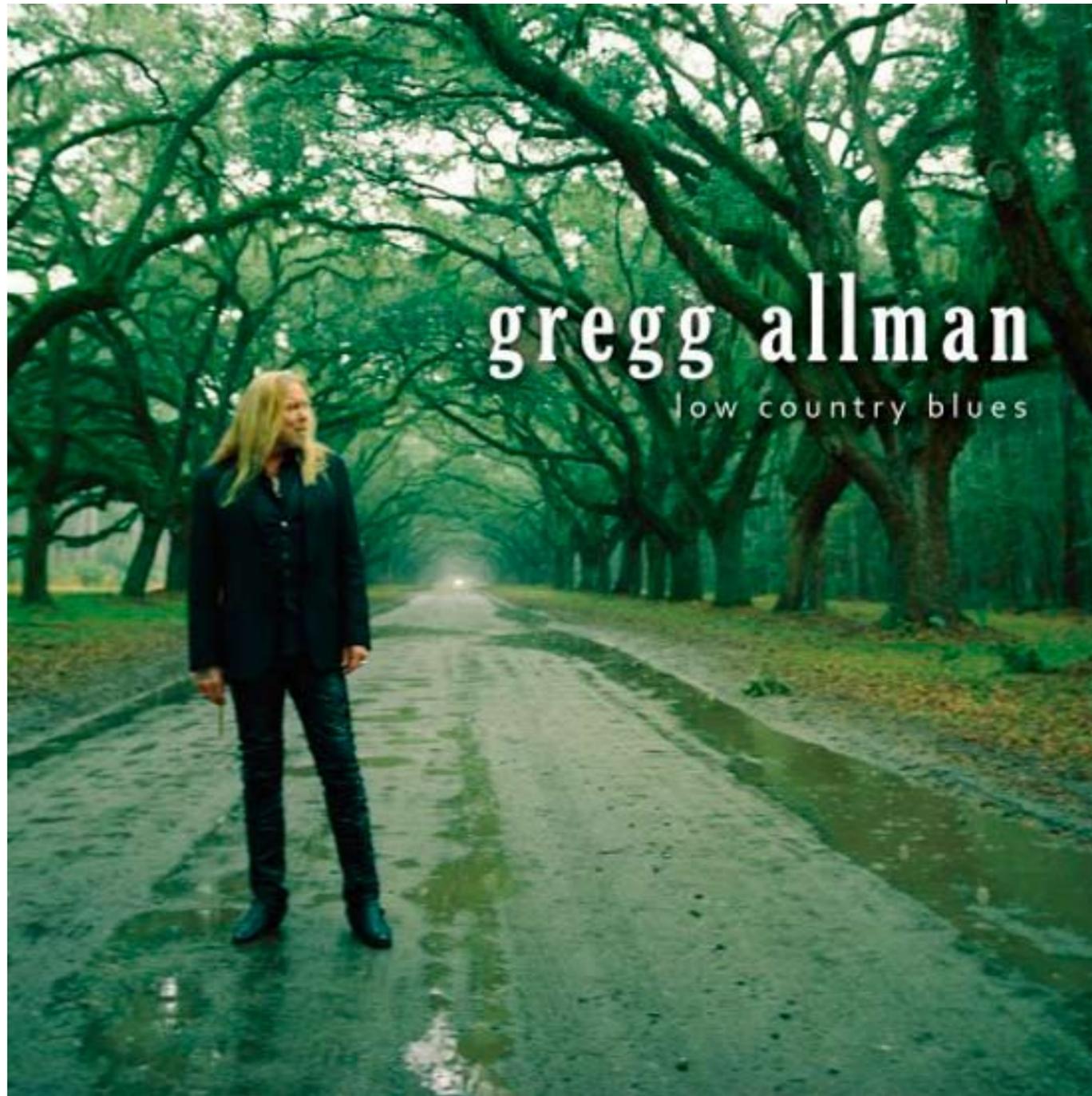
**I was thinking, "Man, this sounds good." You can tell right away when the musicians meld and when they don't. And they really did; it was just uncanny.**

*The last producer you worked with was Tom Dowd. After he died, how did you choose somebody to work with? How did you know T-Bone was the right guy?*

He listened to WLAC. When Dowd died in 2002, I thought, man, what in the hell are we going to do now? I guess we've had it, there's no way we're going to record. I thought Michael Barbiero was an okay producer but he didn't have that "thing," like he knew what you were thinking. And with the Bone, man, he was just right there. Then, if he'd get hung up on something, I would free him loose, and vice versa.

*Your brother's spirit looms on this album. Do you think history has accurately represented him?*

Boy, I really think it has. I think for what he did, and for the length of time he did it, and as genius as it was, he made a big footprint. I would venture to say that had it been me instead of him, there wouldn't have been too many ripples in the water. No, I mean I think he's real, real happy with me that I kept on going, and I owe a lot of it to him and I feel a lot of him coming through me. I have this psychic friend that lives near me. She said that when I first met her I hated her guts because she said, "You know, your brother comes around all the time. He's always around you, can't you feel him?" And I was just like, "Who in the fuck do you think you are?" You know, telling me that even after so many years, you know, that I've longed for my brother and all that. She said he takes the form of a little bird. He wakes me up every morning. That little bird comes to my window every single morning of my life." ●



**Gregg Allman**  
*Low Country Blues*  
Rounder, CD and LP

Very rarely is a covers album as revelatory as Gregg Allman's *Low Country Blues*. Always very taciturn in both his songs and his speech, Allman conveys his pain, thwarted romances, and fear of dying perhaps better in these forgotten post-war numbers than in songs he's written for the Allman Brothers. There, he is usually more stoic, remote, and just plain cool.

On his seventh solo album, he is anything but. While Allman is an underrated and skilled interpreter of other people's work (think of the regret and surrender he infuses into his version of Jackson Brown's "These Days" from 1973's *Laid Back*), much of the credit for the material here goes to Oscar-winning producer T-Bone Burnett. He poured through his 3000-song library of vintage blues numbers to come up with 20 lesser-known tunes from some of the great blues, country, and R&B writers—including Skip James, B.B. King, Magic Sam, Otis Rush—for Allman to peruse, much like he did with Robert Plant and Alison Krauss for 2007's *Raising Sand*. The similarities carry over to the exquisite results.

The material simultaneously pushes Allman to new emotional heights and lows. Why? The organizing properties surrounding Allman's song choices seem to be centered around heartbreak, betrayal, and a flickering hope of reconciliation—themes that echo his recent divorce and allow him to purge some of the hurt, enflame some of the optimism, and outrun some of his demons, his seen-it-all voice cracking in recognition and harrowing psychic pain in ways it rarely did before.

On Sleepy John Estes' "Floating Bridge," Allman anticipates his own mortality in a manner he probably never anticipated. Sung from the viewpoint of a man who has just drowned, the gothic song foreshadowed Allman's critical liver transplant surgery that he underwent just one month after the recording sessions ended. His singing is spectral, haunted—much more so than Estes would ever likely have imagined.

In addition to 11 covers, Allman included one original, "Just Another Rider," penned with fellow Allman Brothers guitarist Warren Haynes. A breath of fresh air among these well-presented antiques, the tune isn't out of place, the subject matter of betrayal, resignation, and the specter of an old-fashioned blood feud right at home in this swampy low country.

—**Jaan Uhelszki**



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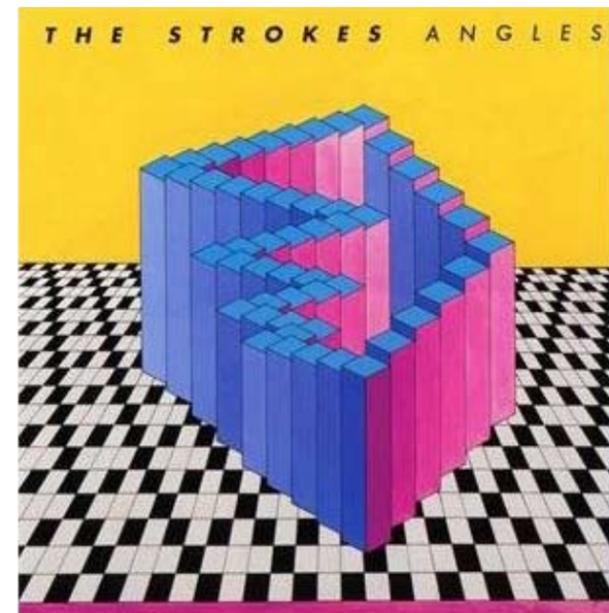


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## MUSIC



**The Strokes**  
*Angles*  
RCA, CD or LP

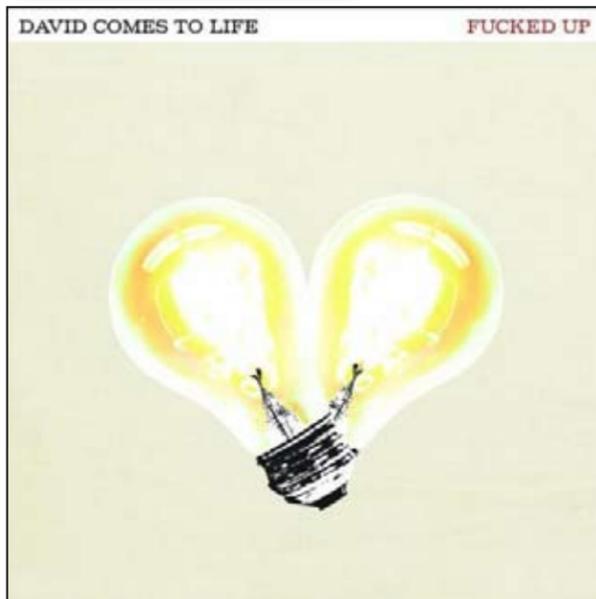
**A**t this point in their career, the members of the Strokes are more like business partners than bandmates. The New York City quintet first burst onto the scene in the fall of 2001 with an album (*Is This It*) and a look (black leather, torn denim, and finger-combed hair) that exuded Lower East Side cool. Frontman Julian Casablancas sang like he'd been weaned solely on old Lou Reed records; guitarists Nick Valensi and Albert Hammond, Jr. traded frantic staccato riffs that sounded like the Yardbirds loosely reinterpreting Chuck Berry. In the years that followed, the crew struggled to recapture the magic of that debut before finally going their separate ways in 2007.

In the ensuing downtime, band members pursued side projects with varying degrees of success—drummer Fabrizio Moretti, he of the cartoonishly Italian name, released the best album of the bunch with his side project Little Joy, easily topping solo turns by Casablancas and Hammond—before regrouping for a series of celebrated festival shows last summer.

Alas, the band's fourth album, *Angles*, proves unable to maintain the momentum of those comeback gigs. Indeed, it often sounds as though the musicians have struck an uneasy alliance. While the ensemble was the equivalent of five fingers on a fist with *Is This It*, here, it often seems like old friends struggling to figure out what it once was that they shared in common. How else to explain synthetic new-wave throwaways like "Metabolism" and the Thin Lizzy-lite of "Gratification"?

Part of the disconnect might actually stem from a writing process that saw all five making contributions and Casablancas finally relaxing his Gaddafi-like control on the group. Without a defined ringleader, the Strokes are free to follow their whims, pursuing reggae-tinged rock ("Machu Picchu"), new wave ("Two Kinds of Happiness"), and robo-funk ("You're So Right"). Casablancas and Co. even make a stab at recapturing the spirit of their debut with the urgent "Under Cover of Darkness," which borrows a vocal melody from U2's "Angel of Harlem" and molds its call-and-response guitar on their own early hit "Last Night."

As a singer, Casablancas still delivers nearly every line with a slouch. "I don't know why I came down," he sings on "Call Me Back," his voice echoing the disinterest in the words. The ever-detached frontman could just as easily be speaking for his mates. Too often, *Angles* sounds less like a product of true inspiration than a marriage borne of convenience. —**Andy Downing**

**Fucked Up**

*David Comes to Life*  
Matador, CD or 2LP

**D**amian Abraham's intense, throaty voice has emerged as one of the most riveting instruments in music. His robust pipes are a human bullhorn, his volatile chords seemingly bulging on steroids—each blustery syllable emanating from the stout frontman's mouth coming across like the barked orders of an iron-lunged drill sergeant. Of course, Abraham doesn't sing in the traditional manner. He growls, yowls, huffs, rants, and bellows, the gruff timbre an inherent charm, the violent outpouring sonic flares that indicate his band isn't putting on any pretense.

And so it is with *David Comes to Life*, Fucked Up's latest and most ambitious rule-violating statement to date. A rock opera, the 78-minute-plus set is at once sweeping, grand, determined, confusing, heady, brawling, sprawling, confounding, and often brilliant. Experienced start-to-finish, it leaves bruises and threatens to wear out the listener with a panoply of characters, plots, changes, and breathless urgency. The Toronto collective's triple-guitar attack allows the band to whip songs into frenzies, drop clusters of counterpoint fills and leads, and slam tempos against the wall, building up heads of steam that charge ahead with reckless abandon. Riffs alternately slash and burn ("Serve Me Right"), race into the stratosphere ("Queen of Hearts"), hit with balled-fist force ("Inside A Frame"), and buck akin to an untamed bull busting out of the gate at a rodeo ("Remember My Name").

Such controlled variation and tonal differentiation underscore the foundation of an album bent on upending expectations and shattering preconceived notions. Fucked Up has operated outside boundaries for its entire ten-year existence; take a look at the group's name, which isn't for showy effect. Ostensibly a hardcore band, the sextet long ago blew away the limiting stylistic trappings associated with the genre, imbibing in everything from extremely lengthy jams to flute-driven passages on EPs, seven-inch singles, and two prior LPs that provoke both musically and lyrically. *David Comes to Life* is certain to invite the typical blowback associated with taking risks, the empty sort that accuses a group of selling out and betraying the sensibility of true punk. The quantity and quality of the melodies, catchiness of the anthemic hooks, tuneful stomps, and highly professional multi-tracked production veritably invite it. Underground credibility and coolness aside, few bands are currently making more meaningful, cerebral, or invigorating noise.

Like most concept efforts, *David Comes to Life* revels in complexity. The four-act narrative's principal characters include David, a lightbulb-factory worker; Veronica, his love; Vivian, the proverbial "lady in the lake"; and Octavio, the story's appointed narrator who also figures into the plot.



© Photo by Daniel Boud

The latter, which involves myriad twists and turns—and demands a close reading of the lyrics—unfolds as a tale about loneliness, love, fleeting happiness, despair, defeat, and, ultimately, redemption and hope. Abraham handles the male protagonists and gets assistance from the Cults' Madeline Follin and several other participants to play the female roles. While intermittent, these softer, gentler, calming voices offer a welcome contrast to Abraham's masculine roar, lending a floating atmospheric element to a record that has just about everything.

Indeed, the 18-track double-album occasionally tries to do too much. Yet for all its flaws, most minor, Fucked Up's colossal album consistently engages with aggregate arrangements, bigger-than-life personality, piercing one-liners, and ferocious energy. "When he raises the trumpet to his mouth," Abraham thunders on "A Slanted Tone," before proclaiming "he tells the choir when to sing," the paint-peeling song's centrifugal spin fueling its bull-in-a-china-shop aggression. Similarly, "Under My Nose" refuses

to let up, glimmering as the group's momentum somersaults forward. Not all is rip and tear.

Structured choral maneuvers trigger an avalanche of drama on "Turn the Season." Abraham's impassioned tones—his theatrical performances convey fluctuating emotions in the same manner an actor's diction expresses a character's physiological state—project pained conditions on the crunchy "Truth I Know," abetted with glossy pop refrains and ringing treble guitar notes that conjure sympathy. High-voltage blues provides a platform for rhymed couplets and metaphorical pronouncements on the boogie-based "Ship of Fools," while psychedelic effects send "I Was There" spiraling into the cosmos. Aptly, the song opens the Fourth Act, at which point the protagonist begins to find enlightenment.

Concluding their chronological progression and emotional journey with "Lights Go Up," Abraham and company exit with upbeat swagger, dancing not to the end of days but to the rebirth of love and life. —**Bob Gendron**

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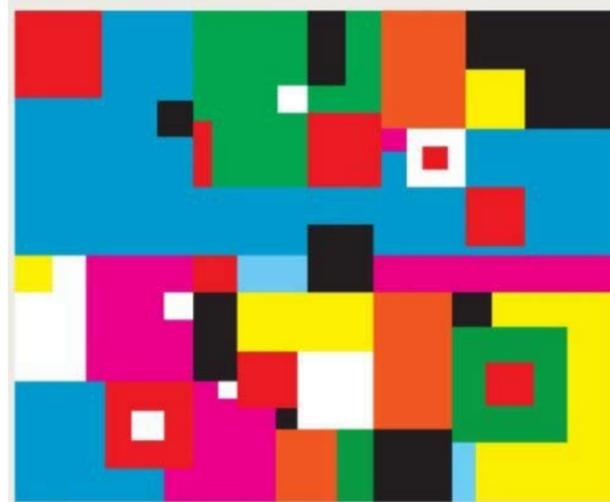
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### BEASTIEBOYS HOTSAUCECOMMITTEEPARTTWO



#### Beastie Boys

*Hot Sauce Committee Part Two*  
Capitol, CD or 2LP

**D**espite sitting comfortably in middle age—the hip-hop trio’s youngest member, Adam “Ad-Roc” Horovitz, is now 44—the Beastie Boys rip into their first album in seven years as if only a few short months have passed since the crew released the now-classic *Ill Communication*, which turns 20 in just three short years.

Delayed nearly 18 months while the now-fully-recovered Adam “MCA” Yauch underwent treatment for salivary-gland cancer (“How you feeling MCA? Well I feel alright” he rhymes on the robotic “Nonstop Disco Powerpack”), the record finds the long-

time mates still embracing their hip-hop “Three Stooges” personas—from the increasingly gruff MCA (Moe) to the goofball rhymes of class clown Michael “Mike D” Diamond (Curly), who playfully compares himself to a Jewish Brad Pitt on “Long Burn the Fire.”

But even though some of the Beasties’ lyrical references sound like mid-90s holdovers (“Be kind, rewind”; “Like a Big Mac attack on your gut”; “I’ll make you sick like a Kenny Rogers Roaster”), the music consistently points forward. The MCs rhyme atop punkish, Ramones-via-Run-DMC backdrops (“Lee Majors Come Again”), steel drum-flecked Caribbean grooves (the Santi-gold-guesting “Don’t Play No Game That I Can’t Win”), and rumbling digital passages that sound something like Transformers breakdancing (album standout “Too Many Rappers,” which finds guest rapper Nas dropping his best verse in years). “Nonstop Disco Powerpack,” a song whose title sounds like it was translated from Japanese (“Happy America Disco Baseball!”), flashes even further into the future, the rappers’ voices breaking and digitizing like humanoids reverting back to robot form.

As one might expect, the Beastie Boys have greatly matured since breaking through with “(You Gotta) Fight for Your Right (To Party!)” back in the mid-80s. Offstage, the trio is

known for trumpeting political causes—countless urban hippies adorn their Prius bumpers with “Free Tibet” stickers due to the Beasties’ persistence. And in recent years, the group has tried to put some distance between it and some of its more hooligan-ish early tunes. No longer does anyone get lyrically sodomized with a Wiffle Ball bat in live performances of “Paul Revere.”

Fortunately, *Hot Sauce Committee Part Two* doesn’t fall prey to any middle-aged tisk-tisking. Instead, the three pass the mic like old-school MCs, trading playful boasts (on competing rappers: “I put ‘em through a strainer like macaroni, ‘cause the shit sounds cheesy!”) and weaving together an increasingly dense web of pop-culture references (Wolf Blitzer holograms, Operation, Crocs, Bob Dylan’s “Subterranean Homesick Blues”). Besides, how deep can things really get on an album with song titles like “Funky Donkey” and “Crazy Ass Shit?” Thankfully, when it comes to the music, the Beasties are still more about getting bodies moving than trying to expand minds. —Andy Downing



© Photo by Sean Pecknold

“So now I’m older,” confesses Fleet Foxes leader Robin Pecknold on “Montezuma,” opening the band’s anticipated sophomore record with a sentiment that largely informs the intelligently crafted, complexly arranged, and gorgeously executed album. Indeed, feelings and realities of being older seemingly consume the sweet-timbered singer-songwriter, who uses *Helplessness Blues* as a platform for soul-searching, questioning personal identity, reflecting on life purposes, and contemplating existence.

Artists have long ruminated on these weighty matters, but one of the myriad reasons that make Fleet Foxes unique is that at no point does the group invoke self-pity, resort to cloying earnestness, or complain about fame as it raises deep questions that often yield no resolute answers.

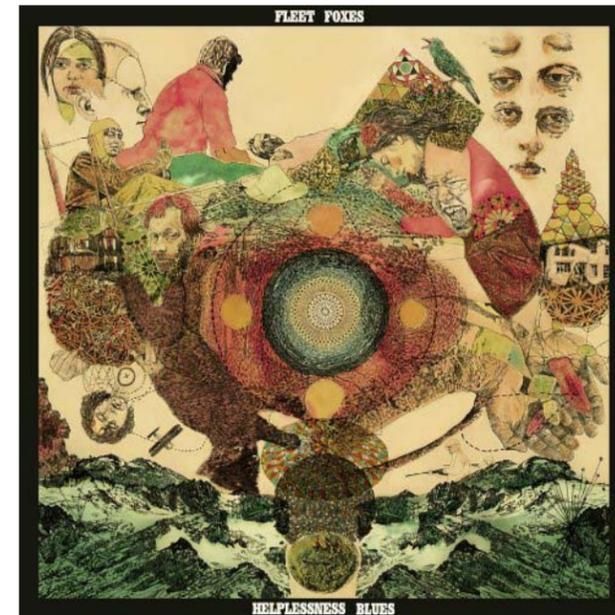
If the Seattle sextet had any detractors after releasing a 2008 full-length debut that landed on most critics’ Top Ten lists and staging shows that proved its natural harmonizing absolutely ethereal in scope, its latest creation should elevate the band to household-name status. Such is the spectral beauty, cohesive chemistry, and golden-hued ambition contained within.

Whether referred to as roots-rock, folk-rock, or the hipster-coined beardo-rock, the last several years have witnessed an inundation of bucolic music performed by bands that yearn for passed times and bygone environments. Mumford and Sons, Dawes, The Head and the Heart, and Blitzen Trapper are among the acts whose rustic fare evokes simpler times and pastoral pleasures while offering needed relief from a technology-dominant culture that’s far removed from the tranquil, down-home rootsiness conjured by

acoustic instruments and easygoing singing. Fleet Foxes stand apart from their contemporaries and followers due to a basic fact: As demonstrated on this filler-free 12-song set, they are plainly superior, deeper, and more soulful than their peers. It’s a truth borne out every year in professional sports. Championship-winning teams claim immense talent and advanced skill sets. For all its romanticism, sheer will only takes you so far.

Whereas the band’s influences shone brightly on its debut, they recede further into the background on *Helplessness Blues*. Shades of Simon & Garfunkel, Crosby, Stills & Nash, and the Incredible String Band give way to a mix that’s more original, involved, and modern. Fleet Foxes occupy an indefinable territory that both bridges and honors the Laurel Canyon past while taking the former period’s earthy, intricate, and natural elements into a present that delves further into go-for-broke blends of gospel, baroque, Americana, rock, psychedelic, and, on “The Shrine/An Argument,” even avant-garde jazz strains. The amount of time and care the group invested in its craft will be immediately evident to even the most casual listener; more than a year in the making, and captured at multiple studios, *Helplessness Blues* comes on like record on which every note is carefully considered but never overly polished or overwrought. It’s a difficult line to navigate, and yet, Fleet Foxes and co-producer Phil Ek convert their Swiss-wristwatch-precise obsessiveness into transcendent art.

“So, guess I got old,” vocally shrugs Pecknold on “Lorelai,” continuing to explore a topic that



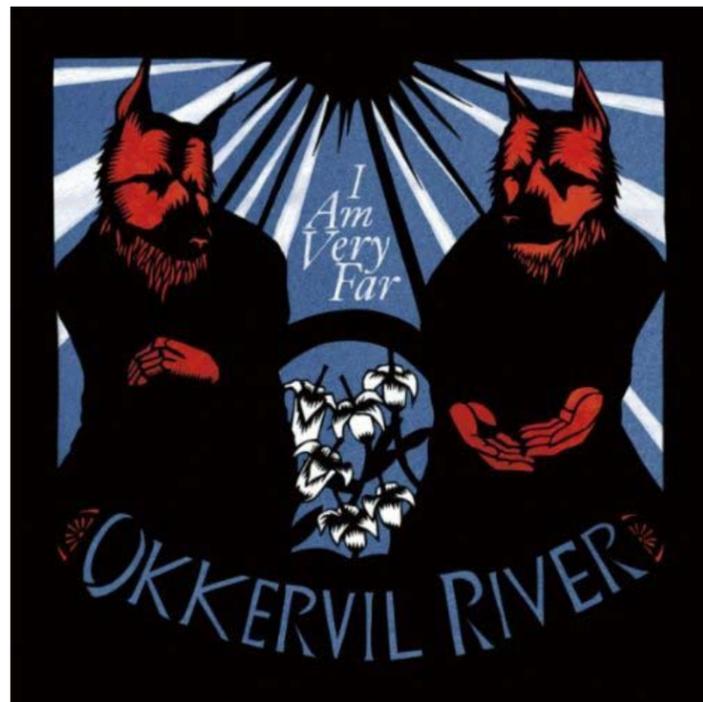
**Fleet Foxes**  
*Helplessness Blues*  
Sub Pop, CD and 2LP

occupies him from the start and stays with him until the concluding “Grown Ocean,” a stomping upbeat tune that reveals glimpses of unvarnished optimism and finds him declaring “I’m as old as the mountains.” Amidst the group’s arching heaven-bound harmonies, delicate finger-picking, booming drums, and majestic melodies, Pecknold engages in blunt self-evaluation, his confessional meditations on uncertainty, withdrawal, and responsibility contributing to an ebb-and-flow of swelling choral tides and three-dimensional textures. Songs pour into diverse structural molds, ranging from suites (“The Plains/Bitter Dancer,” which commences with layered vocals that sound plucked from the heights of an European cathedral ceiling and unexpectedly transitions, via flute passages, into an uptempo romp) to concise, close-up, solitary hymnals (“Blue Spotted Tail”).

Purity maintains as important a role as needle-pointed guitar motifs

and immediate, wide-open production. Slight pauses, reverb baths, and ornate flourishes don’t decorate as much as flavor and reinforce existing patterns. Such detailing enhances the woody percussion and gypsy sway on “Bedouin Dress,” underscores the dips and dives in Pecknold’s vocals during “Someone You’d Admire,” and allows “Sim Sala Bim” to emerge with equal parts orchestral flair and private abandon. And it’s the latter—as experienced through Pecknold and Co.’s aspirations, hallucinations, desires, and innermost thoughts—that spikes *Helplessness Blues* with the mystical intensity and engaging hypnotism of a fever dream.

“All these voices I’ll someday have turned off then/And I will see you when I’ve woken/I’ll be so happy just to have spoken/I’ll have so much to tell you about it then,” Pecknold tenders towards the conclusion of “Grown Ocean,” singing like a drifter in no rush to awaken from his sleep. —**Bob Gendron**



**Okkervil River**  
*I Am Very Far*  
 Jagjaguwar, CD or LP

**O**kkervil River and its lit-prof-looking frontman Will Sheff have never lacked for ambition. So while contemporaries like the Decemberists have started to reign things in, the Austin-based crew drifts even further from its NPR-approved roots on its sixth full-length, *I Am Very Far*, a weary, ambiguous, dense, refined, and fragmented epic of an album.

At times during recording, Sheff amassed a small army of musicians in the studio, gathering two drummers, two pianists, two bassists, and seven guitarists. The immersive effect can be heard on sprawling cuts like “Wake and Be Fine,” which gradually builds to an orchestral swell even as it threatens to come apart at the seams.

Musically, the album finds Okkervil River marrying a range of pretty sounds (sweeping string sections, glassine piano, deep-breathing tuba) to more rustic, potentially ugly flourishes. The drums on “The Valley,” for one, rumble in like a cavalcade of beefy men keeping a beat on thick oak tables in some ancient beer hall. Equally jarring is a squealing, fractured solo that interrupts “Piratess,” a spindly sound the band created by rewinding and fast-forwarding a boombox. On “White Shadow Waltz,” all such aspects surface at once, a string section sweeping through in a graceful waltz as drums stutter and trip, clipping toes as they fumble their way through the dancehall.

In the past, Sheff specialized in plot-driven tunes, turning out eulogies to deceased porn stars (“Savannah Smiles,” written for Shannon “Savannah” Wilsey) and spinning detail-rich, noir-ish tales that unfolded like would-be film scenes (“Our Life Is Not A Movie Or Maybe”). This time around, things are far more obscure. Rather than being built into a coherent narrative, Sheff’s elusive lyrics flash by like images from a horrific slideshow: blue skies the shade of “a dead bachelor’s tongue,” a child’s toy as red as “flayed pigs,” bloody black gunshot wounds.

Perhaps working with psych-rock pioneer Roky Erickson—Sheff produced Erickson’s excellent comeback album *True Love Cast Out All Evil*—ferreted out the once-linear singer’s inner Dali. But even amidst the surreal nightmarish flood, unexpectedly refined bits of wisdom rise from the murk. “We’re cut adrift,” Sheff announces in his unsteady, love-it-or-hate-it bray on “We Need A Myth.” “We need a mass uplift.” Set alongside the singer’s most cryptic utterings (“It’s just nine hands wiping a white shadow off of the walls,” he exhales on the dark fairy tale “White Shadow Waltz”), the lyrical couplet stands out like a torch on the midnight horizon—a prescient assessment of our disconnected, doldrums-driven modern age.

—**Andy Downing**



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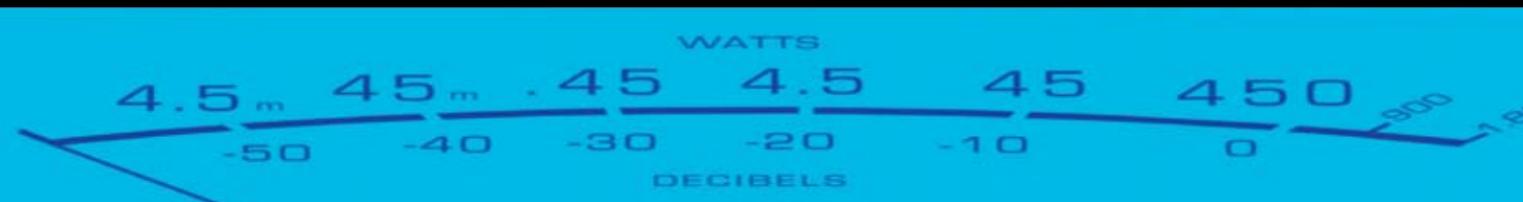
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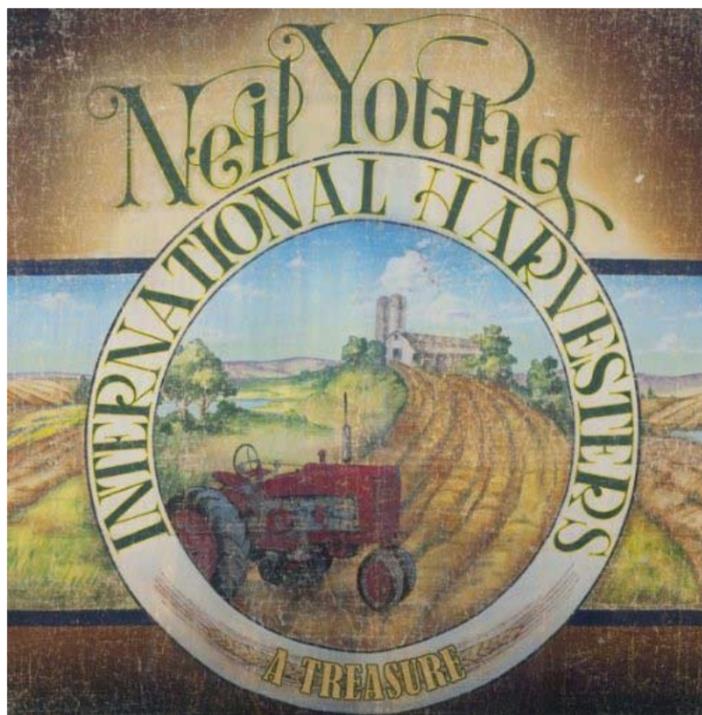
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The newest volume in Young's ongoing Archive Performance Series, and a truly inspired choice, *A Treasure* finally brings to light a dozen sparkling performances from the ensemble's 1984-85 trek, including five often-bootlegged albeit previously unreleased songs.



### Neil Young

*A Treasure*

Reprise/Warner Bros., 180g 2LP, CD, or Blu-ray/CD

**N**eil Young initially asked “Are you ready for the country?” on 1972’s legendary *Harvest*. But the idiosyncratic singer didn’t fully put his money where his mouth was until more than a decade later when he hit the road with the International Harvesters, a crack band comprised of country music pros.

At the time, Young achieved infamy for becoming the first artist to be sued by his record company, an action that served only to spur more of his stubbornness and eclecticism. Young ultimately conquered over Geffen’s commercial will, and in 1985, issued *Old Ways*, a roots-flavored set featuring Waylon Jennings, cowboy tunes, and an intentional down-home feel. Despite the presence of a few minor classics, the album hasn’t aged well and feels sterile. It comes nowhere close to capturing the loose vibe, go-for-broke cohesion, and contagious energy that Young attained with his International Harvester pals on the preceding tour.

The newest volume in Young’s ongoing Archive Performance Series, and a truly inspired choice, *A Treasure* finally brings to light a dozen sparkling performances from the ensemble’s 1984-85 trek, including five often-bootlegged albeit previously unreleased songs. The tour also benefited from excellent behind-the-stage help, as Larry Cragg took charge of instruments and Tim Foster ran operations. As a result, the sound quality of the dozen tracks—recorded at eight different locales, presented in chronological order, and mixed and mastered by Tim Mulligan—is among the finest of Young’s archival releases. Despite the wide-open, airy, transparent, and lively sonics, the music is even better.

Named after recently departed co-producer and long-time Young foil Ben Keith’s statement upon hearing the material, *A Treasure* is the first Young album on which the leader is at times clearly overshadowed by his band. Young doesn’t ever seem ruffled by the prospect. With Keith manning pedal-steel and slide guitars, Rufus Thibodeaux scarping the fiddle, Spooner Oldham and Hargus “Pig” Robbins tickling the piano, Tim Drummond and Joe Allen plucking bass, and Karl Himmel manning the drums, along with various other contributors, Young is free to dig deep into traditional country

elements and their accompanying hayride tones. The manners in which the collective communicate with and complement one another with fills, chords, and solos recall the Grand Ole Opry’s heyday. Nothing is overplayed or overdone. There’s no star-making or showy competition; everyone does what’s best for the material.

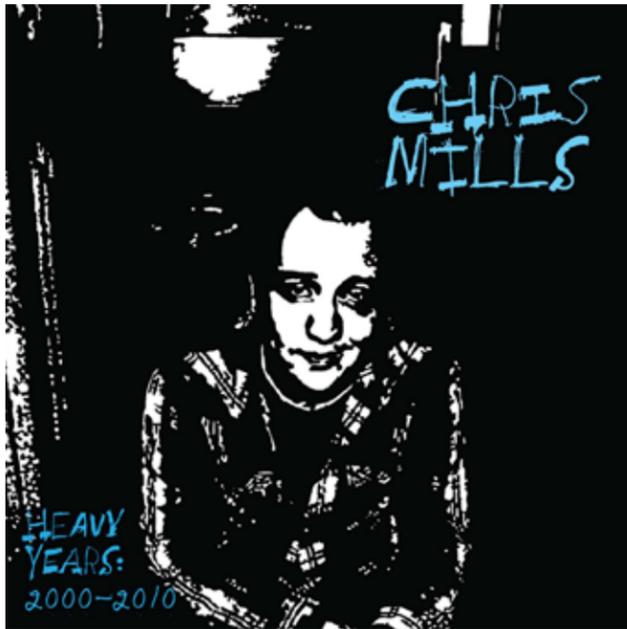
Far from taking a passing interest, or trotting out a novelty, Young fully immerses himself in the barn-dance moods and atmospheres, giving his nasal timbre more drawl than usual and remaining relaxed throughout. He and the Harvesters have fun with slippery, greasy jamborees (“Are You Ready for the Country?”), interstate fare (“Bound for Glory”), square-dancing shuffles (“Let Your Fingers Do the Walking”), melancholic laments (“It Might Have Been”), and punk-fueled bluegrass rejoinders (“Get Back to the Country”). Thematically, verses that speak of the days of covered wagons, cruising down the Trans-Canada Highway, and broken hearts seeking good times perfectly meld with the swirling, rustic arrangements.

While the entire record is a harbinger of Young’s lifelong involvement with Farm Aid, the gospel-fused “Nothing Is Perfect” closely mirrors its era, with a patriotic sweep and enduring optimism that echoes Reaganism’s messages. Similarly, “Motor City”—a great, largely

forgotten cut from 1981’s *Re-ac-tor*—conjures the 80s with references to the decline of the American auto industry and emergence of Japanese imports. Here, Young’s sarcastic humor, hayseed accent, and biting take over, with his support band equally game for a spunky, spirited romp. Not to be outdone, “Southern Pacific,” Young’s hallmark railroad song, allows him to play the role of conductor, the guitars doubling as the blaring horns of a diesel engine and the song’s progression advancing like a smoke-billowing train coming around a mountain bend.

Longtime Young fans also get a wish granted. Finally, the epic “Grey Riders,” one of the Ontario native’s prized unreleased songs, gets its due in the form of a dramatic, hoof-pounding, wind-howling version that finds Young ripping electric shards from his guitar and his colleagues’ notes approximating the sound of pelting hail. It’s a fitting climax to a flawless archival release. —**Bob Gendron**

**C**hris Mills is at his best when he's at his most vulnerable. On *Heavy Years: 2000-2010*, a 14-track decade-spanning compilation that serves as a perfect introduction to the singer-songwriter for the uninitiated, Mills alternately finds himself bloodied and bruised by love ("A Farewell to Arms"), drinking himself into oblivion ("Signal/Noise"), and struggling to find the beauty in a relationship gone sour ("Diamond").



**Chris Mills**  
*Heavy Years: 2000-2010*  
Ernest Jenning Record Co., CD

Growing up in a military family, Mills moved frequently, spending time in Germany before settling in Southern Illinois as a teenager. He spent his formative years in Chicago, coming up alongside the likes of Kelly Hogan (whose haunting vocals grace this album's "Suicide Note"), Califone, Waco Brothers and Neko Case. Normally lumped in with the then-booming alt-country scene, this collection suggests that Mills, who currently makes his home in Brooklyn, never really took to the role.

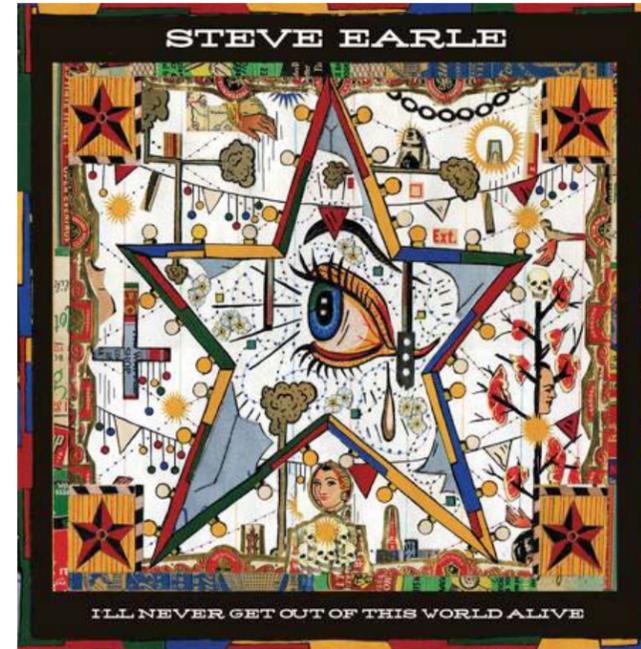
Too much of a romantic to revel in the genre's all-encompassing despair, even Mills' most pained confessionals sound somewhat optimistic. Witness "Suicide Note," a shuffling back-porch lament on which Mills sings about trying to find a tune that can finally mute the pain inside, his earnest voice cracked—yet-hopeful. "A Farewell to Arms" describes a broken relationship in terms normally reserved for the battlefield ("Lover lay your weapons down"; "There is no common ground left for to fight") even as the swooning, horn-fueled musical backdrop calls to mind a tender, moonlit waltz. At times, Mills' heart swells with so much emotion that he can't even find the words to describe how he feels. "You burn like something that burns/And you sing like something that sings," he croons atop a lush musical

prairie of pedal steel, piano, and violin on the starry-eyed "Such a Beautiful Thing."

While missteps are rare, the more upbeat tunes don't hit with the same impact, oftentimes morphing into by-the-numbers pub rock (the sneering "All You Ever Do") or coming across like watered-down takes on artists that influenced him along the way (spot the B-rate Jayhawks impression on the jangly "Sleeptalking"). Better are the piano-flecked "All Our Days and Nights," where the singer explores what happens to love once romantic high fades, and "You Are My Favorite Song," a catchy jukebox ode built around barrelhouse piano and woozy brass. Here, Mills compares a lover to a favorite tune, singing, "Were you born on a barroom napkin?/ Or in the hear of some seasick captain/Longing for the shore?"

Then there's the seven-minute-plus "Signal/Noise," a delicate lullaby that sounds like a corroded take on Phil Spector's wall of noise. The song opens simply, Mills singing atop a fragile, music-box patter before things start degrading near the midpoint, as if the track were recorded to crumbling tape. "And I love you more as...your voice goes static," Mills sings, his own voice slowly giving way to the encroaching white-noise roar of some distant surf.

—**Andy Downing**



**Steve Earle**  
*I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive*  
New West, CD or LP

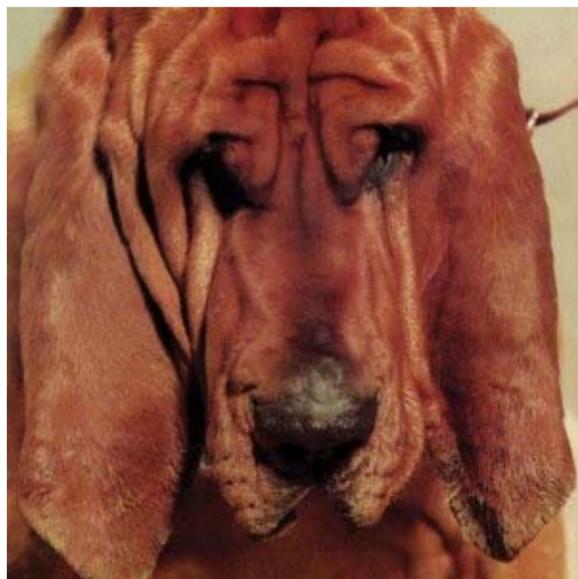
**S**teve Earle has spent the past few years engaged in various activities such as writing and acting, first appearing on HBO's incredible "The Wire" and most recently inhabiting the role of a street musician in "Treme." Earle's own "This City," which appears as the final track on *I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive*, plays over the final credits in the series' first season. Featuring horn arrangements by New Orleans legend Allen Toussaint and a defiant progression, it's the most distinctive and impassioned song on the outlaw singer's latest record.

Named after the Hank Williams tune of the same name, Earle's first new studio work of original material in four years—the longest-ever cycle in the activist/roots artist's career—intentionally harkens back to his country-based origins and comes flavored with dusty stomps, phlanged and pedal-steel guitars, and a more pronounced vocal drawl. It's also produced by current it-man T-Bone Burnett, and claims the spiritually bent "God Is God" and "I Am A Wanderer," two cuts Earle penned in 2008 for Joan Baez. The star-studded resume checks out fine. But there's something ultimately lacking.

Specifically, basic efforts such as the Irish-themed "Gulf of Mexico," traditional bluegrass ballad "Molly-O," and spare acoustic folk "Lonely Are the Free" sound like mimographs of Earle's best work—copies you'd imagine lesser artists presenting as originals.

Vivid details, compelling narratives, and the bold sense to skirt conventional devices have always comprised the 56-year-old Virginia native's hallmark strengths. Yet he seems to lose sight of them during multiple weak moments here, which include a very plain duet with wife Allison Moorer on "Heaven or Hell"—as generic as the title indicates. By comparison, at least the jumpy "Waitin' on the Sky" pulses with a restless energy. Earle's also not done skewering George W. Bush. The hoedown "Little Emperor" takes aim at the former president, shot through with a trusted combination of leftist politics and cunning wit.

Still, given the gestation period, *I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive* lacks the spark, promise, and focus implied by its Williams-inspired inscription. Odds are Earle's other pursuits—he's releasing his debut novel in May—are consuming his attention. Nothing wrong with branching out, and Earle has definitely earned the right to do so, but it's a shame that the expansion is coming at the expense of his music. —**Bob Gendron**



**Ty Segall**  
*Goodbye Bread*  
 Drag City, LP and CD

**T**y Segall is just 23, but the San Francisco-based multi-instrumentalist has already emerged as an indie-rock cult figure that's presently on the verge of making mainstream noise. Five years ago, Segall left high school and headed to the Bay Area to play in various bands. He didn't waste much time. A present or former member of garage-rock acts the Coachwhips, Traditional Fools, Epsilons, Sic Alps, and Party Fowl, he resembles prolific Guided By Voices leader Robert Pollard in the manner in which he seems to release a new seven-inch or spilt EP every month.

Of course, Segall isn't alone in cranking out copious amounts of music, much of it crudely recorded in bedrooms or on four-tracks. One downfall of affordable technology is the resultant glut of mediocre fare that's flooded the market and made it more difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff. But Segall is different. A majority of his releases transcend such disposable and amateurish traits, and while he hasn't hit a home run with every release, in particular, his recent solo full-lengths—including 2010's *Meltd*—capture an artist clearly in the midst of bloom.

Segall also deviates from the norm in terms of public persona. In an age when most performers seize all available social media tools and seek maximum exposure, the singer/guitarist keeps a low profile. There's precious little information in his official biography. He forgoes having an official Web site. And he doesn't seem as if he's in any hurry to lift the veil on his guarded identity, instead preferring to let the music do the talking. Does it ever.

*Goodbye Bread* checks in as Segall's most visible effort yet. The compact 10-song set comes via venerable indie label Drag City and furthers the strengths Segall has demonstrated both as a one-man band and bandleader. Songs arrive as if they could've been made in the mid- and late 1960s and deserve retro inclusion on the famous *Nuggets* compilation. Such is Segall's knack for classic garage-rock grit, hungover psychedelia, and unavoidably catchy devices. Evoking the primitive fuzz-out tones of local 60s legends ranging from the Sonics to the Nazz, as well as the choral properties of

early sides by the Kinks, Move, and the Who, Segall brings a modernity and originality to *Goodbye Bread* that tags him as an artist that's well beyond mere nostalgic revivalism.

Not to say that the slow, jangling tones and chiming chords on the excellent title track don't evoke British Invasion muses. Yet Segall's lilting warm falsetto, slightly frayed deliveries, and delightfully shredded guitar notes (which briefly stir the calm) stamp the tune with its own identity. Indeed, the frontman's reverb-soaked bloodshot vocals and stoned-out atmospheres coexist alongside his inarguable gift for constructing great hooks. Deceptively simple, he appears intent on channeling the sound of what it feels like to be caught between reality and hallucination. Bass-spurred rhythms bubble underneath "You Make the Sun Fry," taser-gun distortion infuses the crunchy "Where Your Head Goes," and rough-and-tumble grit drives "Comfortable Home," each splitting the line between mess and melody, each revealing obvious allegiances to pop elements.

"I'm sick of you/I'm sick of me" Segall gushes with humorous disgust on "I Am With You," one of the handful of tracks on which he pushes the limits of his earlier compact structures into four-minute-plus lengths. He's still best when keeping arrangements tight and short, but as the crashing-through-your-consciousness bridge to the aptly titled and more involved "My Head Explodes" attests, the garage-pop tunesmith claims a wealth of surprises that refuse to be contained in the space of two minutes.

—**Bob Gendron**



**White Hills**  
*H-p1*  
 Thrill Jockey, CD or 2LP

**O**n its second album for Thrill Jockey, enigmatic psych-rockers White Hills deliver another monstrous slab of deep space riffage. Epic in both size (the record clocks in at over 70 minutes) and scope (an accompanying press release describes it as "a concept album telling the story of a corrupt government that is run like and owned by corporations"), *H-p1* finds the trio splitting its time between metallic guitar outbursts and moodier, more spacious passages.

The opening "The Condition of Nothing" establishes the template, piling on zombified vocals ("I speak to you" the mates intone, like freshly reanimated corpses), intricate drum tentacles, and dark swirls of fuzzed-out guitar that move like ocean currents. From there, the group travels through underground sewer systems (the dense, echo-laden "Movement") and abandoned factories—guitars buzz and chime like heavy machinery on "Paradise," which gradually dissipates into a white noise that evokes millions of mosquitoes buzzing overhead—before rocketing into the cosmos on "Hand In Hand." The latter is a massive tune that sounds like a space station slowly circling its way into the yawning cavern of a black hole, blips and beeps gradually giving way to all-en-

compassing nothingness.

Despite its heady concept, the album remains largely instrumental. Indeed, the lyrics on the few cuts that actually contain words are as primal and rudimentary as ancient cave paintings. "No truth, no freedom," singer/guitarist Dave W. chants on the 17-minute title track. Or is that "Know truth, know freedom?" The anger and frustration that drive the anti-corporate concept are instead embedded in the music's DNA, from the beastly swagger of "Upon Arrival," which breaks into an explosion of drums that come on like a herd of hooved creatures thundering over a plain, to the hazy "Monument," which sounds like a final transmission to escape a crumbling empire, seconds before its fall.

—**Andy Downing**



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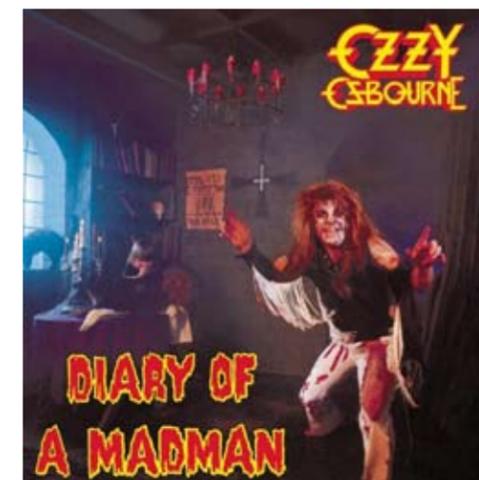
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Long before Ozzy Osbourne devolved into a caricature—a role he's sadly played for the better part of the past two decades—the singer recorded two of the most influential, complete, and ageless hard-rock albums in history. Made within a year's time, 1980's *Blizzard of Ozz* and 1981's *Diary of a Madman* explode with the kind of passion and creativity that the legendary frontman has been able to only briefly recapture (1988's *No Rest for the Wicked*, 1991's *No More Tears*) since becoming a solo artist following his dismissal from Black Sabbath. Anyone familiar with the two early 80s efforts and Osbourne's history understands why the material remains mammoth: guitarist Randy Rhoads.

In honor of the albums' 30th anniversary, Sony Legacy has reissued them in several remastered configurations: 180g LP, picture-disc LP, separate CDs, and, for the faithful, a fancy \$150 multi-disc box set in which a DVD, 100-page coffee table book, poster, and replica of Osbourne's cross are exclusive. The latter arrives in an attractive package, yet apart from its inherent appeal to collectors, the only real reason to make such an investment is the *Thirty Years After the Blizzard* documentary that contains more than 30 minutes of never-bootlegged footage from a May 1981 Palladium concert.

The short film itself covers usual territory. Namely, the story of Osbourne's ascent from booze-inundated exile, his meeting and partnering with the incredible Rhoads, his infamous encounters with a live bat and live dove, his memories of the dearly departed virtuosic guitarist. At best, the documentary functions as a loving tribute to Rhoads; at worst, it's another opportunity for Osbourne's meddling wife Sharon to put a laughable spin on things.



### Ozzy Osbourne

*Blizzard of Ozz/Diary of a Madman 30th Anniversary Collector's Edition*

Epic/Legacy, 3CD + DVD box set; also available as individual CDs or LPs

Given her track record of trotting Osbourne out like a court jester in front of the media, her blaming the press for fanning controversial flames is audacious. Too bad the moments showing her gabbing aren't replaced with raw clips of Rhoads.

Indeed, Rhoads and Osbourne's music and chemistry drive these reissues. Aside from Eddie Van Halen's period material, no guitarist rivaled the inventive, contagious, soulful, and heavy passages (*continued*)

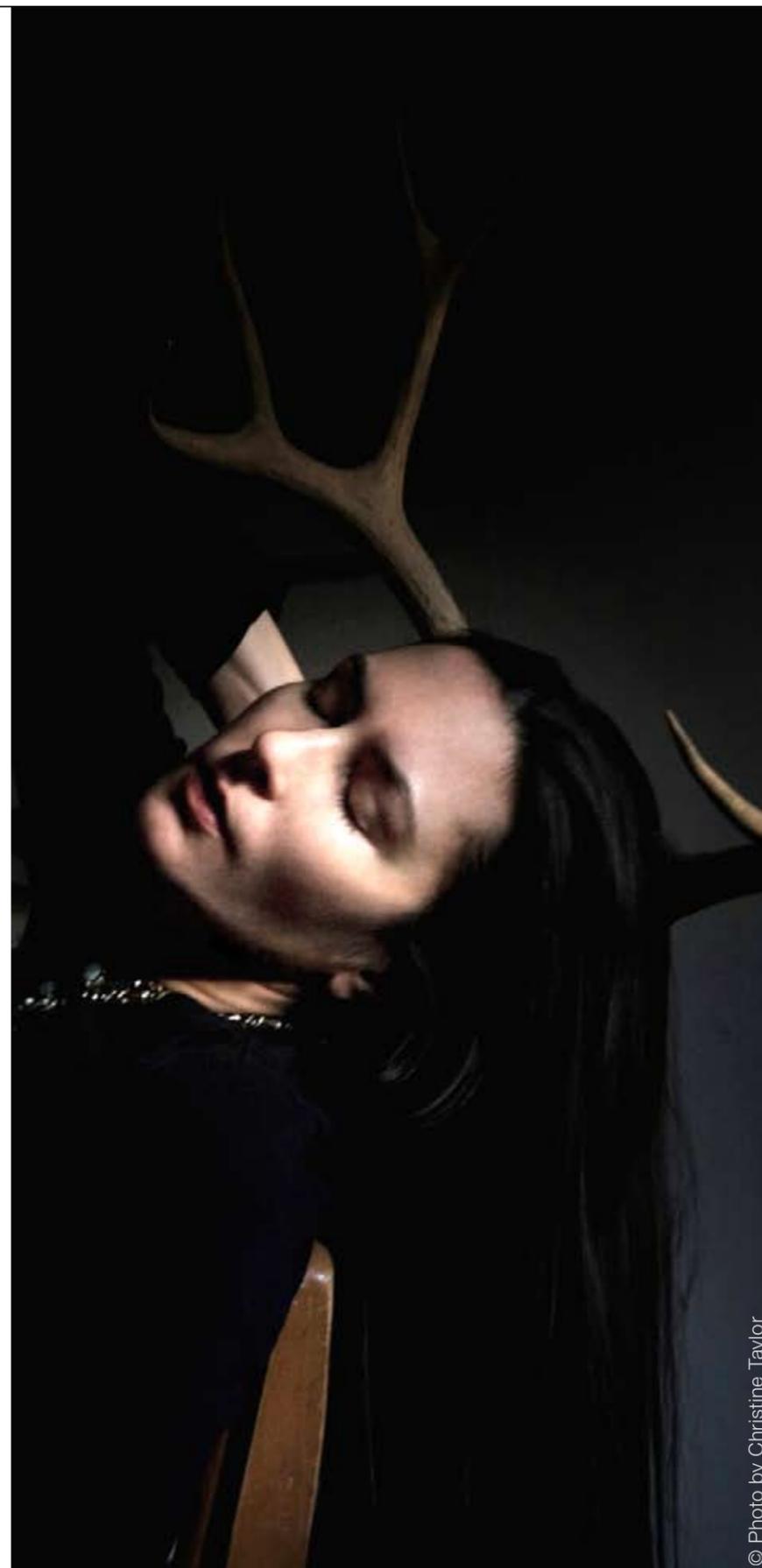
Rhoads laid down on *Blizzard of Ozz* and *Diary of a Madman*. Osbourne is in fine voice throughout, singing as if his future depended on his performance. It did. Songs such as “I Don’t Know,” “Crazy Train,” “Suicide Solution,” and “No Bone Movies” (from the debut) and “Over the Mountain,” “Flying High Again,” “Believer,” and “Tonight” from the 1981 follow-up serve as prime examples of the increasingly melodic, diverse, and accessible direction heavy metal took before limp keyboards and saccharine pop crept into the mix.

Blending gorgeous classical strains with flashy dalliance and elegant moodiness, Rhoads proved the perfect foil for Osbourne’s interest in both expanding his sound and pursuing his preoccupation with intelligent, dark lyrical themes. Former Osbourne guitarist Zakk Wylde cogently observed that Rhoads’ arrangements were songs within songs; listen to the soloing and fills on “Revelation (Mother Earth)” and try not to arrive at the same conclusion. If only Rhoads’ disciples employed their hero’s discipline and tastefulness.

On disc, *Diary of a Madman* is expanded into a double-CD set, with the extra disc comprising 11 live songs from the 1981 tour. It’s scorching, unencumbered, and absolutely essential. Of course, so are each records’ iconic cover artwork, which makes the analog editions that much more appealing. Anyone born between 1965 and 1980 is lying if they say their heads weren’t turned when encountering the albums—especially for the first time—in record store bins. Like the music within the grooves, the thematic images of a caped, cross-clutching Ozzy and demonic, castle-dwelling Osbourne, respectively, are timeless.

—**Bob Gendron**

**W**hen robed doom purveyors Sunn0))) and Japanese power trio Boris invited Jesse Sykes to sing “The Sinking Belle (Blue Sheep)” on their collaborative 2006 album *Altar*, the move made little sense on paper. It simply appeared to be another left turn taken by two groups for which the unexpected acts as the norm. Yet, surprisingly, the pairing yielded a gorgeously barren free-folk ballad that stands apart out for its exploration of the sort of understated extremes often uncharted by thunderous bands. Sykes delivers a truly ethereal performance—her voice hovering over meticulously picked notes, shimmering piano passages, and a Milky Way score. It’s become one of the most prized pieces of music in the underground.



© Photo by Christine Taylor



### Jesse Sykes & the Sweet Hereafter

*Marble Son*

Station Grey/Thirty Tigers, 2LP and CD

Sykes since gained a footing in the art-metal community, most recently securing a spot at the Roadburn Music Festival, where she and her backing group the Sweet Hereafter mesmerized fans accustomed to loud, ferocious sounds with a wraithlike mix of earthy folk, spellbinding trance, and moody rock. Indeed, after debuting nearly a decade ago as a talented albeit primarily conventional practitioner of Appalachian and alt-country fare, Sykes’ ongoing evolution has proved fascinating. Each successive album holds fresh surprises and twists, with 2007’s *Like, Love, Lust & the Open Halls of the Soul*, replete with a horn section and bigger production, the most radical departure yet.

The Seattle-based artist eschews brass on *Marble Son*, but in embracing some of the heavier riffs, bluesy inclinations, and darker ambience associated with avant-garde metal, she’s created the kind of statement record at which her previous efforts only hinted. Flush with cavernous sonics and complex soundscapes, it’s 58 minutes of aural cinema for the ears and mind. Extending arrangements and escalating turbulent build-ups, the quartet wanders into psychedelic regions that, at times, find the collective occupying the stage of what could pass as San Francisco’s Avalon Ballroom in 1968. (continued)

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MUSIC



© Photo by Christine Taylor

Invested with a more involved role, guitarist Phil Wandscher is crucial to the record's hypnotic appeal and songs' entrenched sense of mystery. He plays with tonalities and textures, placing them on imaginary strings that he yanks back and forth, the geometric instrumental leads conjuring objects that range from surrealist circles ("Ceiling's High") to blowing tumbleweeds ("Weight of Cancer," which marries Old West themes to surf-rock commotion). Other guitarists employ more effects pedals, but Wandscher's nose for illustrative progression on expansive tunes such as the space-bound "Pleasuring the Divine" keeps it from unraveling while pushing it forward.

Having stated that the record's title is inspired by her observation that certain artworks are more powerful when viewed in dissolved forms rather than in original states—as time-caused decay reveals their core essentials—Sykes follows through by pursuing a related technique on these compositions, leaving bare vast reduced spaces in which sun-fried atmospherics, crackling fade-outs, and patient tempos cocoon her ghostly voice. Etched with a delicate graininess and surrounded by a halo of natural reverb, Sykes'

breathy timbre is slightly reminiscent of Marianne Faithfull before cigarettes and whiskey assumed control.

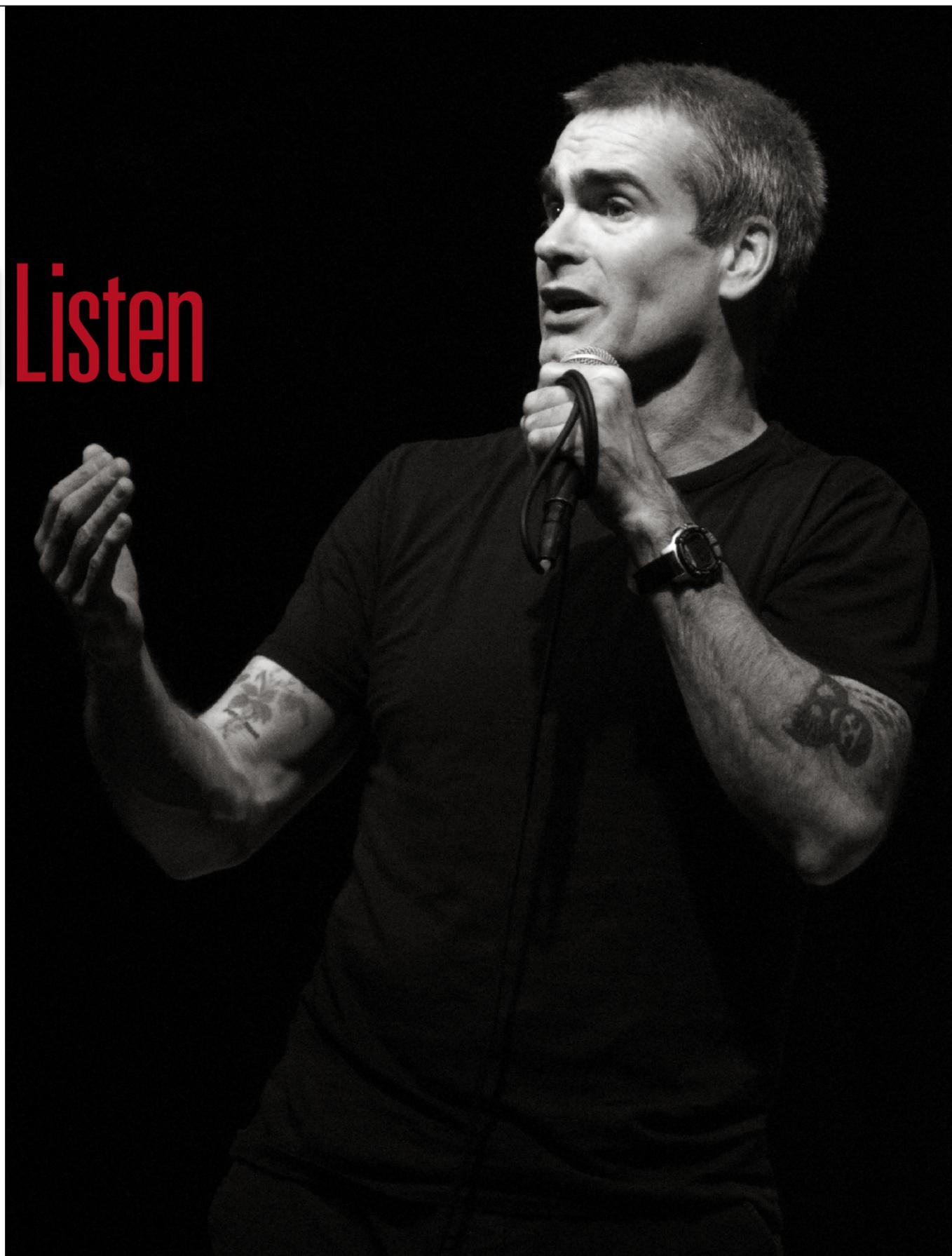
Persuading, summoning, and questioning, Sykes' graceful caution and mellow gentility causes the restrained "Servant of Your Vision" to slowly blossom in the manner that winter turns to spring. Similarly, the title track's English folk harmonies express a pastoral charm that's matched by her childlike-innocence lullaby vocals. Yet the frontwoman's mystical delivery is best when providing rapturous contrast amidst grittier, unsettled sonic tempest.

Sykes' hazy, semi-conscious meditations dance amidst droning noises, swampy feedback, and crunchy chords on the epic "Hushed By Devotion," which begins as a stomp and finishes as a fever-dream dance. And on the paisley-tinted romp "Your Own Kind," the band teases with pace and linearity, managing to produce hard rock that's bereft of potentially alienating heaviness—a feat made by possible by beautiful oracle-like singing that illuminates the dark and casts shadows on the light. —**Bob Gendron**

# Henry Rollins Speaks—You Should Listen

By Andy Downing

**H**enry Rollins, the onetime Black Flag singer who's gradually evolved from a violence-prone hooligan into a modern Renaissance man, turned 50 this past February. He marked the occasion with a lengthy spoken-word tour. Reached at his home in Los Angeles just days after his birthday, the loquacious author/singer/actor/publisher/speaker unloaded on everything from the emergence of the Tea Party to his own father, a "right-wing douchebag" that he's spent a lifetime distancing himself from.



## On turning 50

At the end of the day, it is just another year between 49 and 51. But since we do break things into ten or whatever—the 50-yard line, dun, dun dun!—it's like the first half of your life. I mean, arguably, that's not true. I'm probably at the 66% mark if I get 75 out of the deal. Chances are you won't get 100, but you never know. My grandmother lived to be 102 and was completely clear. My family, what little I know of them, are exceptionally healthy people. My mother is 80 and is still all there. My father, who I don't really know, is probably out somewhere in the weeds with his AK worshipping Sean Hannity and waiting for Obama to take his gun away. As far as I know, he's in his late 80s and still with us. He's kind of a right-wing douchebag.

## On how he's mellowed (slightly) with age

As a young person it's all about you. You're so sleek and beautiful. You want to meet the chicks. Some guy in a magazine says something bad about you, so you want to kill him. I don't even read reviews now. "What if someone says something bad about you?" "Hey man, First Amendment." I love the First Amendment more than I hate anything mean or snarky that you might say about me. And, quite honestly, I've got bigger fish to fry.

## On choosing charity over a fleet of Ferraris

It happened once I could say, "Okay, I've got the year's rent. The roof doesn't leak. I'm stable. I've got money for food." Then I could look around because I wasn't so glued to the wheel in front of me, focusing on keeping my go-kart on the track. It's not like I got money and bought a fleet of Ferraris and a bunch of 16-year-old prostitutes. I drive a Subaru. But as soon as I had stability, then I could go, "Okay, and you wanted something? Sure." *(continued)*

### On the right wing's "embrace" of family values issues

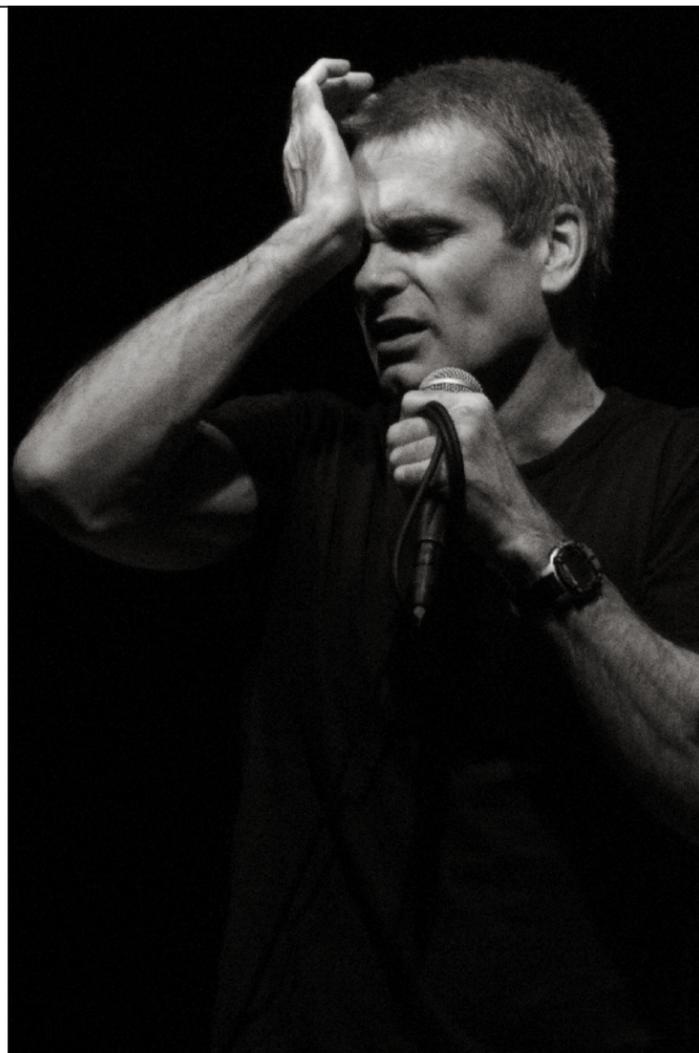
I think John Boehner probably doesn't have anything personal against Planned Parenthood, but those kinds of things keep guys like him in office. Gay marriage? These people don't care. They really don't. It's just a fundraiser. They would lose a fundraising tool if abortion became illegal across the board. So they really do like Roe vs. Wade because it gives them something to rail against. If gays could get married—if that was just the law of the land—they would be screwed because they would lose a boogiemer issue. I think a lot of these people know better, but they have a lot of intellectually malnourished people supporting them.

### On the Tea Party

I can see the anger of a Tea Party person, but when you see the information that fuels them you're like, "Really? That's not really what's happening." "Well you're just spinning it your way." "No. No. Here are the numbers. Here are the real numbers. Here's your beloved Ronald Reagan. Here's how many times he raised taxes in six of his eight years in office: 11 times. So is he really your guy? I'm telling you how it is, man. Don't ask me. Look at the record. Look at the government documents."

### On Sarah Palin's *Going Rogue*

It's so completely depressing. It's a total 180 to reality. And it's just totally moronic. There's kind of a Hallmark greeting card glow to the thing. And it's so, so ghost written. Like she comes in, "So, I bought lunch one day." "Thank you, dear. That's all we need. We'll write the rest."



### On the challenge of portraying a white supremacist on *Sons of Anarchy*

The part that was challenging is probably not the part you think was challenging. Was it challenging to be a white power proponent? No. Because that is a very unemotional person. He takes his orders. "Kill that Mexican." Boom. Go eat dinner. No problem. His emotional range was nothing, really. He's an automaton. He's a hate-fueled, psychotic, sociopathic killing machine who just takes orders for a whiter America. But while he was this excruciatingly awful human being, he was also an exceptionally good dad and devoted father. *(continued)*

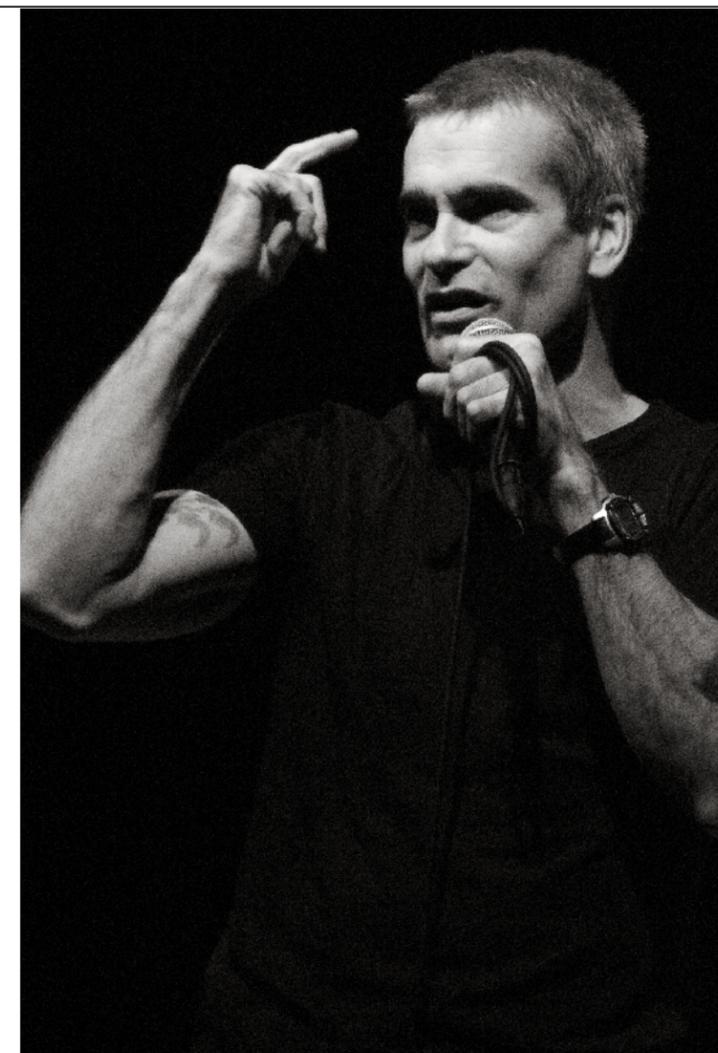
The highest compliment I was paid was by the show's creator, Kurt Sutter, who sent me a very nice email that I still have buried away somewhere. He said, "We knew you could be an angry, hate-fueled guy with no problem. But you made him a good dad and you made him a curious character. And that's what we didn't think you were going to sell as magnificently as you did." That's what I wanted to do. That was the hardest part of that character. It was like, "What a prick." Oh, wait a minute—he's a soccer dad.

### On the flood of acting offers that never materialized afterwards

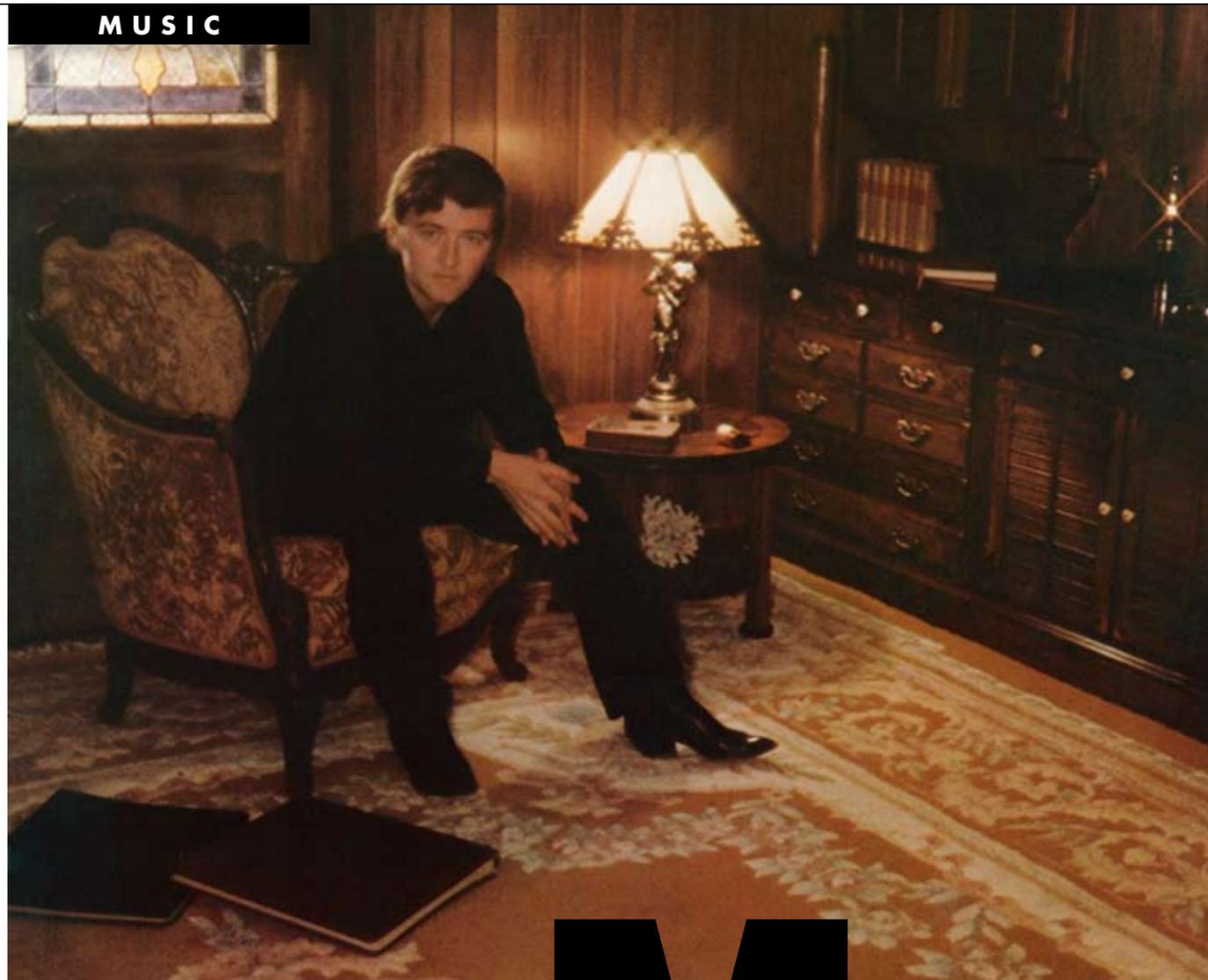
I was kind of hoping I'd be hounded by offers after [*Sons of Anarchy*] and nothing actually came my way. You always hope you have a foot in the door and you'll be fairly spoiled. Like every single series will say, "We demand your presence here on the set." And not a single offer. That's life.

### On his public persona versus his private persona

If there's a disparity between my public and private persona, I'm really not aware of it. And just because I'm not aware of it doesn't mean there isn't one. That said, I really don't know what I don't divulge at any given moment to any person anywhere—at the supermarket, onstage, or in interview. There's no secret drug habit. The thing I spare you is the incredibly boring proclivities I have of like researching some label for like three hours on the Internet or downloading some avant-garde Japanese sax player's music until 4 o'clock in the morning. That's me on a Saturday night. You're talking to a geek, basically. Don't get us started. We'll tell you everything.



I don't have a TV here. I read. There's a lot of art on the walls. There are custom-made bookshelves that go up to the ceiling and a record collection that would probably peel the paint off your car. When I'm off the road I live in that world. Then I go back out there and I'm that thing you throw peanuts at, as Bo Diddley once said. ●



© Photo by Robert Heimall

**M**ickey Newbury is the answer to myriad trivia questions most never think about asking.

A songwriter's songwriter, his tunes have been recorded more than 1300 times by more than 1000 performers—the impressive lot including Scott Walker, Ray Charles, Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley, Box Tops, Nick Cave, Jerry Lee Lewis, Willie Nelson, Dolly Parton, and Tammy Wynette. He's the only artist in history to enjoy number-one hits (with different songs, mind you) on the pop, country, R&B and easy listening charts in the space of one calendar year.

The native Texan is also credited for getting Kris Kristofferson's "Me & Bobby McGee" recorded by star Roger Miller, convincing Townes Van Zandt and Guy Clark to relocate to Nashville, and helping launch what became the Outlaw country movement.

If Newbury's resume isn't convincing enough—and it should be—then his peak-era solo records from 1969 through 1973 make the case for his position as one of the all-time greats that history's pages somehow overlooked. While one of the packaged media era's greatest sins is the seemingly ceaseless reissuing of yet more "lost treasures" and "forgotten gems," Newbury isn't just a good story. He's fully deserving of the treatment Chicago indie label Drag City afforded these four titles, about which no hyperbole is required.

Remastered by Grammy-winning engineer Steve Rosenthal and mastering engineer Jessica Thompson from the original analog tapes, thought for years lost to a fire but recently discovered in the Elektra Records vault, the analog reissues are on par with traditionally more expensive audiophile pressings. Everything from the immediate, spare, transparent sonics to the superbly reproduced album jackets travel back to the glory days of the early 70s and present Newbury amidst his home studio environment.

Musically, Newbury's efforts aren't the obvious yield of a commercial hitmaker. His austere, often minimalist approach is the tormented sound of a man who's had his heart shattered on multiple occasions and is no longer able to recover. Contrary to the bigger productions given many of the renditions of his songs that became famous via other artists, Newbury prefers a stripped-down approach that accents his sincere, emotionally rooted vocal deliveries and introspective arrangements. *(continued)*



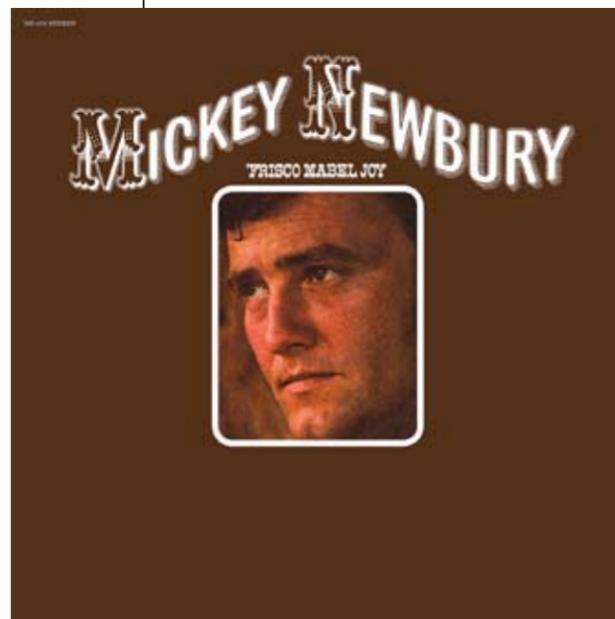
### Mickey Newbury

*Looks Like Rain, 'Frisco Mabel Joy, Heaven Help the Child, and Better Days*

Drag City, LP or CD;  
also available as 4CD box set



**Regret doesn't get any more real, save when found at the bottom of a whiskey bottle.**

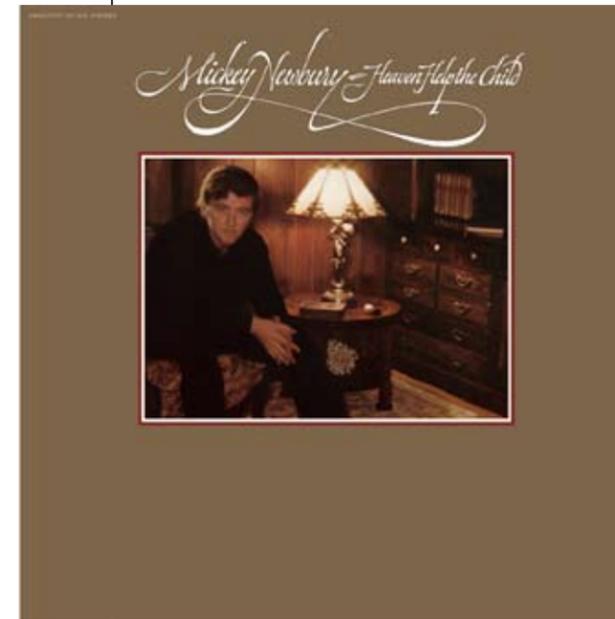


Guitars, strings, background choirs, and subtle percussive effects tuckpoint rather than provide foundation. The latter takes the form of Newbury's forthright, granite-solid singing. He lacks the wowing range, baritone depth, and distinctive tonalities of his contemporaries, but his vocals double as a wide-open chasm in which sadness and sorrow dwell. It's difficult to imagine a singer making better use of their instrument.

On 1969's aptly titled *Looks Like Rain*, Newbury raises up in pitch to meet the gospel-drenched chorus halfway on "She Even Woke Me Up to Say Goodbye," four graceful minutes of desolation ridden with hard-swallowing understanding and spiritual forgiveness. Like many of Newbury's anguished originals, it elicits pathos not just for the singer but for the protagonist. Witness the barren "I Don't Think Too Much About Her No More," a sung-spoken confessional on which Newbury isn't even fooling himself, the artisan-like acoustic folk motifs underscoring the value he invested—and still invests—in the relationship. Regret doesn't get any more real, save when found at the bottom of a whiskey bottle.

The tempos faintly pick up on 1971's *Frisco Mabel Joy*, bolstered by "An American Trilogy," a moving three-part suite that, 40 years on, remains both dignified and inspired. Forget "Georgia on My Mind"; this is the true anthem of the South. Throughout, Newbury's tenor is again an atmospheric enigma and deceptively versatile device.

*(continued)*

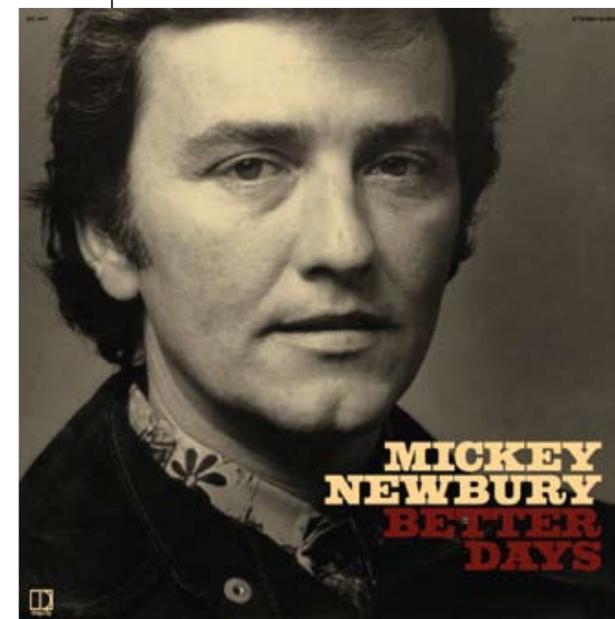


There's never a note out of place, and yet, there are no sings of artificial sweetening or false pretense. Newbury strolls through these songs of loneliness, emptiness, estrangement, and remorse like Edward G. Robinson at the haunting finale of the bleak film noir classic *Scarlet Street*—eternally confined to a personal hell, tortured by thoughts of what once was and will never be again. Try as he might, there's no forgetting, no moving on. The drinking song "The Future's Now What It Used to Be" sums up the condition of his condition.

With two critically acclaimed albeit largely ignored albums behind him, Newbury further expands his palette on 1973's slightly more upbeat *Heaven Help the Child*, trading in everything from symphonic pop (the title track) to roots country ("Why You Been Gone So Long") to raw-timbered lullabies ("Good Morning Dear"). Have a handkerchief nearby; absent drama and manipulation, these epitomize how weepers and maverick tales should sound and feel. Replete with hard-luck characters, fateful scenarios, and tragic ending, the closing "San Francisco Mabel Joy" is a study in the art of murder ballads.

As befitting of any substantial reissue project, *Better Days* comprises demos, rarities, and previously unreleased fare. Of particular note are "Better Days" and "I Don't Want Me No Big City Woman," recorded for a Los Angeles radio broadcast and never again revisited. These exemplary reissues ensure that mistake won't be repeated. —**Bob Gendron**

**Have a handkerchief nearby; absent drama and manipulation, these epitomize how weepers and maverick tales should sound and feel.**





# Neil Young

**Chicago Theatre**  
Chicago, Illinois  
**May 6, 2011**  
By Bob Gendron

Floors vibrated, metal chairs rattled, and structural beams shook at the first of a two-night stand by Neil Young at the intimate Chicago Theatre in early May. Such was the level of tonal resonance, low-frequency extension, and decibel-emboldened tenacity summoned by the iconic artist on just a handful of guitars—two very familiar to longtime fans. Unaccompanied, Young seemed intent not to journey through the past but rearrange it—as well as confront the present via recent material that stands among his most vital.

Several years removed from a near-fatal brain aneurysm, Young has witnessed several close friends and associates pass away over the last two years, chief among them film producer/collaborator L.A. Johnson and close musical companion Ben Keith. Young is quoted as saying that, without Keith, he is no longer able to play 70% of his repertoire with a band. Perhaps that explains his decision to go it alone on 2010's superb *Le Noise* and on several recent outings. Yet the reasons probably also relate to Young's way of coming to terms with the personal losses and surrounding world. The Canadian native channeled frustration, mourning, and conflict through sound and verse

throughout the hyper-focused 110-minute set, during which Young, in typical fashion, rarely spoke to the near-capacity crowd.

Roaming around a dimly lit stage in a white sports coat, jeans, and Panama-style hat, Young remains an introverted figure. He surveyed available instruments with cautious consideration, rubbing his fingers along the body of a grand piano before taking a seat and spying his pump organ as if it were a deity before climbing up a short row of stairs and launching into a meditative "After the Gold the Rush." Young's pensive motions made for understated drama. Yet they also came across as slightly exaggerated. The show's meticulous nature and serious mood were never in doubt. Young needn't have slowly wandered about like a pensive drifter to drive the points across.

Still, if further slowing the pace and engaging in spiritual communion with a cigar store Indian perched onstage served the enigmatic artist—upon entering the venue, at Young's request, patrons were informed to refrain from shooting photos even with cell phones—the introspective moments never derailed momentum. While no stranger to raucous fun and celebratory irony, on this evening, Young held fast to a severe presentation that underlined the sober themes in his songs. Tonight was no place for "Welfare Mothers," "Sedan Delivery," "Roll Another Number," or, thankfully, any of his well-meaning tunes about hybrid automobiles.

At the onset, the 65-year-old stamped standbys such as

"My My, Hey Hey (Out of the Blue)" and the country-tinged "Tell Me Why" with a more pronounced hesitation and susceptibility. He carefully balanced forlorn harmonica fills with restrained acoustic guitar passages, his lanky body a loose Jell-O mold of wobbling knees, swaying legs, and bobbling torso. For "Helpless," Young painted rural pictures with bucolic poetry and mellow chords. As blue-hued lighting glowed behind him, the gorgeous imagery both corresponded to the "blue, blue windows behind the stars" lyric and invoked Marc Chagall's "America Windows"—a masterpiece located less than a mile away at the Art Institute of Chicago. Young also performed the unreleased "You Never Call" unplugged, and in spite of a narrative that mentioned the Detroit Red Wings and In-N-Out Burger by name, steel-tinted textures and apparent allusions to Johnson and Keith lent comparable gravitas.

Weight—in the emotional, voluminous, and responsible senses of the term—guided Young's progression. The most spectacular moments arrived via electric guitar, his tool of choice. Akin to the treatments employed on *Le Noise*, his Old Black (Les Paul) and White Falcon (Gretsch) guitars were filtered through distortion effects and related pedals, yielding huge soundscapes that seemed to infinitely extend and seldom decay. Rhythms stacked upon one another, each swipe of Young's hand to the strings unleashing torrents of crackling thunder, rolling feedback, and booming resonance.

Heard amidst such sonic constructs, "Down By the River" wore an even deadlier mask, "Rumblin'" proved true to its name, "Ohio" recoiled with bitter disgust, and "Peaceful Valley Boulevard" flowed with a menacing fervor targeted at unforgivable ignorance. Similarly, despite its lively Spanish-flavored intro, "Love and War" conveyed foreboding feelings, the song's piercing truisms and horrors ringing out alongside guitar notes that hummed, moaned, and exploded. Young abruptly stopped and shifted tempos, adding to the material's edginess and upping dynamic contrast. In fine form, his hallmark soulfully quivering tenor voice warmly complemented several paeans to love ("Sign of Love," "I Believe In You") but refused to shy away from irritation at everything from environmental ruin to corrupt politics to distorted history to himself.

On the autobiographical "Hitchhiker," Young turned his never-sleeping rust loose, the subterranean guitar riffs corroded with terrifying noise, the tune marching on even as the singer injected percussive breaks into the violent arrangement. By the time Young concluded with the persuasive "Walk With Me," the dark clouds began to clear, and the frontman, as if finally purged if not entirely content, sought solace in friendship and faith. ●

**O**n Bon Iver's much-romanticized 2008 debut, *For Emma, Forever Ago*, singer-songwriter (and then the band's sole member) Justin Vernon sounded trapped in his own personal Ice Age. Fresh off two painful breakups—first from a girl and then from his band—the singer retired to his father's hunting cabin in northern Wisconsin and went about setting his grief to tape. Wintry, introspective, and thin-ice fragile, the resulting album bears the scars of its creation.

In the years since, Vernon has become a much more public figure, recording with sprawling indie-rock collective Gayngs, releasing an album with his own side project Volcano Choir and, most notably, working alongside rapper Kanye West, who sampled the Bon Iver track "Woods" for his own *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* and even invited the scraggly-bearded Wisconsinite along for recording/brainstorming sessions in Hawaii.

But despite a notably heightened profile, Vernon still returned to his home state when it came time to record his sophomore effort, *Bon Iver*, setting up shop in a studio he built in a former veterinary clinic in Fall Creek—a Wisconsin town located just a short drive from his Eau Claire birthplace. Yet where *For Emma...* revels in isolation, setting his confessional lyrics ("Go find another lover...to string along," he sings like a broken man on its title track) against a snowy musical backdrop, *Bon Iver* comes across as a warmer, more inviting affair.

It's also cryptic as all hell, as though the idea of sharing another record as intimate as his debut became a source of some consternation. So instead of pulling more lines from his journal, Vernon pens verses that come across like fragmented remembrances (think *Memento* set to earnest



### Bon Iver

*Bon Iver*  
Jagjaguwar, LP or CD

art-folk) or slippery haikus. "Solar peace/Well it swirls and sweeps/You just set it," he offers amidst sparse piano on "Hinnom, TX." Despite the coded language, the singer's fragile pipes imbue songs with deep layers of meaning even when his words are at their most impenetrable.

"Holocene," for one, hints at a thaw in both name—the word is taken from a geological epoch that marked the end of the Wisconsin glaciation (fitting, no?)—and sound, layering together Vernon's multi-tracked falsetto, deliberate acoustic picking, and the slow rumble of freshly awoken-from-hibernation drums. Elsewhere, the singer flirts with psychedelic folk ("Perth"), eases into the sparse brass-haunted "Towers," and delivers a love letter to Claire (not a girl, but his birthplace) on the minimalist, string-kissed "Wash."

Then there's "Beth/Rest," an 80s throwback that sounds like Vernon soft rocking with Mr. Mister. Still, beneath the satiny, saxophone-flecked AOR surface (admittedly, a tough hurdle for many), lies a fairly gorgeous song about reclaiming some degree of happiness, highlighted by the singer's admission "I ain't living in the dark no more." It'll be interesting to see where the light leads him on his next go-round. —**Andy Downing**

# M

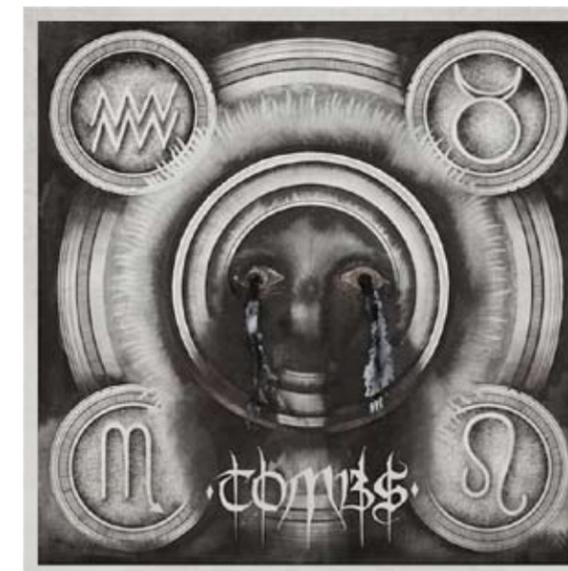
etal is a domain to which language connoisseurs should flock—not necessarily to listen to the music, but to revel in the imaginative prose that often surrounds descriptions and/or reviews of a band. With all apologies to the countless subgenres invented to categorize indie-rock offshoots (witchhouse, mumblecore, eight-bit, and rapegaze being among the most laughable tags), no genre posits more pigeonholing terminology or outrageous hyperbole than metal. Silliness aside, such classification attempts are good for at least one reason: Proof that diversity has never been greater.

Variety is on parade throughout Tombs' *Path of Totality*, at its basest root a heavy record shaded in nuance, texture, and somber atmosphere. The Brooklyn trio's sophomore statement advances the progress shown on its 2009 full-length debut, *Fear is the Weapon*, upping detail, moodiness, and cohesion while sacrificing any of the surprise. Inside of 58 minutes, the band runs a proverbial gamut: black metal, crusty grindcore, revved-up doom, blackened thrash, death-metal extremism, and down-tuned sludge strains coarse throughout the cycle, which begins with a grand entrance on the level of the initial stormtrooper attack in *The Empire Strikes Back* and ends with a fade to black.

However, as is made evident by the disciplined playing and accomplished compositions, the band isn't intent on addressing every major metal style developed over the past 20 years or leapfrogging disciplines to try and appeal to any hip sensibility. By nature, *Path of Totality* is rather humorless, yet it's easy to imagine the members getting a chuckle over scribes and bloggers attempting to put their craft in a box. Tombs' art is the not the sort that's meant to be confined.

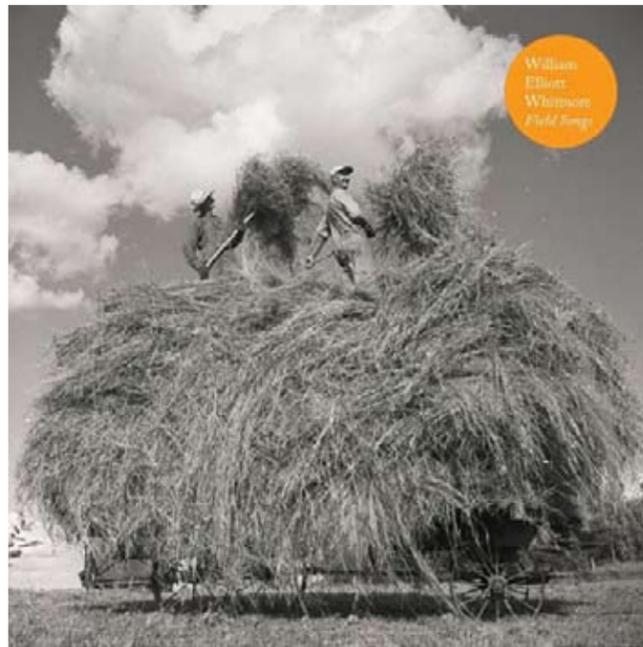
What matters here is the emotion—the senses of isolation, floundering, release, fear, suspense, and aggression evoked by shape-shifting songs and vocalist/guitarist Mike Hill's half-intelligible drones and growls. That Andrew Hernandez' drums sound like they should be breaking apart from the sheer force at which he's striking them—and that the percussive sequences conjure everything from stars falling out of the sky to giant I-beams being dropped from overhead onto pavement—rounds out a set that refuses to be ensconced in historical precedent or fancy lexicon.

"Bloodletters" and "To Cross the Land" pay homage to Nordic black metal legends, but akin to nearly every sonic journey here, dare to venture down unseen rabbit holes. Unanticipated tempo changes, gothic instrumental passages, and well-timed breaks offset bursts in intensity. Light pierces darkness on "Black Hole of Summer"; on the title track, off-kilter rhythms that mimic a deejay scratching an LP precede a shotgun-firing segue that finds each snare hit arriving like an explosive ear-deadening shot, hot shells falling to the ground around the drum stool. Indeed, it's Hernandez' mammoth performance that holds it all together, Tombs true to its name and leading the listener through the tunnel landscapes of a yet-to-be-written steampunk novel. —**Bob Gendron**



### Tombs

*Path of Totality*  
Relapse, CD or 2LP


**William Elliott Whitmore**
*Field Songs*

Anti Records, LP or CD

# W

hile he's only in his early 30s, singer-songwriter William Elliott Whitmore carries the burdens of a man twice his age.

His first three albums—*Hymns for the Hopeless*, *Ashes to Dust* and *Song of the Blackbird*—make up a gruesome trilogy, dense with banjo-driven funeral songs inspired by the deaths of both of his parents. Consumed with grief, he holed up on the family horse farm in Iowa and picked up his banjo, perhaps inspired by a quote from playwright Samuel Beckett, who famously said, “When you're up to your neck in shit, the only thing left to do is sing.”



© Photo by David Black

And boy could he. Blessed with the gravelly pipes of a mountain man, Whitmore crooned songs about digging his own grave in a voice that might have had Ralph Stanley watching the mail for legal documents requesting a paternity test. But while *Blackbird* closed the song-cycle on a hopeful note, equating birth and death with the natural circle of life on the farm, it also left a new question hanging in the air: What next?

Whitmore responded in 2009 with *Animals in the Dark*, an album that found him stretching himself both musically (“There’s Hope For You” flirted with Southern soul, while a rowdy chorus turned “Mutiny” into a drunken free-for-all) and thematically (like a folk singer in 1960s New York City, he packed his narratives with a range of scheming politicians, charlatans, and crooked cops).

With that in mind, *Field Songs*, his fifth proper release, initially sounds like a bit of a retreat. Again limiting himself to either guitar or banjo (rudimentary percussion—Stomping feet? Hands clapping?—accompanies the singer on just two tracks), Whitmore weaves together eight simple tales that seem almost weightless when measured against his early material. Now, this observation isn’t exactly a slight; the singer can’t always be expected to wield his banjo the way a gravedigger swings a pickaxe. But place “Bury Your Burdens in the Ground” (sample lyric: “If you got burdens, don’t carry them”) against the hole he grimly carves into the earth on his debut’s “Diggin’ My Grave,” and the difference becomes immediately evident.

But if anyone deserves a degree of contentment, it’s Whitmore, and once the initial shock wears off (is that...is that...*hope?*), a rather pretty folk album begins to emerge. Littered with field recordings of singing birds and chirping crickets, it often sounds as though Whitmore set up his recorder on the back porch, strapped on his banjo, and started singing. Songs touch on immigration (“Get There From Here”), the enduring nature of the human spirit (“We’ll Carry On”) and, on “Let’s Do Something Impossible,” even love. Of course, old soul that he is, Whitmore reaches back to a 1937 prison break (“We’ll escape from Alcatraz/Just like Theodore Cole”) to illustrate his point about overcoming insurmountable odds.

Elsewhere, Whitmore touches on familiar themes (see: death), albeit from an entirely different perspective. On “Everything Got Gone,” he picks up his acoustic, surveys the landscape, and sees finality in everything from the worn-down farmhouse just “a mile down the gravel road” to the tree precariously clinging to the riverbank. Perhaps surprisingly, he sounds okay with this as he sings “I’m just here for a little while” like a man unafraid of whatever it is that comes next.

Whitmore once sang “I don’t want you to know the pain I’ve known,” but by the time he rolls into the meditative, album-closing “Not Feeling Any Pain,” it’s undeniably clear that he’s finally made hard-won, long-overdue peace with the world. —**Andy Downing**

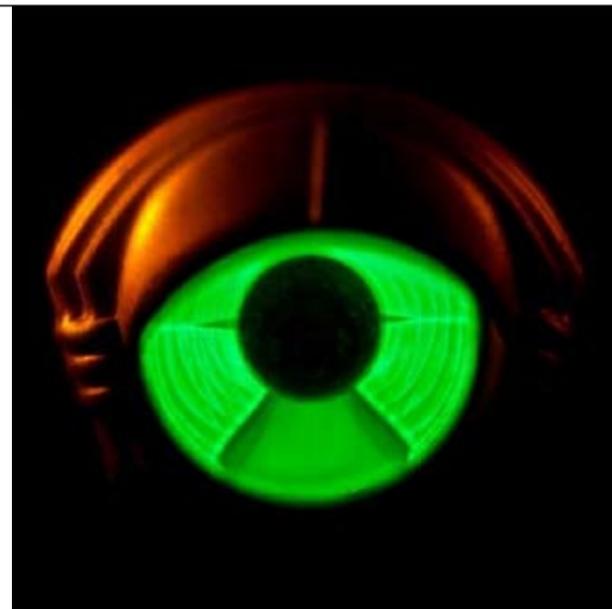
# M

y Morning Jacket recorded

much of *Circuital* in an abandoned church in its Louisville hometown, which helps explain why the album's liner notes include the phrase "recorded in heaven." Fittingly, the band doesn't shy from the spiritual, with singer Jim James delivering odes to both heaven (the violin-laced, afterlife-referencing "Wonderful (The Way I Feel)") and hell ("Holdin' on to Black Metal," which includes a visit from Lucifer himself).

No stranger to questions of faith, James could recently be heard delivering the existential prayer "Dear God" alongside a host of indie-rock icons in *Monsters of Folk*. Several songs here tread similar ground, from the low-key meditations of "Victory Dance" ("Should I close my eyes and prophesize/Hoping someday maybe you'll come?") to the summery "The Day Is Coming," which comes across like the soundtrack to an eerily peaceful Rapture.

The album, recorded with producer Tucker Martine (the Decemberists, Sufjan Stevens), finds My Morning Jacket returning to the stripped-down sound of earlier efforts like *At Dawn*. The idea that the band has come full circle is reflected in everything from the record's round-and-back name to James' words on its title track: "Right back in the same place that we started out." There's a degree of truth to the singer's words, but *Circuital* still sounds far more polished than anything in the band's early catalog. Indeed, anyone that fell for that crew of shaggy Southerners found bashing out reverb-soaked guitar jams on *It Still Moves* will likely feel as though they just stumbled into a black-tie affair wearing nothing but a Skynyrd t-shirt and pair of cutoff jean shorts when they spin this comparatively stoic disc.



### My Morning Jacket

*Circuital*

ATO Records, 180g 45RPM 2LP or CD

Still, don't think of *Circuital* as a step backwards. In many ways it's as though the band has returned to youth with accrued wisdom intact, like a Buddhist retaining full knowledge of past lives upon reincarnation. As James sings on the swaggering "First Light," "First I was an ancient/Then I was an infant/Now I am alive." Of course, coming on the heels of the band's last album, 2008's genre-hopping *Evil Urges*, which sounded uncomfortably like a jam band rehearsing Sly and the Family Stone covers—one wonders if James is referencing these experimentations when he sings about purging himself of youthful indiscretions on the propulsive "Outta My System"—a little bit of restraint goes a long way.

This is particularly true on the opening one-two punch of "Victory Dance" and seven-minute "Circuital," which layers on twinkling piano arpeggios and the lightly fuzzed-out, humid twang of Carl Broemel's guitar. Heck, even when the group branches out into R&B, the songs connect here in a way that they rarely did on previous albums. Witness the oddball "Black Metal," which successfully combines a children's choir, bleating horns, and James' convincing falsetto into a memorable bit of psychedelic soul. —**Andy Downing**



### SebastiAn

*Total*

Big Beat/Atlantic, CD

**F**rench producer and deejay SebastiAn secured a celebrated reputation on the club scene thanks to his clever remixes of Annie, Daft Punk, Cut Copy, and more. A longtime affiliate of label français Ed Banger, the Boulogne-born electrohouse artist's full-length debut moves beyond the dancefloor and comes across as like a stereo receiver that briefly tunes into one cutting-edge radio station before ceding to yet another in a wild spectrum.

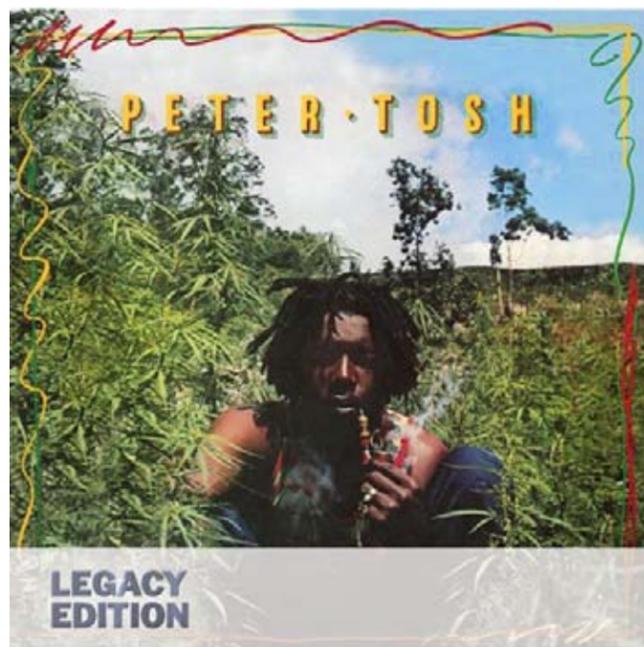
A diversely scrambled albeit united miasma of sounds, *Total* spans the expected four-on-the-floor beats and expressive noise pastiches while extending into unexpected territories such as Italian movie music and psychedelic disco.

The 22-track set doesn't rewrite electronic music rules, yet by operating as an all-in-one jukebox—an approach that holds true to the record's title—the album subverts conventions associated with dance and functions as an invitation to audiences that normally eschew the genre.

A handful of guests—Mayer Hawthorne soulfully croons on the sexy funk "Love In Motion"; M.I.A. eclipses most of what she turned in on her sloppy *MAYA* on the catchy whip-cracking electro-punk warning "C.T.F.O."; Justice's Gaspard Auge plays the electronic harpsichord during "Tetra," which unfolds as a mini-symphony composed via hotwired Speak & Spell machines—join SebastiAn for the sonic party. Still, the creative fun and success relate to the manner in which the ear-teasing music dives and weaves, every few minutes (and in the case of several transitional interludes, seconds) opening up a window on a different landscape of possibilities.

Per bands such as Justice and Sleigh Bells, the intersection of hard rock and metal with dance continues. The pounding title track slices metallic notes onto slasher-film backgrounds, "Motor" pulses with industrial aggression, "Jack Wire" flirts with doom menace, and "Doggg" grinds to thrash-metal riffs and shock-cartoon vocals. Not that SebastiAn abandons his native country's affinity for modernized, computer-manipulated funk. "Ross Ross Ross" grooves to hip-swaying samples and inverted beats; "Embody" lays down on thick beds of synthesizers and robotic Auto-Tune singing; "Kindercut" is built on the kind of hypnotic repetition and clamorous sequencing that draw hordes to late-night dance clubs the world over.

Indeed, the best dance music is that which makes one move and forget their inhibitions. *Total* accomplishes those goals and more, all the while introducing intelligent elements often ignored in a field more renowned for targeting the body than the mind. —**Bob Gendron**



### Peter Tosh

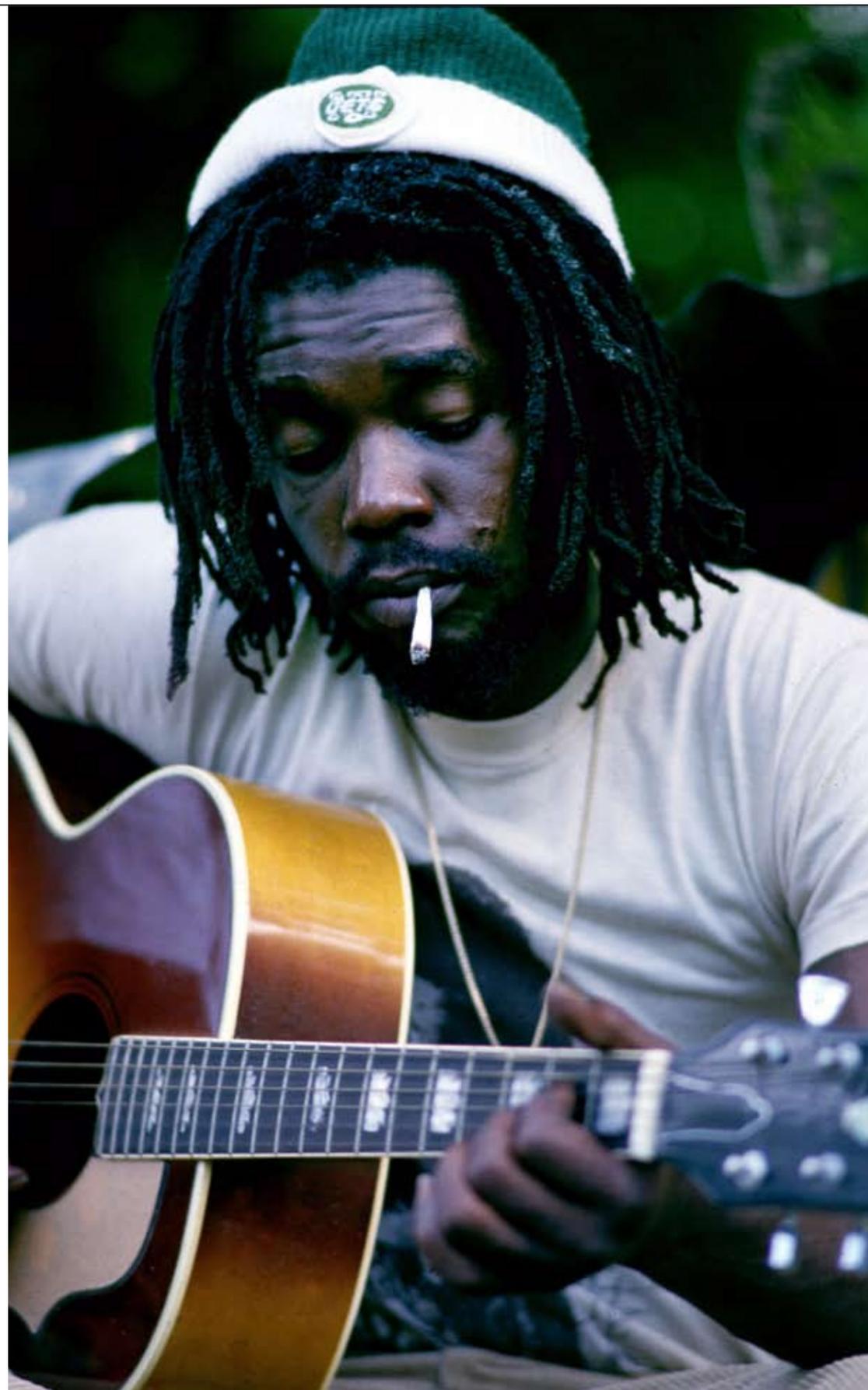
*Legalize It: Legacy Edition* and  
*Equal Rights: Legacy Edition*  
Sony/Legacy, 2CD (available separately)

**M**arijuana activists, party seekers, and high-school burnouts have forever held Peter Tosh's *Legalize It* in high esteem for related reasons. Due to its evocative cover art—Tosh smoking grass in a rural field—and deceptively simple goals, the record evolved into the equivalent of a Che Guevara image, art that's become devoid of much of its original context. It's likely that Tosh, assassinated in 1987, would welcome its role in the ongoing ganja legalization movement but despise knowing that those who champion it largely ignore the deeper messages within. Indeed, the stories and motivations behind its genesis—and the 1977 follow-up *Equal Rights*—are more involved than basic puff-puff-pass wishfulness.

Newly remastered and reissued as double-CD Legacy Edition sets, both albums belong in every music collection. While many listeners' reggae libraries don't go much deeper than a few token Bob Marley efforts, Tosh's first two solo sets are requisite examples of the music's hypnotic style, universal language, and sociopolitical reach. Recorded after Tosh quit the Wailers following his conflicts with Marley and Island Records chief Chris Blackwell—and made amidst oppressive, volatile, and dangerous circumstances that informed the revolutionary-minded lyrics and identity-driven declarations aimed at Third World societies everywhere—they teem with vibrant energy, relevant anti-authoritarianism, and progressive instrumentation.

In particular, the band on *Equal Rights* features personnel rivaled only by that of the Wailers when they had Tosh and Bunny Wailer as members. With drummer Sly Dunbar delivering one-drop snare-dominant pulses and bassist Robbie Shakespeare draping song foundations in taut albeit putty-textured bass lines, Tosh's narratives float above it all—like bubbles on a soup being slow-boiled over a fire, the simmering sounds underlying the militant themes and human-rights pronouncements. Diverse details—the fast-paced rock-cum-R&B introduction to “Stepping Razor,” light-stepping harmonizing surrounding the outstanding “Downpressor Man,” the interlocking assembly of grooves on the penitent “Jah Guide”—abound.

Legacy's reissue adds seven outtakes originally recorded for but, for brevity, omitted from the original. In his superb liner notes, Jamaica Music Museum curator Herbie Miller notes that the inclusion of the extra tracks solidifies the case for *Equal Rights* as Tosh's



magnum opus. He could've gone one step further, and stated that the bonus material makes a convincing argument for deeming the record reggae's greatest achievement. A second disc containing dub and alternative versions is a nice curiosity item.

Similar content, as well as Tosh's original mixes that were subsequently rescued from a garbage can, comprise the auxiliary disc to *Legalize It*—a debut aptly funded by a Miami drug dealer. Save for noticeably different vocal placements and a slightly stripped-down nature, the fare shines a brighter light onto Tosh's thought processes but yields no revelatory finds. No matter. The previously unreleased material serves to augment the singer/guitarist/pianist's finished studio LP, a record that taps a decidedly militant vein despite its seemingly peaceable goals of overturning marijuana laws.

Whether surveying broken romance on the country-tinted “Till Your Well Runs Dry” or balladic “Why Must I Cry,” issuing rhetorical challenges on “Whatcha Gonna Do,” or sparing no one on “No Sympathy,” Tosh emerges outspoken and uncompromising. In comparison to his former bandleader Marley, he's an outright renegade. Darkness, fear, and betrayal loom on the horizon. And yet the vocalist revels in the music's threatening culture, with the title track not just the product of a playful rebel but a determined man willing to endure physical beatings and illicit harassments to advance his beliefs.

“It's good for the flu/It's good for asthma/Good for tuberculosis/Even um-ara compositis,” Tosh maintains, speaking as if he foresaw the future in which cannabis is increasingly legalized for medical use. —**Bob Gendron**

**Lincoln Hall**

Chicago, Illinois

**June 13, 2011**

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Robert Loerzel

# Keren Ann

Uncomfortable silences arose amidst Keren Ann's concert at Chicago's Lincoln Hall, an 80-minute show during which stillness and restraint made it seem as if one should be afraid to breathe for fear of making extraneous noise. Yet the pin-drop quietness and hushed mood not only complemented the chanteuse's music; they were often part of it. Steeped in suggestiveness, the deceptively delicate fare unfolded into soundscapes whose spare minimalism and subdued persuasion succeeded precisely because of what wasn't there. Left with little to lean on, and accompanied only by a trumpeter, the singer/guitarist's naked presentation overflowed with boldness, subtlety, and nerve—particularly considering the pitfalls associated with stripped-down production.

For Ann (né Keren Ann Zeidel), a bewitching Israeli-born bilingual vocalist who remains much more popular in her longtime home country of France than in the US, the decision

to undress songs of their bigger recording-studio structures also represented a slight departure from that of her current *101* album. Yet the 37-year-old has never lacked for adventure. Having debuted nearly a decade ago with a pair of French trip-hop-minded discs, she's since broadened her stylistic horizons and language capacities on each successive release, most recently venturing into more complex territories that nonetheless, on the surface, appear calm, simple, and romantic. But not all is what it seems.

Indeed, on the opening "Strange Weather," a lament performed in a broken-hearted key, slivers of optimism pierced Ann's melancholy demeanor, flipping the tune on its head and turning it into less of a mournful hymn and more of an understatedly determined declaration of independence. As they did throughout the concert, implications of emotional severity bubbled under the wispy surface, camouflaged by the low hum of an amplifier and shiver of the Parisian transplant's purring coo.





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Similarly disguised, gentle swells on the traditional-tinged chanson “For You and I” kept indignation at an arm’s length, Ann’s reverb-laced voice—a mystic instrument at once hovering and fading, haunting and enticing—spelling out the rules of disengagement for a terminated relationship.

Outfitted in a sleeveless black top, jeans, and black boots, Ann exuded a serene cool that paralleled the blue and purple hues of her breathy timbre. Capable of moving from dreamy to nervous to bittersweet in the same verse, her range of resigned sighs, witty sing-song rhymes, and sultry murmurs instilled soft cabaret folk and artful pop arrangements with a raw intimacy usually associated with personal, whisper-in-your-ear meditations. As she fleshed out unhurried

arrangements on both electric and acoustic guitar, trumpeter Avishai Cohen splashed muted colors onto the canvases. Filtered through a multitude of effects pedals, his horn unleashed a wellspring of sounds.

Squiggling funk patterns peppered “It Ain’t No Crime,” elastic melodies cocooned “Lay Your Head Down,” and Dixieland-inspired flavors coursed through the prancing noir tune “Blood On My Hands,” its contrast of insouciance and violence evoking the carefree exploits of legendary gangster français Jacques Mesrine. If anything, Ann should’ve drawn more from French culture. When an enthusiastic fan shouted out a request for “Ailleurs,” she laughed and corrected the flat pronunciation, asking him to repeat it with the proper

accent. The exchange caused the initially reserved singer to drop her guard and loosen up. It may also have inspired her to close with the gorgeously sung “Le Chien d’avant Garde,” replete with sass and pizzazz. Similar Euro-fashioned elegance added an exotic lilt to the catchy plea “My Name Is Trouble” and “End of May,” the latter recalling the heyday of vocal jazz as it flirted with lasting affectation while peering into darker regions. It’s a dichotomy that Ann appeared comfortable revisiting.

“Instead of a man/I married a ghost,” Ann concluded on the fingerpicked ballad “All the Beautiful Girls,” a graceful slow dance so faint that her modest raise in pitch during the hook came as a relief. Latent with surprise, less has seldom been more. ●

**O**ne might be better off not knowing the backstory to this album. Yet pop-culture secrets aren't well kept in 2011, so let's get it out of the way: *Only in Dreams* is a record about death, much of it written while the lead singer's mother was falling prey to terminal brain cancer. Now try and forget that.

While lead Dum Dum Girl Dee Dee (real name: Kristen Gundred) isn't shy about the tragedy that inspired *Only in Dreams*, it would be unfair to forever brand this LP as one obsessed with sadness and mortality. For it's first and foremost, a rock 'n' roll record, and one on which singer and band try to maintain a too-cool-to-cry toughness throughout. Additionally, the girl-group harmonies, morale-boosting hand-claps, and reverb-laced guitars—which hit the pavement running on album opener “Always Looking” as if they're maxing out the odometer on a vintage Porsche 550—aren't built for wallowing.

Even the album's six-and-a-half-minute centerpiece of a ballad, “Coming Down,” traces a sudden moment of clarity. Should anyone attempt to stand in Dee Dee's way, “you had better make it strong,” she sings. This is a long way removed from the demo-like feel of the act's low-fi debut, last year's “I Will Be,” as every echoing quiver of a guitar string



### Dum Dum Girls

*Only in Dreams*  
Sub Pop, LP or CD

is heard loud and pristine. As for Dee Dee, she's calm as she scolds, and she's stern when she seduces, like a film noir femme fatale as filtered via Chrissie Hynde.

The formula here is one that's well-traversed, and it's no coincidence that the band works closely with industry vet Richard Gottehrer, perhaps still known best for co-writing “My Boyfriend's Back.” The Dum Dum Girls, however, do retro without it feeling worn. “Bedroom Eyes” conquers wistfulness with a steadily building momentum, peaking with a glistening, reach-for-the-stars bridge, while “Creep” is a kiss-off disguised as a dance party.

Still, the real pull is the emotional depth these largely three-minute songs reach with simplicity and directness. Take, for instance, “Caught in One,” a jangly number that does country by way of California garage rock. “This year's been a drag,” Dee Dee sings, eventually revealing that she simply wanted to have fun. Even in the darkest of times, the Dum Dum Girls show how it can be done. —**Todd Martens**

**A** glimpse into the mind of Annie Clark can be had with relative ease. Scan the titles of her latest effort, *Strange Mercy*, her third, and the word “Cheerleader” is one that stands out—not for its images of youthful enthusiasm but for the terms that surround it. The song that precedes “Cheerleader”? That one is called “Cruel.” And the one after? That one is labeled “Surgeon.” It doesn't take much detective work to discern that Clark's “Cheerleader” probably isn't going to be of the rah-rah kind.

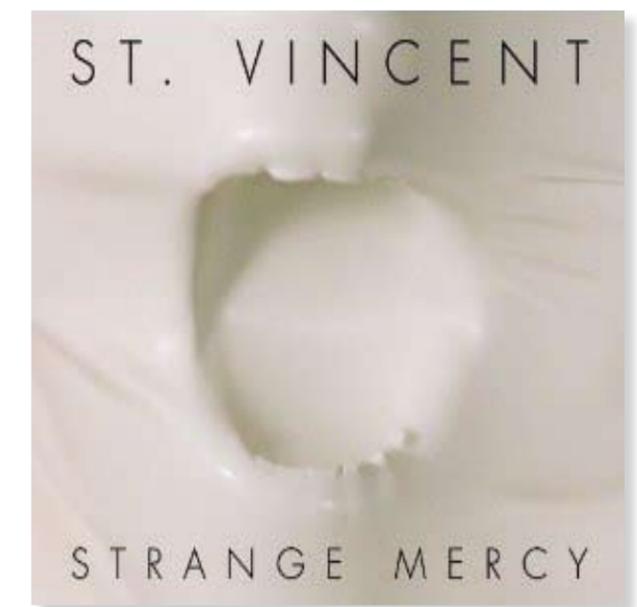
To enter a world conjured by Clark, who records under the St. Vincent moniker, is often to find an aural landscape where the familiar becomes foreign. As evidenced by the numerous Disney flourishes that dot her work, she has the talent to compose an orchestral score as soft as a stuffed Winnie the Pooh. Yet she also possesses the destructive tendencies of the fiercest of hard-rock guitarists.

Her 2008 album *Actor* is a collection of mini-symphonies, with dark fairy-tale imagery jarring with more computer-constructed classical tendencies. *Strange Mercy*, however, sees Clark in something of a tug-of-war. The orchestrations are no less ornate, but there's less of an effort to disguise their synthetic nature. Yet rather than feel more programmed, the album seems slightly stripped down—an anxiously tentative attempt to peel back the surface.

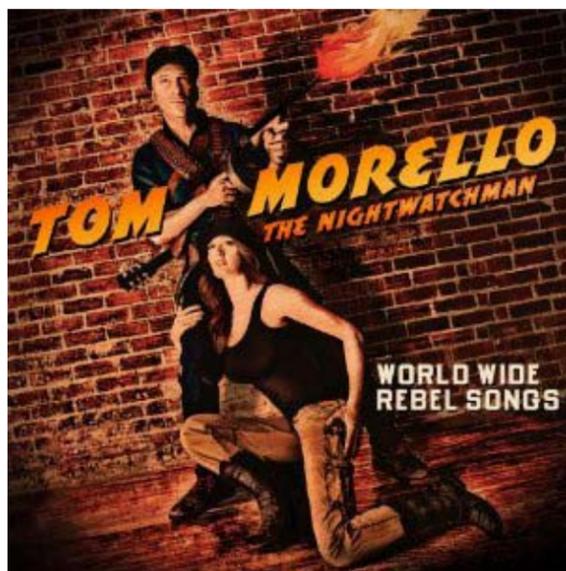
“I don't know what good it serves, pouring my personal dirt,” Clark sings on “Cheerleader,” a hands-in-the-air declaration before she does it anyway, knocking away any electronic hiss with riffs that hit the surface like one meteor after another. The feel isn't completely confessional, as shady police officers occupy the murky digital beats of the title track. Still, “Neutered Fruit” feels brutally honest for Clark. “Did you ever really care for me?” she asks, the song unfolding like a time-lapsed trip through a lifetime of sounds as childlike choirs and Prince-like jazzy excursions eventually fold in on themselves.

When she wants, the diminutive artist can sing with a disarming grace. But more often than not, Clark doesn't see the need to waste her time on such trivialities as sweetness. How else to explain the vocal overlays that turn the warm into something caustic on the album-opening “Chloe in the Afternoon,” or the ghastly howls that disrupt the nursery-rhyme coyness of the verses on “Hysterical Strength”?

At times, Clark's atmospheric experimentations can get the better of her, as *Strange Mercy* lags slightly in the middle. It's not a quibble so much as an acknowledgement that the exuberant intensity of “Cruel” and jangly psychedelics of “Northern Lights” are early emotional highs. But this is still weirdness that's engaging throughout. Toward album's end, Clark laments that she's not invited to the party she can hear through the wall, momentarily forgetting that it's the outsiders who are often more alluring. —**Todd Martens**



**St. Vincent**  
*Strange Mercy*  
4AD, LP or CD



### The Nightwatchman

*World Wide Rebel Songs*  
New West Records, LP or CD

**O**n his solo debut as the Nightwatchman, Rage Against the Machine guitarist Tom Morello dubbed himself a *One Man Revolution*, strapped on an acoustic guitar, and stomped his way through an array of fist-pumping protest songs as if he were overcome by Woody Guthrie's spirit.

For his third Nightwatchman album, Morello recruited a full band (the Freedom Fighter Orchestra) and expanded on his folk-troubadour sound. Heck, the guitarist even plugs his instrument back in for a handful of tracks, which, while miles removed from Dylan going electric, remains a welcome development for fans. See, as a singer, Morello

has always been utilitarian at best, hammering out words like a contractor pounding away at nails. But as a guitarist? Well, just check the solo he uncorks midway through "It Begins Tonight," a ferocious six-string display that sounds something like an army of marauders storming the castle gates—a fitting accompaniment to coup-baiting lines like "Let's move tonight and take the throne."

The hit-or-miss *World Wide Rebel Songs* arrives quickly on the heels of the recent *Union Town* EP, a more traditional effort that could have served as the soundtrack to the wave of pro-union protests still dominating headlines in Madison, Wisconsin—or, based on its throwback sound, any pro-union movement throughout history. But while the targets on *Union Town* are clear (corporations, right wing news outlets, apathy), *World Wide Rebel Songs* is a far more eclectic affair. Songs deal with everything from stop-lossed American soldiers stuck fighting an unjust war ("Stray Bullets") to Mexican slums decimated by the drug trade ("The Dogs of Tijuana").

Lyrically, Morello still finds himself prone to broad sloganeering, dropping lefty lines like he's been holed

away brainstorming bumper sticker copy for Ralph Nader: "History is not made by presidents or popes"; "Freedom's train has left the station"; "Are you gonna stand around? Or are you gonna be free?" While it's difficult to argue with the sentiments in his songs, there are definitely moments where the delivery is best described as clunky. Witness the title track, constructed around a sing-along chorus that sounds as though it's being belted out by the cast of *A Mighty Wind*. Superior are the shake-the-rafters thump of the gospel-inflected "Speak and Make Lightning" and comparatively stoic "Facing Mount Kenya," a slinky spiritual on which Morello puts the overwhelming challenges facing our democracy in more natural terms. "I am only one man," he whispers, "facing Mount Kenya."

At its best, Morello's solo output serves as a rallying cry. "I ain't alone no more," he howls atop the harmonica-fueled folk of "Black Spartacus Heart Attack Machine." But too often on *Rebel Songs*, the frontman sounds unmoored, coming across less like a would-be prophet than one well-intentioned man adrift in the desert.—**Andy Downing**

**P**acked with violent imagery and musical nods to the classic doo-wop era, Mister Heavenly's debut album, *Out of Love*, sounds as though it could have sprung forth fully formed from filmmaker David Lynch's imagination.

On the swooning "Your Girl," the indie rockers deliver lines like "You got a gash, let's get that sewn" atop a slow-dancing 1950s groove, while the twinkling "Hold My Hand" opens as a sincere love song ("I'll stroke your hair/Put your head on my shoulder") before taking a significantly darker turn ("Don't try to leave/Feral dogs have us surrounded").

The band, which gained a bit of notoriety late in 2010 by inviting actor Michael Cera to tag along as a touring bassist, brings together frontmen Ryan "Honus Honus" Kattner (Man Man) and Nicholas Thorburn (The Unicorns, Islands) along with Modest Mouse drummer Joe Plummer. The crew's musical output is every bit as bat shit and unpredictable as its combined DNA suggests. There are definite strains of Modest Mouse in the chunky guitar march of opener "Bronx Sniper." "Reggae Pie," by contrast, flirts with dub, the hypnotic groove pulsating as though it were emanating from a private cabana on some tropical isle—and dig that not-so-subtle nod to Soul II Soul's "Back to Life (However Do You Want Me)."

Elsewhere, the trio experiments with surf-rock on "Harm You," a dreamy bit of ocean-pop with lyrics—"Close your eyes/Don't turn around/I won't harm you"—that would have most women digging in their purses for pepper spray. Equally twisted is "Charlyne," a piano-pop nugget so undeniably jaunty that it nearly conceals the decaying heart at the tune's core.

Like a Ripley's Believe It or Not museum, oddities abound, from the woozy "Pineapple Girl," which takes its inspiration from a relatively obscure event (the late 80s pen-pal relationship between 10-year-old Michigan resident Sarah York and Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega) to "Diddy Eyes," a dreamy throwback whose nonsensical chorus ("She has diddy eyes, diddy eyes") cuts against the more straightforward musical backdrop. Indeed, there are times where it sounds as though this joyously twisted effort took its inspiration from a single line off the album-closing "Wise Men": "I tried so hard to keep my head on straight, but I'm cracking like a coconut anyway."—**Andy Downing**



©Photo by Jacqueline Di Milia



### Mister Heavenly

*Out of Love*  
Sub Pop, LP or CD



**Cave**  
*Neverendless*  
Drag City, LP or CD

**C**hicago psych-rockers Cave have a way with noise.

In the past, the crew, which originated as a five-piece before slimming down to a quartet for this most recent turn, bashed out shaggy, feedback-heavy squalls of guitar drone that are the sonic equivalent of primal cave paintings. But on *Neverendless*, that hairy sound is given the *Encino Man* treatment.

Songs like the Neu!-inspired “WUJ,” which sounds something like Wilco’s “Spiders (Kidsmoke)” if it had remained strictly instrumental and never progressed past its percolating first quarter, and the epic 14-plus-minute “This Is the Best” (truth in advertising, in this case) are scrubbed up and given a clean shave.

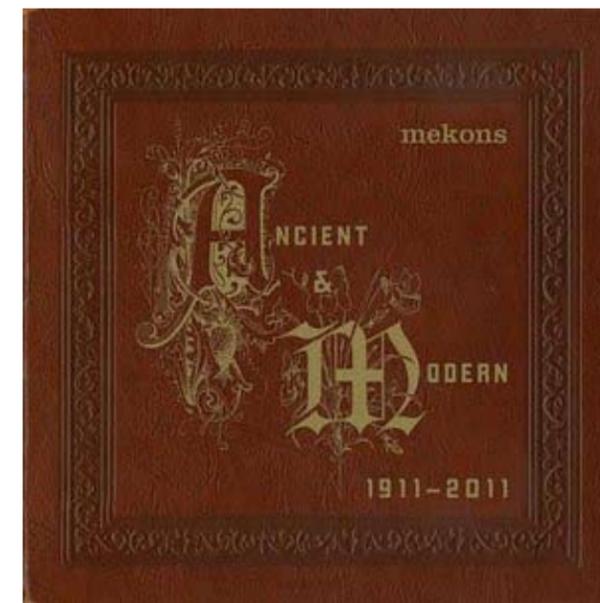
While the group’s 2010 EP *Pure Moods* hinted at a new musical direction (more lyrics, less chaos), these five songs don’t stick to the expected script. Instead of the central role it played on songs like “Teenagers,” the human voice is almost non-existent here, save for a few random shouts and a brief passage of cult-like chanting (“OntheriseOntherise”). Listening back, it’s as if the machines are fully in control. Witness the mechanized “Adam Roberts,” a hypnotic mash-up of buzzing guitar and synthetic noise that, at just a shade over four minutes, doubles as the album’s shortest track. At nearly twice the length, “OJ” stretches things back out, piling on deep reverberations of bass that sound like coded messages being beamed into deep space—fragmented synths and guitars buzzing as if they’re trying to shake loose years of accumulated cobwebs.

There are definite connections to be made between *Neverendless* and the Dirtbombs’ latest, *Party Store*, an album that finds the Detroit garage-rock crew reinterpreting classic techno tunes from the Michigan city’s electronic music heyday. Fittingly then, Cave draws upon its own hometown’s musical past, weaving together its own version of Chicago house on “This Is the Best,” a robotic and repetitive jam that sounds like four dudes doing their damndest to come across like cyborgs. “On the Rise,” by contrast, has a more handmade feel, the bandmates layering together the steady click of drums, needly guitar, and deadened vocals.

The downside? At just five tracks, things are over way too quickly. Fortunately for all, these repetition-heavy cuts demand repeated plays.

—**Andy Downing**

**P**ity the Mekons. On the verge of year number 35, the Chicago-via-Leeds, England, band has amassed one of the more adventurous catalogs in rock n’ roll. Yet despite the relatively consistent roll-out of material—the tally of albums and collections is near 30—the artsy punk-county-folk collective has soldiered on in near-obscurity. In fact, it’s a safe bet that rock critics comprise a sizable contingent of the band’s fan base.



**Mekons**  
*Ancient & Modern*  
Sin/Bloodshot Records, CD

None of that, sadly, is likely to change with *Ancient & Modern*, although the promise of a forthcoming Mekons documentary could finally lift the band’s profile. For newcomers, this is as fine a place as any to dive into what could be a daunting mass of material. There’s meaty political rock anthems, boozy stream-of-conscious ruminations on religion, a piano vamp, and chant-like songs outfitted with plucked lutes and violins. After the folksy rock of 2007’s *Natural*, this is one of the looser later-day Mekons albums, and it ambles through genres with a devilish grin.

Always-exquisite vocalist Sally Timms has her fun dancing around the rootsy cabaret of “Geeshie,” and Jon Langford is in his comfort zone in “Space in Your Face,” on which there’s a grand break-up, a drunken spill in the street, and a reference or two to the American labor movement—all while digital effects shoot

over guitars like laser beams. “The Devil at Rest” is quieter, a group sing-along with island rhythms. And “Calling All Demons” is a bluesy stomp with accordions.

Thematically, the 11 songs here promise to look at the world just on the brink of WWI and offer parallels with modern society. There’s no doubt plenty of material to please the most cynical of rock n’ roll socialists, but one of the Mekons’ strengths has long been their ability to humanize big issues.

See, for instance, “I Fall Asleep,” where Tom Greenhalgh is the tortured, woozy narrator who stumbles through the piano ballad. “My darling cannot understand what I have done,” Greenhalgh sings, as images of combat rest alongside those of loneliness. So, to sum up the Mekons’ history lesson: War, drink, break-ups, and a good tune.

—**Todd Martens**

# A Discussion With Flaming Lips Ringleader **Wayne Coyne**



©Photo by J. Michelle Martin-Coyne

By Andy Downing

**F**or more than 25 years, Wayne Coyne has acted as ringleader of the ongoing Flaming Lips carnival, guiding the psych-rock crew through acid-washed experimentations (*Telepathic Surgery*), heartfelt art-pop (*The Soft Bulletin*), and, most recently, into the dark, damaged explorations of the endlessly weird *Embryonic*. Through it all, the frontman has maintained a fierce work ethic, childlike sense of wonderment, and enviable creative streak. After all these years, Coyne and Co. can still find new ways to surprise.

Witness the band's latest project: The release of a miniature drive containing four new songs in the middle of a seven-pound gummy skull. In a recent phone interview, Coyne discussed the darker turn on *Embryonic*, how the Lips are like the Beatles (a comparison he made with tongue planted firmly in cheek), and why the Oklahoma collective still toys with the idea of bringing *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots* to Broadway.

**Are these single-track releases like “Two Blobs Fucking” an offshoot of the idea that you possibly pushed the album format as far as you could with *Embryonic*?**

Part of the mentality that freed us up on *Embryonic* was this idea that we were doing a double record. Because it's a double record, it allowed us to be ridiculously self-indulgent. Songs didn't have to make any sense and they didn't have to have chord changes and they could be ten minutes long. It was total freedom. You think things like discipline and listening and caring about the audience make your music better, and perhaps they do. I don't know. But all I know is every time we got away from this way that we worked, we just had such a great time. We would get done with one of these normal pieces of music and then we would reward ourselves and say, “Let's do one of these freaky things!”

I always point to “Revolution #9” on the Beatles’ *White Album*—see how I compare myself to the Beatles? Without that being this weird, behemoth of a double record, a song like “Revolution #9” probably never would have been made or put on an album. But because it was this big, expansive record you think, “Okay, we’ll throw that on there.” When I was growing up, those sorts of songs just felt like very normal songs.

**Did you have the sense as you were recording *Embryonic* that you were taking some darker turns with the music?**

The word “dark” comes up a lot. It’s not this major-chord, optimistic, gleeful record like some of ours have been. I think people who love *Soft Bulletin* and love *Yoshimi* sometimes probably wish that we made records like that every time. To me, we wouldn’t want to do that. I think we’ve been lucky that when we look back at what we’ve done I can say, “Wow, we really turned a corner there and became something different!” But at the time I don’t think we knew that at all. I don’t think we sat there and said, “We’ll show everybody there’s more to us!” We’re just in a panic making whatever music we can.

**Did it feel like the darker musical direction was a way to cut against the glitter and animal costumes that have become staples of the live show?**

Well, part of the reason we do that in the live show is I sometimes feel like even songs from *Soft Bulletin* are too heavy. I can remember the first night we played some of the *Soft Bulletin* songs. It was to a crowd in Dallas. We had played to this crowd for a long time and they were a bunch of 25-year-olds who did acid, and every time we played it would be this fucking great party. And here we were about to play this heavy, existential, death-oriented group of songs. Even a song like “Feel Yourself Disintegrate,” I mean, it’s a bummer. It’s powerful, but it’s not a party. I didn’t want people to think that this can’t still be a party. Even then it was, “What can we do?” I was throwing handfuls of confetti back in 1999 to say, “C’mon, I want you to do acid and have a good time.” I thought about it a little after we made *Embryonic*. Maybe these songs are just too strange to play next to something like “Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots”? But they’re not. I always try to remember, it’s just like talking. If we were having a conversation, you could be talking about something that’s absurd and funny one minute and then three minutes later you could be talking about a very tragic serious thing, and it wouldn’t seem like, “Hey, I thought we were supposed to be laughing?”

I think we’ve been lucky that when we look back at what we’ve done I can say, “Wow, we really turned a corner there and became something different!”

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**I read a great quote from you where you said, “We don’t need to make the world any more normal and boring than it already is.” It seems like mindset drives almost every decision you guys make.**

[Laughs] Well, yeah, and in the defense of the things that are boring, I understand there are things out there that can’t just be whimsical and do whatever the fuck they want. I’m lucky I can. The Flaming Lips audience would think much less of me if I tried to calculate and play it safe or whatever. The Flaming Lips audience has allowed me to fail spectacularly in the pursuit of this. “Entertain us, Wayne. Show us your world.” But I agree, too many people play it safe and it’s boring.

**Is that the driving force behind releasing music in a seven-pound gummy skull?**

Completely! We do live in times where there’s an almost absurdist kind of art to [releasing music], and I think sometimes the more absurd it is the more interesting the group is.

**Do you consider yourself impulsive?**

Not necessarily. It’s not like one minute I’m working on a film and the next minute I want to build racecars. This thing of one idea sprouting another idea sprouting another idea, well, yeah I believe in that. Even in the way we work musically, you see where it streams off. But I don’t know if it would be impulsive. Maybe impulsive just had a bad connotation to it. It’s more intuitive.

**Has U2’s experience with the *Spider-Man* musical deterred you pursuing *Yoshimi* for the stage?**

No, no. I have to say the mistake people make is when they think, “I don’t want to make some big, dumb Broadway thing that is laughed at and fails and is an embarrassment.” If it loses money and it’s embarrassing, I don’t care. I’d rather do it and fail than worry about it. When you look at things that way you become pretty fearless.

**I imagine if you staged it the way you wanted the potential for injury among the cast and audience would be higher than with *Spider-Man*.**

Well, yeah. But it wouldn’t be boring, would it? ●

The Flaming Lips audience would think much less of me if I tried to calculate and play it safe or whatever. The Flaming Lips audience has allowed me to fail spectacularly in the pursuit of this. “Entertain us, Wayne. Show us your world.”

**Lincoln Hall**

Chicago, Illinois

**September 29, 2011**

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Jeff Dorgay



# GIRLS

The dozens of long-stem flowers scattered about the stage at Girls' sold-out Lincoln Hall show suggested a scene reminiscent of a somber funeral or celebratory wedding. Aply, moments from the indie-rock group's convincing 80-minute concert could've served both events, with its music leaning towards malaise and cheerfulness, sometimes within the same song. Delving into private thoughts and confessing innermost desires as if he was conversing with himself in front of a mirror, Girls singer/guitarist Christopher Owens utilized the performance as a platform for his tortured emotions—the kind of which often resonate with individuals punctured by the travails of unrequited romance, wishful longing, and feelings of inadequacy.

As a bandleader, Owens strikes a reluctant figure. He seems to still be processing the extra attention paid to his group as a result of its excellent sophomore album *Father Son Holy Ghost*. While he stood at center stage and faced the crowd, he usually kept his head bowed. His eyes concealed by drifting bangs, his mouth became the only primarily visible attribute on his face. During frequent tuning breaks, Owens ignored the comments of those in the audience intent on baiting him to submit a response. The silence had nothing to do with immodesty or unconcern. It related to Owens' shyness and manner of communicating what he needed to say through song.

While meditating on love, Owens often became consumed by it, the ruminations taking the form of questions-as-statements (“Could we fall in love?”), wounded admissions (“My heart’s been broken”) self-referencing observations (“I’m not as young as I used to be/I’m not as beautiful”), tragic memories (“When I said I loved you, honey/I knew you’d break my heart”), bummed-out disclosures (“I’m feeling so sad and alone”), and the pained revelations of a single man that believed he’d forever be *célibataire* (“It’s hard enough to be alone/It’s harder still to spend so long looking for happiness”). His lanky, skeletal frame and stringy hair helped give shape and believability to his lyrics by way of the fact that, in addition to being sung in an earnest and genuine voice, the words fit the frontman’s physical profile.

Owens never came across as the type of bachelor yearning to troll trendy bars or impress with flash. Instead, his unthreatening posture and mellow, occasionally nasal-tipped timbre belonged to a man genuine in his intent to find companionship, relief, and comfort. Of course, Owens’ concerns are nothing new in pop music and, when bereft of context and support, usually reveal themselves as insufferably piteous and laughably pathetic. In strumming jangly melodies from Rickenbacker guitars and leaning on a thumping rhythm section for slight turns of rough-and-tumble grit, Owens appeared to understand the need for sonic personality, muscle, and, yes, brief elements of transcendence.



Rather than encase tunes in downcast arrangements, Girls met Owens’ flinching anguish and star-crossed romanticism head-on with bouncy surf riffs, curb-hugging bass lines, and resilient countermelodies streaked with positivism and brightness. The emerging scenarios hinted at Owens overcoming darkness and finding the light, the conversion of soul-scorched ache into reasonable hopefulness. The quintet’s tonal variations—shifts between distortion, fuzz, reverb, and delay effects painted songs with intriguing textural colors—produced stronger, punchier renditions of fare such as “Alex” and “Like a River.” Extra freedom afforded the keyboards and drums added to the aural expansiveness. On the epic “Vomit,” psychedelic haze yielded to edgy, craggy feedback and winding, ugly beauty that ultimately bled into the repeated invitational refrain. Illuminating Girls’ contrasts, wordless doo-wop harmonies underscored the childlike glee in “Magic,” while on “Die,” bottom-end 70s-drenched sludge briefly positioned the band as successors to Deep Purple.

“Yeah, I’m just crazy/I’m totally mad,” proffered Owens on the jitters-inspiring “Lust for Life” as his mates bop-bopped sunny rejoinders in the background. As he checked off simple wishes and hungered for a new start, Owens already realized what many of his newer, more complex and assured songs probe with more detail: That there’s nothing insane about wanting a partner with whom to camp out in front of a fire, share experiences, and risk soul-baring secrets. What’s crazy is to give up hope that such a situation will ever occur.



Photo by Autumn de Wilde

**W**ilco's *The Whole Love* begins with a crush of digital thunder. It's the sound, perhaps, of computer-hard drives malfunctioning. Or maybe it's the band imagining some sort of electronic warfare. The specifics aren't quite discernable, but it's gripping nonetheless. Don't look to leader Jeff Tweedy for guidance, either. "I can be so far away from my wasteland...Ambulance," he sings, an artist tortured by his own mind. Hi-tech warbles lead to a funky, effects-drenched bass, and plaintive vocals give way to an eruption of scorching guitars, instruments trailed by a rhythm so rushed it nearly runs itself over. Wilco calls this song—this exercise in computer-enhanced rock n' roll carnage—"Art of Almost," and it sounds unlike anything the band has ever recorded.

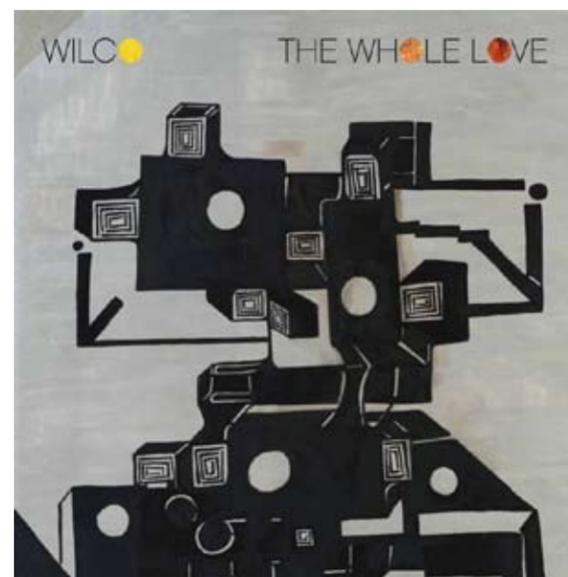
Well done, Wilco, well done.

Not since the extended melodic deconstruction of "I Am Trying to Break Your Heart," which heralds the beginning of 2001's *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, has Wilco launched an album with an opening track this far out of the realm of listener expectations. Wilco, now in its 17th year, long ago trained fans to anticipate the unexpected. Yet something happened on 2009's *Wilco (The Album)*. While there was no shortage of finely crafted songs, rock n' roll comfort seemed to outnumber the surprises.

Rare was it that such sharp musicianship, such a competent knack for a melody, would feel so *normal*. Ever since the Chicago band unleashed 1996's sophomore *Being There*, which jettisoned the backyard country of feel of the debut *AM*, for spacious roots-rock atmospheres, it felt as if a gauntlet was being thrown at the feet of its fans. No two albums, the Tweedy-led outfit seemed to be saying, would ever sound the same. And thus it was so.

Lineups changed, sometimes drastically, but the mission didn't. There was gallantly harmonious orchestral pop (1999's *Summerteeth*), exquisitely detailed art-rock minimalism (*Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*), aggressively claustrophobic guitars (2004's *A Ghost is Born*), and soul-enhanced folk-rock (*Sky Blue Sky*). On *Wilco (The Album)*, the band neatly, and confidently, touches on all of the above, with the sole exception being the panic-stricken "Bull Black Nova."

*The Whole Love*, however, is full of the exceptions. Some, of course, are stronger than others. Sadly, the entire album doesn't have the cut-and-paste intensity of "Art of Almost."



### Wilco

*The Whole Love*  
dBpm/Anti, 2LP and CD

feat, as often here, Tweedy is not the focal point. He's brash and energized on "I Might," sure, but that song belongs to bassist John Stirratt and keyboardist Mikael Jorgensen. Never has Wilco sounded this groovy, as Stirratt's fuzzy bass leads the song with an R&B shimmy. Jorgensen, meanwhile, channels 60s rockers the Zombies and plays give-and-take with Tweedy.

Ace guitarist Nels Cline gets plenty of moments to roam, and turns the solitary sentiment of "Born Alone" into a statement of defiance. He also contrasts giant bar-band riffs with sleek, artsy fills on the delightfully reckless "Standing O." "I mope and I cry and attack," Tweedy sings on the latter, a moment that captures the emotional schizophrenia of much of the lyrics. "Capitol City," for instance, seems like a giant mind-game. Musically, the old-fashioned jaunty pop stroll is Wilco at its silliest, while lyrically, it's an embrace that tries to keep its distance. As Tweedy sings later on the album, "As intimate as a kiss over the phone."

"Art of Almost" creates nearly impossible expectations for Wilco's eighth album, yet *The Whole Love* comes close to delivering on them. "Dawned on Me" may be a tad slight, and "Rising Red Lung" is all darkness amidst an album that's spry and bright. Yet the record is a daring statement, even coming to a close with 12 minutes of acoustic exploration. "One Sunday Morning (Song for Jane Smiley's Boyfriend)" unfolds with slight melodic tweaks and shading throughout, underscoring once again that Wilco, nearly 20 years into its career, still has plenty left to investigate. —**Todd Martens**

Yet there's a studio-driven sheen that makes this, from start to finish, the freshest Wilco work since *A Ghost is Born*. Much credit must be given to multi-instrumentalist Pat Sansone, who Tweedy enlisted for a greater production role.

Sansone adorns many tracks with a symphonic lushness, and helps liven up even Wilco's more traditional moments. Sawsawing violins and drummer Glenn Kotche's constantly in-motion clickity-clack rhythm add a softness to the starkness of "Black Moon," while "Sunloath" tiptoes to a finale drenched in 60s psychedelics. "I don't want to lose this fight," Tweedy sings with his comforting rasp, and the chorus-less song rescues its lyricist in the final moments with swooning harmonies and crystallizing guitars, finishing with a kaleidoscope of instrumental colors.

Those who have seen Wilco live in recent years know that the current six-piece incarnation—the only Wilco lineup to have lasted for three full albums—has the ability to put on an expansive, blistering rock n' roll show packed with highs and lows. *The Whole Love* seems to recognize such a



Photo by Sandy Kim



**Girls**  
*Father, Son, Holy Ghost*  
True Panther Sounds, 2LP or CD

**T**here's a moment near the close of "Vomit," the lead single off Girls' excellent new sophomore album *Father, Son, Holy Ghost*, where waifish frontman Christopher Owens, buoyed by a gospel choir and coffee-rich strains of soul organ, repeats the starry-eyed phrase "come into my heart." Ostensibly the singer is delivering the message to a would-be lover—after all, the band's 2009 debut hinged on Owens' ability to spin heartache into lo-fi, psych-pop gold—but this time around his words come across as a universal invitation.

In interviews, the frontman never shies from his complex past (Owens was born into the Children of God cult, escaping to Amarillo, Texas, when he was 16). But the subject surfaces here in surprisingly direct ways. The weary "My Ma," for one, sounds like it could have been written after the singer stumbled alone into the hot Texas sun for the first time. "I'm so lost out here," he laments atop bluesy organ and spectral rays of guitar, "I'm looking for meaning in my life, and you, my ma."

Elsewhere, he equates his search for love with a desire to reclaim the sense of comfort he once felt in his mother's arms (the galloping surf-rock of "Honey Bunny"), struggles with drug addiction (the Renaissance Faire pluck of "Just a Song," a tune whose "keep me up/keep me down" refrain explicitly references self-medicating to maintain emotional balance), and blasts through a deceptively upbeat love song ("Magic") that's as heartwarming as the Hall & Oates number that enlivens the otherwise forgettable *500 Days of Summer*.

Of course, this being Owens, heartache remains something of a constant. On the shuffling garage-rock bruiser "Alex," the singer pledges his unrequited love to another in a series of verses that turn the song into a musical version of that scene in *Louie* where comedian Louis C.K.

unburdens his soul to a longtime crush, knowing full well she'll never feel the same about him. "Love, Like a River," a retro slice of Stax-worthy soul, finds Owens trying to hold tight to a girl who's no easier to grasp onto than smoke ("No man can ever keep that girl from moving on," he croons wearily). Even "Saying I Love You," which opens like a straightforward 1960s romancer, quickly pivots toward depression.

Things grow even darker on "Die," a riff-heavy monster that pairs a drugged-out, thundering guitar squall with Owens' most hopelessly despondent lyrics to date ("We're all going straight to hell tonight," he howls). But even a quick glimpse at the album title serves as a reminder that redemption is near at hand, and eventually arrives in the form of the winding, eight-minute "Forgiveness." The latter is a sprawling, Pink Floyd-like epic the singer penned after coming down from a particularly memorable acid trip. While jarringly simple in concept—the song suggests that forgiveness is key to living a fulfilled life—Owens' words touch on a range of universal themes: sin, redemption, enlightenment, religion, self-discovery, and even death.

"Nobody's gonna find any answers if you're looking in the dark," he sings as cautious acoustic guitars encircle him like smoke rings. This is what illumination sounds like.  
—Andy Downing

**While jarringly simple in concept, Owens' words touch on a range of universal themes: sin, redemption, enlightenment, religion, self-discovery, and even death.**



**Mastodon**  
*The Hunter*  
 Warner Bros., LP and CD

**A**fter making involved concept records about earth, fire, water, and the universe, respectively, where does a band go? As it headed into sessions for its fifth studio album, the question loomed for Mastodon, which took imaginative themes about as far as any group can without invoking parody. Little surprise, then, that *The Hunter* is a transitional effort and the most stripped-back release since the Atlanta quartet's 2002 debut. Unencumbered by narratives, the collective seems at times to exhale sighs of relief as well as recognize the sense of freedom gleaned from a back-to-basics approach.

Not that the band abandons creative growth and challenging experimentation. However, the will to push boundaries and demand to explore ambitious territory assume a lower priority. Liberated from a high-pressure atmosphere, Mastodon relaxes and lets fly—occasionally channeling pent-up energy or emitting aggression simply for the sake of doing so. The strategy owes less to letting down one's guard and more to rediscovering skill sets and fundamental reasons to play music. Of course, the danger with such tactics lies with recycling the past and/or settling for what comes easy.

Coming from an ensemble that's made mind-melting concoctions in the form of "Circle of Cysquatch" and "The Last Baron," new fare like "Curl of the Burl" and "Thickening" register as repeat activities, the type of exercises expected from ersatz artists that mimic Mastodon's moves. It's hard not to think that the underwhelming fare is a rushed consequence of a tireless band that should've taken more time to reenergize after issuing its previous album and staging subsequent tours. And on a

13-song set that logs in at 53 minutes, a bit of trimming wouldn't hurt.

Thankfully, throwaway tracks are an exception on *The Hunter*, the strengths of which are (again) Brann Dailor's battery of dynamic drumming as well as concise, get-in-get-out episodes that last just long enough to allow listeners to picture how pieces fall into place, ala a to a rapid-paced Tetris game, before the music either explodes or slugs you in the craw. Psychedelic elements abound, whether on "Stargasm," an into-the-void hypnosis that practically demands incense be lit and gongs struck, or during "The Sparrow," a hefty tune influenced by early Pink Floyd.

Resembling the agitated commotion of bumblebees shaken in a Mason jar, "All the Heavy Lifting" references traditional Mastodon lyrical touchstones of mountains and oceans, the song's hook-and-ladder construction and pent-up suspense ceding ground before getting trampled underfoot. Few bands manage to shape viscous heaviness into fluid, airy, and breathable patterns. Quick arpeggios, wah-wah guitar solos, and jazz-infected per-

cussive fills open up valleys bathed in light and shade. "Bedzazzled Fingernails" capitalizes on such detours, the song scampering through craggy sonic jungles that conjure the grand hedge maze—and the characters' sense of desperation—in *The Shining*.

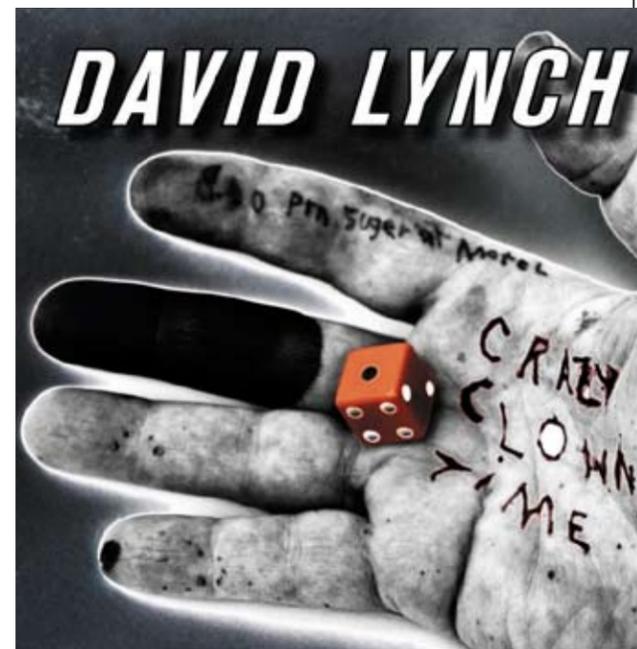
Films also come to mind in "Creature Lives," which plays as an indirect tribute to 60s-era drive-in monster flicks. Beginning with mad-cap laughter and manipulated frequency effects, the song represents yet another change for Mastodon, as its glam-rock accents and choral chant vocals confirm the group's capacity to surprise, refresh, and invent remains unabated. —**Bob Gendron**



In his movies, director David Lynch explores the darkest, weirdest, and most twisted corners of the human experience.

Witness the opening shot of *Blue Velvet*, where a camera pans through an idyllic suburban setting before diving beneath one of the bright green, perfectly manicured lawns to reveal the beetles eating away at them from below.

A similar feel pervades Lynch's first solo album, *Crazy Clown Time*, which time and again takes a seemingly innocent scene—children running through the backyard, nighttime treks to football games—and twists it into something vaguely menacing. In interviews, Lynch, whose interest in music traces back to a song he co-wrote for *Eraserhead* in 1977, describes his sound as “modern blues,” which is a bit like describing his film *Mulholland Drive* as a “modern noir” (supposing that film noirs typically dispose of conventions like plot, continuity, and clarity in lieu of extended masturbation scenes featuring Naomi Watts). Dark and disjointed, the music on *Clown Time* more closely resembles Tom Waits' most out-there experimentations than other, more easily recognizable forms of the blues. *(continued)*



#### David Lynch

*Crazy Clown Time*  
Sunday Best, 2LP and CD

The consistently unsettling album arrives awash in queasy tremolo-heavy guitar, programmed drums, and clipped bursts of noise (gunshots, howling electronics). Save for a guest appearance from Yeah Yeah Yeahs singer Karen O, who brings a sense of desperation to the surrealist nightmare of “Pinky’s Dream,” Lynch provides vocals throughout, sometimes singing through a vocoder—the willfully odd “Strange and Unproductive Thinking,” which includes more references to dental hygiene than the typical Rick Reilly column and comes across like a cyborg making its shaky debut at an open-mic poetry slam—and other times adopting a reedy twang that sounds something akin to Jimmy Fallon fighting off a head cold to bang out his impression of Neil Young.

Removed from the musical backdrop, a majority of Lynch’s lyrics sound relatively tame. When he repeatedly intones, “So glad you’re gone/Ball and chain gone” on “So Glad,” it initially sounds like the plainspoken talk of a new divorcee. But delivered in cryptic tones and paired with shadowy instrumental accompaniment, a more nefarious picture of wrongdoing emerges. Ball and chain gone? *Why, what have you done with her, David?* Similar feelings pervade the weary “Speed Roadster,” a tale of obsession on which Lynch sings, “I might be stalking you” like a man who’s already invested in his share of wiretaps. Then there’s the innocuously named “Football Game,” which gradually evolves into a bleary menacer. “You better run, baby,” Lynch drawls as guitar chords melt and stretch like glass put against an open flame. “I hope you can.”

Occasionally, Lynch adopts the same weird-for-weirdness-sake approach that can submarine his films. This is particularly true of the title track, a ponderous, seven-minute-plus tune where the director—speaking in a nasal, high-pitched voice—provides a weirdly detailed description of a child’s party (“And Timmy jumped so high!”) atop a droning musical backdrop replete with over-sexualized moaning. “Strange and Unproductive Thinking,” which might be the most apt title on the album, sounds similarly unmoored, a drug-induced experiment better left on the studio’s cutting-room floor.

Indeed, while the famed director makes a somewhat convincing turn as a musician, he could have used a good editor to help shape and refine his disconcerting soundscapes. —**Andy Downing**



Photo by Cory Smith

**Still Corners**

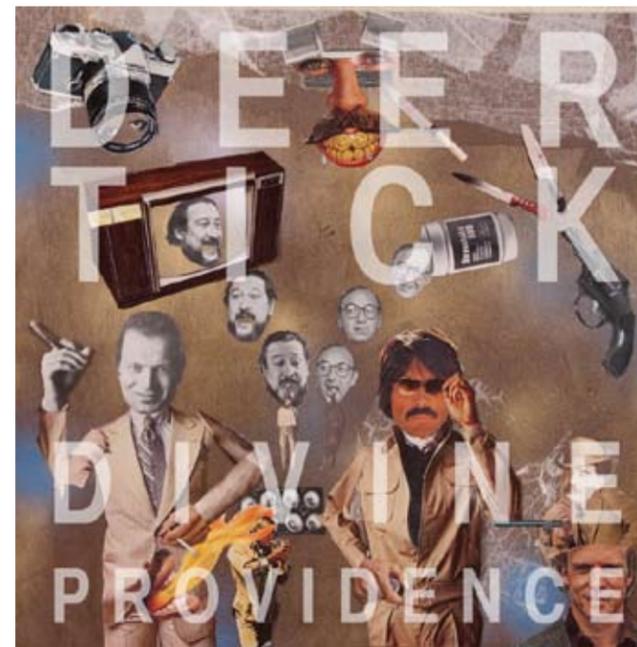
*Creatures of an Hour*  
Sub Pop, LP and CD

Something of a litmus test happens early on in Still Corners' debut. It comes in the form of the word "cuckoo," and it's repeated often throughout the song of the same name. It's a ridiculous word, especially in a grown-up song with twilight atmospheres and a feeling of romantic confusion. Yet Still Corners has a secret weapon: vocalist Tessa Murray.

She doesn't sing so much as quietly exhale, with words appearing like mystical creatures that slowly dissolve into warmly minimal and foggy atmospheres. Still Corners invites such English Lit 101 descriptions, as their music lives in the shadows without being Gothic. Indeed, the London quartet is adept at conjuring a mix of synths and reverb that touches on melodies as often as it obscures them.

Those who stick with this 10-song, 32-minute effort will find plenty that's rewarding. "Endless Summer" places one foot in Girl Group classicism but stretches out with a dizzying organ, ripped either from a haunted house or an old Broadcast song, and a chorus that's all rhythm and bewitching croons. "Circulars" goes so far as to largely do without vocals. Listeners hear Murray's teasing whisper in the back, but as Leon Dufficy's guitar vibrates like a metal scythe, one doesn't know if she's seducing or running.

*Creatures of an Hour* is primarily about creating mood, and its relatively brisk run-time ensures it doesn't overstay its welcome. It's a familiar sound—a more spooked Stereolab or a less-aggressive Electrelane—but it's done well and hints that the best is still to come. "I Wrote in Blood," for instance, sees Murray acting femme-fatale cool, singing over a guitar riff anxiously tip-tapping away. "Wrote a little book where I put your name," she sings, and it's a music/lyric combo that says just enough to let one's mind run wild. —**Todd Martens**

**Deer Tick**

*Divine Providence*  
Partisan Records, LP and CD

"I need electric to play it loud,"

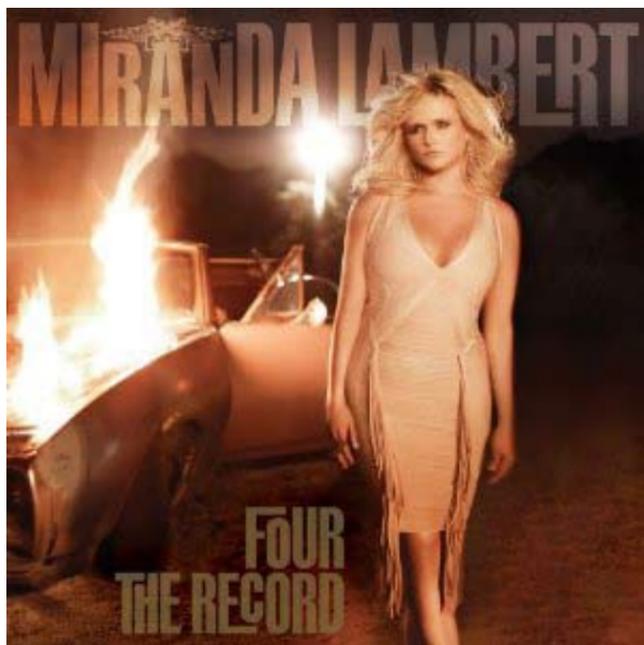
sings frontman John McCauley near the close of Deer Tick's fourth album. Fittingly, the best moments on *Divine Providence* find the Rhode Island quintet doing just that, bashing through an assortment of drunken rockers with the same sloppy, manic energy as *Sorry Ma, Forgot to Take Out the Trash*-era Replacements.

As the album opens, McCauley swaggers like a villain on loan from a Sergio Leone western, delivering lines like "I'm a drunken devil" through tightly clenched teeth. The tough-guy facade melts away by "Funny Word," however, replaced with casual indifference. "I don't have to be a hero," he sings on the grungy bar rocker, exuding an effortless slacker charm. "I can just walk the streets." Elsewhere, the vocalist ignores an encroaching hurricane to knock back drinks with friends (the raucous sing-along "Let's All Go to the Bar"), talks dirty with an older woman (*The Graduate*-esque affairs of "Miss K"), and struggles with insomnia that gradually robs him of all his senses ("Main Street").

The record is quite an evolution for the crew, whose staid early albums never reflected the anything-goes feel of its rowdy live shows—though it's not without considerable flaws. While McCauley remains a consistently engaging frontman, delivering his words in a graveled voice that makes it sound like he's always in the midst of a weeklong bender, his mates don't fare as well during their turns on the microphone. Indeed, "Clownin Around," a restrained number that directly comes on the heels of "Let's All Go the Bar," nearly grinds the proceedings to a halt. Ditto "Walkin Out the Door" (side note: what's the band's issue with the letter g?), a generic, organ-tinged tune that plays as by-the-numbers folk rock.

And while the album's killer first half calls to mind a whiskey-fueled, sure-to-be-regret-laden night—capped by the chaotic, Link Wray rumbler "Something to Brag About"—the sleepier second half sounds like a band repeatedly and unsuccessfully trying to shake off the resulting hangover. Of the mellower fare, only "It's Your Turn," a bleary piano ballad that finds McCauley laying his cards out on the table ("Here's my heart," he rasps, "now it's your turn"), has any lasting impact.

It's a shame, too, since McCauley displays a knack for such bruised, barroom balladry on an eclectic album he released earlier this year with his side-project Middle Brother (check the I'm-in-love-with-a-bartender flirtations of "Daydreaming"). But time and again, *Divine Providence* fares best when the musicians ratchet up both the guitars and recklessness, sending a fresh stream of empty beer bottles whizzing across the room. —**Andy Downing**


**Miranda Lambert**

*Four the Record*  
Sony Nashville, CD

**D**ear Miranda Lambert: You will likely never read this review, but if you do, please take away just one thing: More showing, less telling.

Few artists possess a voice with as much fire and personality. Yours is a sweetly scorned thing that seems to saying, “Just shut the heck up and listen to me” on even the lamest of ballads (ahem, “Better in the Long Run”). And no one else today can wield a Southern drawl as if it’s a weapon, stretching even the word “bangs,” as you do on the downright volatile “Mama’s Broken Heart,” into something that makes a man shiver.

Also, when it comes to songwriting, you do fine – the best, actually – when you’re on your own. Heck, your side project, Pistol Annies’ “Hell on Heels,” is one of the year’s strongest country records because it’s full of recession-inspired grit, which *Four the Record* desperately needs. So once and for all, let this be the last album on which there is so much as one song in which you brag about how much you like guns and whiskey. Sorry, but the whole “Fastest Girl in Town” shtick? We get it. Thanks.

Like much that comes out of mainstream Nashville, Lambert can be frustrating. On each of her four albums there are moments of brilliance, songs where her mix of glossy slow dances and finely tuned rock n’ roll serve to simply let the querulous artist tee-off and burn away any conventions. Then there are songs like “Fine Tune,” which come off like boardroom-constructed attempts to capture Sheryl Crow’s Kid Rock period.

On *Four the Record*, however, the first knock-down-wow instance comes with “Dear Diamond,” a Lambert-spun tune (of course) that also happens to be the slowest on the album. Here, she crafts a domesticated, murder-free version of “Tell-Tale Heart.” It’s a wedding ring that haunts the narrator, and every move of Lambert’s hand is a reminder of the singer’s betrayal. More fun—and devilish—is “All Kinds of Kinds,” which takes Southern charm and sticks a knife in it. Male congressmen wear women’s clothes, and no-good mothers slip their bratty kids prescription drugs. Yet rather than pander or pledge allegiance to small-town values, Lambert urges the listener to “look in the mirror” and shush it.

In commercial Nashville, such a sentiment is downright revolutionary. So once again—for the fourth album in a row—it’s a shame that such nerviness accounts for only half of *Four the Record*. —**Todd Martens**

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# Make the Investment

## 2011's Best Box Sets and Collections

By Bob Gendron

With traditional brick-and-mortar record retailers in short supply, box sets graduated into the hyper-collectable realm in 2011, largely leaning on limited-edition exclusivity, various bells and whistles, and encyclopedic completeness to attract attention. More than a few releases crossed practical lines—and not for the better.

Elvis Costello's *The Return of the Spectacular Spinning Songbook* includes just one CD and one DVD but sells for upwards of \$325, a price that drew fury from Costello himself. Nirvana's disappointing *Nevermind: Super Deluxe Edition* features nothing—save for a box, book, and CD—that can't be otherwise had for a total of about \$40. The Rolling Stones' *Some Girls: Super Deluxe Edition* essentially charges \$150 for the rights to a book, 7" single, and separately available DVD; what, Mick and Co. need cash to buy another private island? Not to be outdone, the Beach Boys' *SMILE* autographed light-up box comes with a custom-made surfboard for a mere \$6,000. The replica version of Bono's "The Fly" sunglasses enclosed in U2's *Achtung Baby 20th Anniversary Uber Deluxe Edition* has got nothing on a waxed Hobie board.

Cost obscenities aside, a number of musically superior and reasonably priced box sets and collections spanning formative jazz to French pop to Canadian-bred prog-rock to kitchen-sink soul emerged throughout the year. All deserve a place on coffee tables and shelves.



### The Beach Boys

*The Smile Sessions Box Set*  
Capitol, 5CD + 2LP + 7"

Upon listening to the bizarre, eccentric, neurotic, enigmatic, imaginative, acid-drenched, peerless *SMILE Sessions*, it's easy to understand why anyone might desire the spiritual nutrition and drug diet that fed Beach Boys leader Brian Wilson during the ensemble's 1966-67 recording period. While previous efforts contain snippets of the fabled material—and Wilson finished *SMILE* in 2004 with a different cast—collectors, fans, and folks curious about the most mythological album (n)ever issued have clamored for its release for decades. Everyone finally gets his or her wish—mostly. (continued)

The 19-track *SMiLE* included here is not considered a technical album as Wilson and company never completed audio's equivalent of the Loch Ness Monster. Hence, what's presented equates to a semblance agreed upon by group members Wilson, Mike Love, and Al Jardine. All were involved in a painstaking project that demanded producers Mark Linnett and Alan Boyd consult upwards of 70 master reels of tape while tackling the mind-numbing tasks of putting the group's sonic "modules" in a sensible order as well as piecing together fragments into coherent songs. In that simply hearing the constant fits and starts occasionally feels infuriating, it's relatively impossible to imagine the patience Linnett and Boyd employed to bring *The SMiLE Sessions* to light.

Indeed, one of the more illuminating aspects of the 5CD collection has little to do with the music. Rather, enlightenment stems from spying on Wilson's studio banter and recognizing the ad-infinitum degree to which the obsessive-compulsive tunesmith forced his mates and Los Angeles' finest studio hands to stop/repeat/stop/repeat/stop in a quest for "perfect" takes and sounds he envisioned in his mind. Gorgeous baroque melodies, heavenly harmonies, psychedelic freedom, experimental techniques, humanist spirituality, and sophisticated concoctions of pop, choral, jazz, cabaret, and R&B on *SMiLE* aside, insight into both Wilson's methods and madness in the recording studios proves most compelling. Inspired packaging—the box sports a three-dimensional "window"—adds to the enjoyment.

**Boddie Recording Company**  
Numero Group, 3CD or 5LP

**B**etween 1958 and 1993, husband-and-wife team Thomas and Louise Boddie operated a soul, R&B, and gospel recording clearinghouse in Cleveland, Ohio. Thousands of hours of tape, more than 300 releases, and countless artists passed through the pair's homebrewed studio/pressing plant, largely pieced together from scrap parts and secondhand gear by Thomas, a lifelong tinkerer and electronics maven. Due to a confluence of racism, logistics, and luck, Boddie Recording Company never registered a national hit let alone a regional smash. Its colorful story remains unknown to most of Cleveland itself. And yet the mom-and-pop enterprise—largely kept afloat by income generated from Thomas' day jobs as an organ and television repairman, as well as traveling musicians seeking a cheap place to lay down a few songs—outlasted every other studio, pressing plant, and imprint in the city's history.

Unparalleled as crate diggers and investigative researchers into the old, weird history of regional music, Numero Group crowns another year of fascinating finds with its 3CD (or 5LP) *Boddie Recording Company* box set. Resembling an old file folder, with discs, exhaustively annotated booklets, and memorabilia trinkets stuffed inside the pouches, the proletarian packaging mirrors the do-it-yourself quality of the ad-hoc gospel and R&B tunes from intriguingly named unknowns such as the Gospel Hebrews and Harvey & the Phenomenals. Because Boddie recycled dead-label inventory to save money and lower costs, a majority of fare stemming from 1974 and onward sounds particularly lo-fi. Yet it only adds to the charm of a label that's seemingly the soul equivalent of the white blues and hillbilly operations that helped give birth to the roots fare on Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*.

Better still is the meticulous detail with which Numero's sonic archeologists approached the project. Superb essays unravel the almost-unbelievable history in a manner that's akin to going on an exotic adventure; the producers even tracked down the biographies and related artifacts related to the more than two dozen artists represented on the set. Selections are organized according to the Boddie imprint on which they were originally released. Despite lacking time and money for promotion, the couple possessed a marketing vision and strategy designed to appeal to certain audiences and, depending on the style of music, assigned their releases to a certain label. Consumed as a whole, *Boddie Recording Company* is as close as it gets to knowing what it must feel like to step inside Indiana Jones' boots—provided they saw the inside of a soul club."



**The Bridge School Concerts:  
25th Anniversary Edition, Volume 1**  
Reprise/Warner Bros., 2CD and 3DVD

To celebrate its 25th anniversary of staging benefit concerts and raising money for physically challenged children, the Bridge School compiled a bevy of remarkable live performances on CD and DVD sets that claim both overlapping and unique program material. Rather than strictly focus on the obvious, producers also opt for diversity and surprise.

Vide, Bruce Springsteen turns in a riveting solo acoustic version of “Born in the U.S.A.” true to its protest roots—and not the dreaded flag-waving patriotism with which it later became associated. R.E.M. pairs with Neil Young on a harrowing “Country Feedback,” about which singer Michael Stipe declares as his favorite R.E.M. song before breaking down in tears towards the end. Other highlights: Metallica dares to unplug and recast “Disposable Heroes,” Fleet Foxes reach for skyward Appalachian-style harmonies on a gorgeous “Blue Ridge Mountains,” and Emmylou Harris and Buddy Miller speak the truth on a tortured “Love Hurts.”

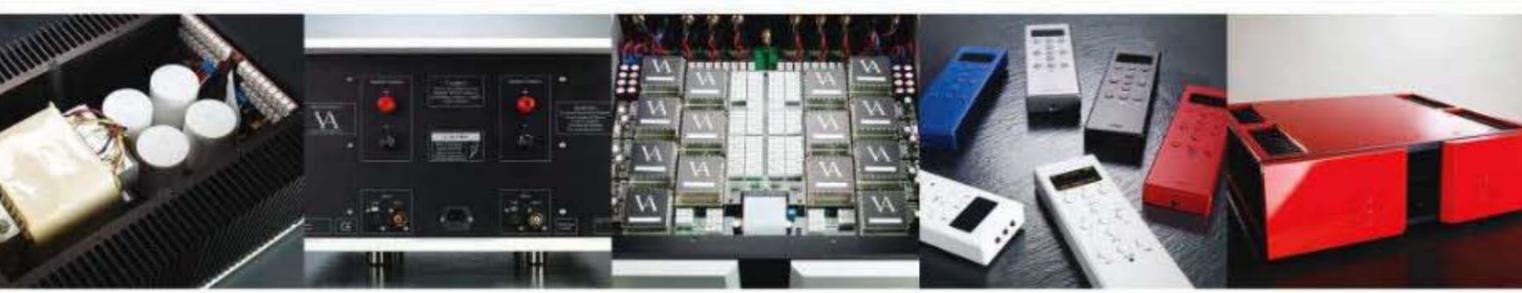
Many of the same tracks appear on the DVD package (which includes a bonus documentary disc), but Norah Jones’ show-stealing go at Wilco’s “Jesus Etc.” does not, which means that both formats are worth exploring. And the DVD boasts non-CD fare from the likes of a typically spirited Patti Smith (“People Have the Power”), gruff Tom Waits (“16 Shells From a Thirty-Ought Six”), and excitable Paul McCartney (“Get Back”) that stem from various eras, lending to an experience where it’s as much fun to spot bygone fashion and hair styles as it is to savor the music.

**Leonard Cohen**  
*The Complete Columbia Albums Collection*  
Legacy, 18CD

Sony/Legacy’s reissue specialists devised a clever solution to the problem of marketing box sets in an era during which most record retailing has shifted online, a move that lessens the chances that listeners notice the existence of finely designed compilations and collections. Namely, the label created affordably priced complete studio anthologies of household artists and then, bypassed middlemen by offering said releases on its own Web site. Billy Joel, Electric Light Orchestra, Wynton Marsalis, Nina Simone, and Sam Cooke are among the familiar names whose catalogs have been neatly placed into space-conscious boxes. Yet none rivals Leonard Cohen’s *The Complete Columbia Albums Collection*.

Gathering every single studio LP the Canadian troubadour/poet made between 1967 and 2004, plus five live sets—including 2009’s superb double-disc *Live In London* and archival *Live at the Isle of Wight 1970*, as well as 2010’s victory-lap *Songs From the Road*—this treasure basically amasses every official recording attributed to Cohen. Oh, and it’s all remastered from the original analog tapes. Discs are housed in vinyl-replica sleeves while the credits, liner notes, and original layouts are contained in an accompanying booklet. Purists might balk at the infinitesimal font size and shrunken album art, but it’s a small price to pay for the ability to pick up 17 records in pristine digital sound for approximately \$10 per.

Most impressive? The sheer consistency pertaining to Cohen’s output. His debonair baritone grows deeper as time wears on, but his knack for irony, observation, betrayal, wryness, and relationships never wanes. The folk-based icon suffers a small dip in quality during the late 70s and early 80s before rearing back to form on 1988’s bracing *I’m Your Man*, as relevant as ever. Meanwhile, the concert sets act as fifth-row invitations to some of the most simultaneously scathing, bitter-sweet, and atmospheric performances ever captured on tape. Quintessential.



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**Miles Davis Quintet**

*Live in Europe 1967: The Bootleg Series, Vol. 1*  
Legacy, 3CD + DVD

It's a wonder that, given the success of its Bob Dylan Bootleg Series, Legacy took so long to undertake a similar Miles Davis venture. Akin to the first Dylan entry, the initial Davis release features three CDs (as well as a DVD) and, in terms of material and sonics, can't get any better. Documenting six European concerts by the jazz icon's longest-running quintet—saxophonist Wayne Shorter, pianist Herbie Hancock, bassist Ron Carter, drummer Tony Williams, and Davis—the archival set zeroes in on a high point not only in the composer's career but that of his vibrant interaction with a band that, at the time, deserved every word of the superlative-laden praise thrown its way.

On the cusp of moving beyond post-bop, Davis and company showers standards such as "Round About Midnight" and Shorter's "Footprints" with boundless intensity and head-exploding panache. The instrumentalists are united not only in harmonically accenting arrangements but in their desire to discover what lies beyond existing borders, and press on to aural frontiers not yet traveled. Rules don't apply. Lines are crossed, familiar interpretations ignored. And so the multiple versions of "Agitation" are completely unique, with Shorter spinning melodic flights as Williams drives it all forward via aggressive percussive dialogues. Davis seemingly exists as both an excited conductor and proud parent, realizing that what he assembled is achieving exactly what—and more—he intended.

This is music rooted in freedom, looseness, risk, and intrepidity; it's a bold rebuff to predictability and a salutary gesture to new era. Rootsy, elastic, lyrical, offbeat, experimental, daringly rhythmic—these aural expressions claim one foot in modalism and another in free-form harmonizing, the songs flowing into one another, sans traditional break, with solos, themes, developments, and improvisation superceding established structure and technique. In essence, *Live in Europe 1967: The Bootleg Series, Vol. 1* is the sound of jazz reinventing itself and, with little persuasion needed, taking the audience along for the ride.

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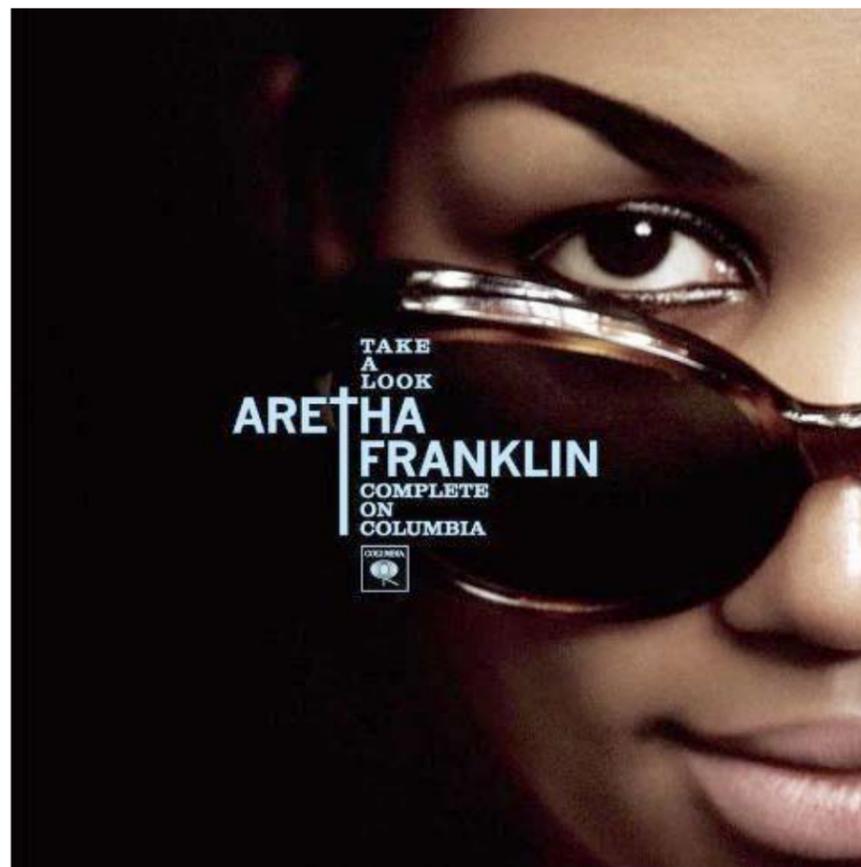
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### Aretha Franklin

*Take a Look: Aretha Franklin Complete on Columbia Legacy*, 11CD + DVD

**T**rue or false: Aretha Franklin never reached her potential at Columbia. Producers and associates saddled her with incongruous material and arrangements. Her tenure merely served as a learning curve, and her true greatness—and ultimate reign as the Queen of Soul—emerged only as a result of her transition to Atlantic in 1966. Such misconceptions and misperceptions continue to be accepted as givens throughout the music industry, as Franklin's Columbia output is either often treated as necessary footnotes to her broader story or, worse, completely dismissed. And they all make *Take a Look: Aretha Franklin Complete on Columbia* the most convincing myth-busting box set to emerge in recent memory. Indeed, if any legend's early career deserves to be revisited, it's that of Franklin.

Encompassing Franklin's seven full-length Columbia LPs, collaborations with Bobby Scott and Clyde Otis, and several singles and rarities—as well as a 1964 performance on “The Steve Allen Show”—the twelve-disc compendium sets straight the singer's pre-Atlantic legacy. On 1961's *Aretha: With the Ray Bryant Combo*, her Columbia debut, the vocalist sparks with the renowned pianist on small-band jazz fare, plying phrasing, timbral, and rhythm techniques with erudition well beyond her 19-year-old age. No matter the setting or stage in her career, Franklin has always maintained she leaned on her gospel background and upbringing in the Baptist church.

Evidence of her spiritual roots surface on a number of big-band albums on which she adroitly utilizes vocal swoops and dynamic passages gleaned from performing under grand ceilings painted with angels, heavens, and harps. For 1964's *A Tribune to Dinah Washington*, an incredibly overlooked vocal gem, Franklin not only taps into a divine aesthetic but also one related to the blues and the genre's trademark mournful characteristics. She proves equally masterful on a rich assortment of pop songs, orchestrated show-tune fare, and bebop standards that round out her Columbia era. Appointed with stellar liner notes, mini-LP-style packaging for each disc, and stellar sound (particularly on the mono mixes), the cleverly named *Take a Look*—undoubtedly a call for a fresh evaluation of a long-misunderstood body of work—makes its case and then some.

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To a majority of Western listeners that know his name, Serge Gainsbourg is primarily recognized by a stereotypical “the dirty old man” handle due to his high-profile philandering, sexually suggestive singles, and ill-advised “Lemon Incest” duet with daughter Charlotte. Yes, the elder Gainsbourg traded in provocation, sleaze, scandal, satire, pun, and peculiarity—occasionally doing so for mere effect, with the results treading the fine line between comical and pathetic.

Yet the Jewish singer/songwriter/composer stands as France’s greatest pop artist for more than his mastery of controversy, women, booze, and witty rejoinders. And while cult landmarks, LPs such as *Jane Birkin/Serge Gainsbourg* and *Histoire de Melody Nelson*—recorded within a three-year span—only hint at the profound diversity and prolific consistency Gainsbourg cultivated during a 30-year-plus career.

Completely remastered and superceding all prior reissues, the French import *Integrale: 20th Anniversary Box Set* gathers 16 studio albums (including bonus fare) and four compilation-arrayed discs themed according to singles and duos, television and radio performances, vocal film material, and instrumental film-soundtrack compositions, respectively. A comprehensive 60-page book (*oui, il est en français*) and 20 photo cards supplement a heavyweight, scrapbook-style box that’s assembled as well as the music is organized.

Experienced in chronological order, the reissue magnifies Gainsbourg’s evolution from a traditional lounge-jazz crooner into a pop alchemist that ultimately embraced funk, strings, dub, orchestrations, and electronica. The surfeit of cabaret, baroque, reggae, soul, rock, and new wave tracks subscribe to a mad eccentricity and irrepressible curiosity. Familiar tracks (the erotic “Je t’aime...moi non plus,” double-entendre-laden “Les Sucettes,” goading “Aux Armes et cetera,” dozens of duets with Jane Birkin and Brigitte Bardot) join a mélange of equally intoxicating numbers spanning pianistic *chanson* (“Elisa”) to ye-ye (“Chez Les Ye-Ye”). Numbered and limited to 9000 copies, this 20CD behemoth functions as an addictive portal not only into French culture but the mind of a pop genius on par with that of any American or British contemporary. Enthusiastically recommended.



**Serge Gainsbourg**

*Integrale: 20th Anniversary Box Set*  
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Leave it to archival concert pioneers the Grateful Dead to issue all the known recordings from a tour staged nearly 40 years ago, dump them all in a miniature steamer trunk that resembles the suitcase George Bailey wanted to take on his aborted world travels in *It's a Wonderful Life*, limit the initial run to 7,200 copies, and sell it out in less than 96 hours. A day-by-day sonic journal of one of the inimitable band's most sought-after and much-discussed tours, *Europe '72: The Complete Recordings* rivals the long-out-of-print *Fillmore West 1969: The Complete Recordings* in matters of chemistry, ambition, and transcendence.

Deadheads have forever traded spring 1972 shows for a bevy of reasons. The outing came on the heels of the ensemble's most consistent studio efforts (*Workingman's Dead* and *American Beauty*), clicked to the beat of a single drummer (rather than the usual two), introduced the tandem of Donna and Keith Godchaux, and, most importantly, stood as the final tour on which original keyboardist/vocalist Ron "Pigpen" McKernan embarked. Achieving a level of seamless interaction and telepathic communication that set the standards for all future shows, the Dead renders improvisational jams, challenging segues, and spontaneous transitions as if guided by a spiritual force, turning in signature renditions of favorites such as "Dark Star," "Truckin'," "Turn on Your Lovelight," and "Good Lovin'." New, unreleased material like "One More Saturday Night," "Ramble on Rose," and "Jack Straw" burst forth with insouciant energy and contagious looseness. There's nothing not to love. Same goes for the sonics, as the HDCDs are mixed from the original 16-track tapes and sound exquisite.

One problem: The cost-conscious packaging falls short of the workmanship warranted by the \$450 price tag. The trunk should be sturdier; the bi-, tri-, and quad-fold cardboard disc sleeves easily tear. It's nigh impossible to free a disc from a sleeve without triggering a small rip. It's unfortunate, too, as new, original Stanley Mouse artwork signifies each individual show with unique designs.

**Grateful Dead**

*Europe '72: The Complete Recordings*  
Grateful Dead/Rhino, 73CD



## The Jimi Hendrix Experience

*Winterland*

Legacy, 4CD or 180g 8LP



Go ahead. Roll your eyes at this, yet another Jimi Hendrix reissue. The deceased guitarist continues to “release” more albums than productive indie favorites Guided By Voices and Robert Pollard combined. *Winterland* isn’t the only new offering. *Hendrix In the West*, a collection of performances originally issued in 1972 and out of print for nearly three decades, is also remastered and expanded, yet remains inconsistent and scattershot. Far superior is *Winterland*, a four-disc anthology of the Seattle native’s three-day, six-show October 1968 stand at the famed San Francisco ballroom.

“I think we got four speakers left and maybe three more valve tubes,” announces Hendrix on the last day of the run, his statement indicative of the firepower he, drummer Mitch Mitchell, and bassist Noel Redding bring to standards such as “Red House” and searing covers like Cream’s “Sunshine of Your Love.” The admission also suggests why, due to such onstage technical

problems, these tapes have largely stayed in storage despite having been recorded by noted engineer Wally Heider. Audiophile purists and fans craving direct interpretations of nuggets like “Foxy Lady” should look elsewhere. Indeed, *Winterland*’s appeal resides in the band negotiating taxing sound issues and, at nearly every turn, countering with even more violent bursts of earth-scorching feedback, vibration-inducing distortion, and thundering rhythms.

The Experience becomes more audacious with each passing concert. Whereas the first two performances, by no means orthodox, attenuate the improvisational runs and tweeter-blowing intensity, the trio stretches out on a subsequent rendition of “Are You Experienced?” and—via a thoroughly transcendent go-round with Bob Dylan’s “Like a Rolling Stone,” complete with organ accompaniment—engages in soulful communion that contrasts the dive-bombing wanderlust on the Troggs’ “Wild Thing,” the frayed closer to the entire shindig. Note: *Winterland* does not present the shows in their entirety, and questionable edits to introductions and sequencing take the set down a notch. Those caveats aside, smart pricing and a wealth of consistent vocabulary-shaping performances justify its existence.

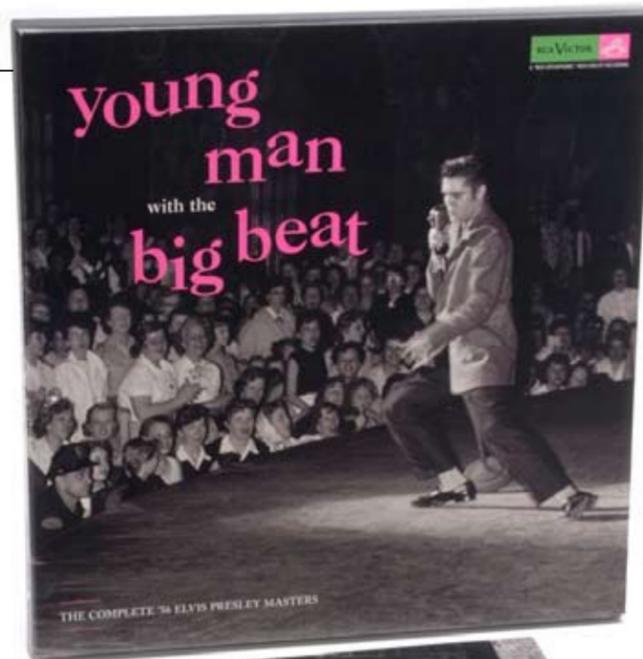
## Howlin’ Wolf

*Smokestack Lightnin’: The Complete Chess Masters 1951-1960*  
MCA/Universal, 4CD

Chester Arthur Burnett’s face was tailor-made for Hollywood. Bigger than life, and accented with an old-school football linebacker’s imposing jowls and weather-proof skin, his visage could be simultaneously threatening and welcoming, tough and friendly, serious and comical, confrontational and mild. Of course, the 6’3” Mississippi native better known as Howlin’ Wolf opted for music over movies, and lived in an era that placed less of a premium on image. But when it came to performing, no blues artist came close to generating such primal energy and fearsome aggression.

Akin to similarly limited-edition sets spotlighting Muddy Waters, Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, and Little Walter, *Smokestack Lightnin’: The Complete Chess Masters 1951-1960* presents every master take Wolf cut during his first decade as a professional musician, with culture-changing songs such as “Smokestack Lightnin’,” “Wang Dang Doodle,” and “Forty Four” alongside deeper, equally boisterous songs like “Howlin’ for My Baby,” “Don’t Mess With My Baby,” and “Who’s Been Talking?” Wolf’s gritty, megaphone-caliber-loud voice pairs with Hubert Sumlin’s amplified guitar to make one of rock’s most foundational building blocks: Raw, cathartic, eerie boogie, R&B, and jump blues played with unyielding intensity and anchored by rhythms that attacked and bit at listeners’ heels. Wolf’s ground-shaking growls and fiery harmonica fills complete a sonic architecture that everyone from the Rolling Stones to the White Stripes emulated.

Featuring an array of outtakes and more than a dozed previously unreleased performances, this 4CD set brings you into 2120 S. Michigan Avenue and allows you to witness the oversized personality and magnetic charisma of the man Sun Records founder Sam Philips tried to record before Chess won out. For all of the tired debates regarding whether or not blues will survive, and the often-pathetic attempts to revive a style that cannot be taught but only inherited, *Smokestack Lightnin’: The Complete Chess Masters 1951-1960* acts as resounding answer that, no matter what the genre’s future holds, its core will never die.



### Elvis Presley

*Young Man With the Big Beat*  
Legacy, 5CD

Last year witnessed the release of the landmark *The Complete Elvis Presley Masters*—a 30-disc behemoth home to every single master recording the hip-swiveling performer put to tape. What else can possibly reside in the vaults? Presumably, not much, but it's also safe to assume a minority of fans were able to pony up \$750 for the colossal set, meaning that its contents could be recycled on a smaller-scale set.

More manageable and strictly concerned with 1956, the year rock n' roll broke, *Young Man With the Big Beat* hones in on the master recordings cut in New York, Nashville, and Hollywood that landed on Elvis' self-titled debut and follow-up LP. Bestowed with the same superb mastering gracing the 30CD trove, twang-and-snap-sparked standards such as "Heartbreak Hotel," "Don't Be Cruel," "Hound Dog"—and a bevy of other classics that transformed culture and music—sound fantastically dynamic and vibrant. A third disc contains remastered live performances from Las Vegas and Little Rock as well as a previously unreleased Shreveport concert. A hardcore-fans-only disc of outtakes counts eleven takes of "Lawdy, Miss Clawdy" and a dozen run-throughs of "Shake, Rattle and Roll." And history buffs, rejoice. The final disc is stocked with rare interviews—the most comprehensive collection of Elvis spoken-word material ever put on an RCA title.

In addition to the landmark sides, the key attraction on *Young Man With the Big Beat* relates to the coffeetable book that could easily command \$30 as a standalone product. Exhaustively researched and impeccably organized, the 80-page tome reveals a day-by-day chronology of Elvis' life in 1956, charting concerts, sessions, television appearances, personal events, and more. The obsessiveness extends to images of memorabilia spanning tickets to fan-club souvenirs to tour itineraries, not to mention the armada of photographs presenting the Mississippi-born phenomenon in all his early glory.

### Rush

*Sector 1, 2, and 3*  
Mercury/Universal, 6CD + DVD (each)

Please see this issue's  
Audiophile Pressings section.



### Smashing Pumpkins

*Gish and Siamese Dream*  
Virgin, 2CD + DVD (each)

"This is probably the only record I'll ever make that is that perfect in its intention," divulges Smashing Pumpkins leader Billy Corgan in the liner notes to the expanded reissue of *Siamese Dream*, his band's 1993 sophomore smash that, in tandem with the also-deluxified version of the group's debut *Gish*, form an alt-rock union that hasn't peers in a landscape otherwise dominated by Seattle acts. Prophetically, the Chicago-based quartet toured with Pearl Jam and the Red Hot Chili Peppers in the early fall of 1991, shortly before Nirvana's *Nevermind* and the resultant sea change transformed pop culture.

Twenty-plus years on, *Gish* and *Siamese Dream* still come across as refreshingly isolated from everything else around them, a pair of incandescent works whose mushroom-triggered psychedelia, melodic pop, arena bluster, mystical themes, radiant textures, personal revelations, leftover-hippie folk, and distinctive high-pitched vocals stand apart from the angrier, soft-loud dynamic embraced by the group's Pacific Northwest contemporaries. Corgan's effects-laden guitar playing, too, speaks to an understanding of prog- and acid-rock influences—as does his utilization of space, atmosphere, and sound. Combined

with Jimmy Chamberlain's powerhouse drumming, James Iha's choral-voiced guitar passages, and D'Arcy Wretzky's sober bass playing, Corgan attained heaviness, trip-piness, and sensuality—sometimes on the same track. His perfectionism, and quest for supremacy, also play considerable roles.

It's evident even in the band's formative tracks, here on bonus CDs in the form of demos and sessions—nearly every one previously unreleased. The Pumpkins' initiative and strangeness belie their collective age. Witness the collective's prowess and projection on two soaring concerts, the first, from the Metro in 1990 on *Gish*, and the second, part of a three-night stand, also from the hometown venue in August 1993, on *Siamese Dream*. The former illustrates a band on its own terms preparing a surprise attack on an unsuspecting public, and the latter conveys the look, feel, and sound of a confident ensemble ready to detonate. Picture postcards, fine remastering, shiny flip-top boxes, and thought-provoking liner notes (Corgan explains his suicidal state while penning the band's breakthrough "Today," discusses his drug appetite, and admits the group's already-fractured state in 1993) round out these quintessential volumes.

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### The Smiths

*Complete (Deluxe Box Set)*

Rhino UK, 180g 8LP, 25 x 7", 8CD, DVD

Please see this issue's Audiophile Pressings section.

### Phil Spector Presents the Phillies Album Collection

Legacy, 7CD

Phil Spector's immeasurable aural contributions have already been chronicled in various forms, whether via the 4CD *Back to Mono* box, 2CD *The Essential Phil Spector*, or any number of single-disc reissues released in early 2011. Intended for fanatics, *Phil Spector Presents the Phillies Album Collection* goes even deeper by providing in their entirety, and for the first time on CD, six mono albums from his Phillies label as well as a compilation disc of ultra-rare B-sides. For girl-group aficionados and Wall of Sound students, it's a godsend.

Due to the significant overlap that graces the Crystals' *Twist Uptown* and *He's A Rebel*, casual listeners need not apply—exactly the set's intent. As much a historical artifact as music collection, the box authentically replicates select album covers and track sequences associated with Spector staples such as Bob B. Soxx and the Blue Jeans, the Crystals, and the Ronettes. Each disc is housed in mini-LP-style sleeves. A full-color booklet reveals an informative essay penned by Ace Records consultant/producer Mick Patrick, who sheds light on intriguing trivia, not least the least interesting morsel of which exposes that "He's a Rebel"—forever credited to the Crystals—is actually sung by Darlene Love and the Blossoms. The real Crystals learned it on the fly so it could be added to their concert repertoire.

It goes without saying that the purely innocent and hypnotically melodic appeal of classics like "Da Doo Run Run," "(The Best Part of) Breakin' Up," "On Broadway," and "Why Do Lovers Break Each Other's Heart" continues unabated. Spector's flair wasn't confined to the producer's chair; it emanates via his dominance of suspended harmonies, choral dynamics, and eminently infectious rhythms. All of which account for why the bonus disc, *Phil's Flipsides*, billed to the Phil Spector Wall of Sound Orchestra, is the most audacious revelation here. The brassy instrumental tracks venture into sprightly jazz and blues territory far removed from the usual A-side fare.

**This May Be My Last Time Singing: Raw African-American Gospel on 45RPM 1957-1982**

Tompkins Square, 3CD

Ever wonder what it would be like to be a successful crate digger obsessed with a very specific type of music? Mike McGonigal invites listeners to peruse many of the superior aspects of his record collection on *This May Be My Last Time Singing: Raw African-American Gospel on 45RPM 1957-1982*, a three-disc set compiled from his expansive archives. Akin to his work for 2009's *Fire In My Bones: Raw + Rare + Otherworldly African-American Gospel*, the Portland resident again made selections in relation to the most soulful and spiritual sides he attained during the past decade. In the liner notes, he admits that audiences benefit from his enthusiasm as, in search of rare finds and unknown tracks, he's spent good money on 45s that fail to live up to their promise.

The same cannot be said for the nearly four hours of music on this archival wonder. While the annotation and packaging falls short of the standard set by Numero Group, songs alternately scorch and sway, roll and tumble, uplift and hypnotize, moan and holler. From the distorted albeit insistent piano lines gracing the insistency of Prophet G. Lusk's "The Devil's Trying to Steal My Joy" to the overlapping harmonies on Clefs of Cavalry's organ-spiked "Baptized," the material delves into the core of American gospel. There's no polish, commercialism, or ulterior motive found. As made evident by the album title, every track here stems from a 45RPM single, a process McGonigal states is due "to their democratic/DIY nature; almost anyone could raise enough money to release a seven-inch single."

Indeed, the list of anonymous performers confirms his theory. At least a third of the cuts here were self-released and self-financed by church congregations and/or the artists. Such context partially accounts for their fervent garage-like properties and robe-swishing energies; the rest owes to the unspoiled passion pouring from the mouths of singers in collectives such as the Crump Brothers and Spiritual Echoes. A closer, more genuine glimpse into the storefront churches, salvation services, and worship gatherings that played immeasurable roles in African-American communities does not exist on record. Electrifying.

One of the five best and most crucial releases of the past 20 years, *Achtung Baby* represents not only the rebirth of U2 (and its reclamation from borderline-parody pomp during its *Rattle and Hum* era) but the group's most ambitious, integral, and ageless album. Treatises on romance, hypocrisy, desire, freedom, fear, and faith, its Berlin-born songs are thematically mired in regret, darkness, and solitude. The optimism of yore (and the quartet's future) is replaced by grim views, jaded sarcasm, frayed sacrifices, clenched-teeth confessions, and jaundiced experiences. "Love is clockworks/And cold steel/Fingers too numb/Too feel," Bono exhales on the sobering closer "Love Is Blindness," the same tune that U2 used to end its 1991-92 shows, night after night, leaving audiences with a forbidding, throbbing hymn rather than a celebratory anthem. About that tour.

It's captured on the flawless sensory explosion that is *ZOO TV: Live From the Sydney*, one of the four DVDs included on this hardshell-bound volume, and time and again, comes on as a performance, concept, and visual spectacular that no modern artist has yet to surpass. Recognizing the record's connection to metaphorical lyrics and symbolic imagery, the producers afford this set with a binder of Anton Corbijn prints as well as a hardback book pregnant with complementary photos and insightful essays by the likes of producers Brian Eno and Daniel Lanois, Corbijn, and author



Bill Flanagan. Three other DVDs—including the recently released documentary *From the Sky Down*, about the album's creation—round out the visual portion. The audio options are even better.

A remastered *Achtung Baby* is abetted by its sister album, the colossally underappreciated and more experimental *Zooropa*—and two discs of remixes, a platter of B-sides and bonus tracks, and *Kindergarten*, an alternate version of *Achtung Baby* featuring tracks in somewhat-unfinished form, complete with different lyrics and twists on final arrangements. Gospel choruses on a remix of "Mysterious Ways," cut-and-paste

vocal tricks on a manipulated "Numb (The Soul Assassins Mix)," and "Salome," the original flipside to the "Even Better Than the Real Thing" single, count themselves among the myriad highlights. As for *Achtung Baby* itself, the multiplatinum effort continues to reveal soulful and soul-baring secrets with each repeat listen. From the sinister crossed-wires heartbreak of the ghostly "So Cruel" to the where-did-those-come-from electronic-laced riffs on "The Fly," it's genius-level art. If you have to settle on a single box set this year, this should be the one. ●

**U2**  
*Achtung Baby: 20th Anniversary Super Deluxe Edition*  
Universal, 6CD + 4DVD



# Dum Dum Girls

**Empty Bottle**

Chicago, Illinois

**October 14, 2011**

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Kaitlin Fenci

Few songs are more appropriate for Dum Dum Girls to cover than “There Is A Light That Never Goes Out,” the Smiths’ ode to violently romantic death. “And if a ten-ton truck kills the both of us/To die by your side/Well, the pleasure, the privilege is mine,” crooned lead singer Dee Dee, embracing bizarrely embedded themes of dedication, sacrifice, loneliness, and love. Related threads of longing, companionship, and sensuality dominated the female quartet’s hour-long set at Chicago’s sold-out Empty Bottle, where the group convincingly proved its merit above that of a mere novelty act.

Of course, it’s easy to understand why detractors think of the band as little else than another in the long line of cute, nostalgia-chasing opportunists. Dum Dum Girls members are identified by invented aliases and referred to on a first-name basis. With their legs wrapped in black patterned stockings, the foursome conveys a unifying visual gimmick relied upon by a host of retro-based acts determined to express bygone styles and attain a trademark look. Yet the Dum Dum Girls possess what most of their lesser peers lack: Catchy, fuzz-churned, mildly complex fare sung from the gut, and in Dee Dee, a vocalist that channels both the ruffled-up street-cool toughness of Chrissie Hynde and sensitivity of the 60s-era’s premier girl-group leaders.

Onstage, she’s a no-nonsense figure, her aloof shyness diffused by a willingness to channel bruising loss, aching need, and exposed vulnerability into dreamy, alluring tunes that, via their edginess, warn listeners to keep their distance. Dee Dee never teased, batted an eyebrow, or waffled. Yet aspects of her understated seductive delivery—equally capable of sounding like blown kisses, lashing scolds, and hesitant whispers—betrayed the unrequited emotions and sorrowful feelings brimming underneath her leather-clad outer shell. Akin to her mates, which primarily hid in the shadows and made no attempt to stray from supplying ample backing parts, she remained assertive and tortured, a handsomely dangerous combination that translated via concise, contagious melodies assembled from a wellspring of influences.



**Akin to her mates, Dee Dee remained assertive and tortured, a handsomely dangerous combination that translated via concise, contagious melodies assembled from a wellspring of influences.**

Underpinned by a reverb-laden indie-pop aesthetic, songs alternately stabbed like a prison-made shank (“Always Looking”), bopped amidst dark currents (“Bhang Bhang, I’m a Burnout”), crossed surf-rock waves with clattering country train-song percussion (“Catholicked”), utilized distortion as one might use lipstick to smear details (“Wasted Away”), and romped along to handclap-derived beats tailored for jump-rope competitions (“He Gets Me High”). Innocence and iciness often clashed. Caught in uncertain limbo, Dee Dee split time between letting go of her inhibitions and pulling secrets closer to the vest.

Amidst the confessions, hopes, and worries, several moments of levity relieved any potentially oppressive drama. Watching the

collective sway their legs during the four-part harmonies on “I Will Be” brought to mind Robert Palmer’s “Addicted to Love” video. Trashy vibes, and the sweat glistening off of Dee Dee’s upper lip, lent “It Only Takes One Night” a one-and-done rawness absent from the more mature, heart-on-a-sleeve material.

If there was ever any doubting the Dum Dum Girls’ candor, it was immediately put to rest during the fluid “Heartbeat (Take It Away).” Built atop crawling, counterpoint guitar lines and a simple drumbeat, the cathartic cry for deliverance from pain steadily rose in intensity, the climax eliciting sympathy and empathy—and the conclusion that, as she grows into her role as a confident bandleader, Dee Dee has no ceiling.

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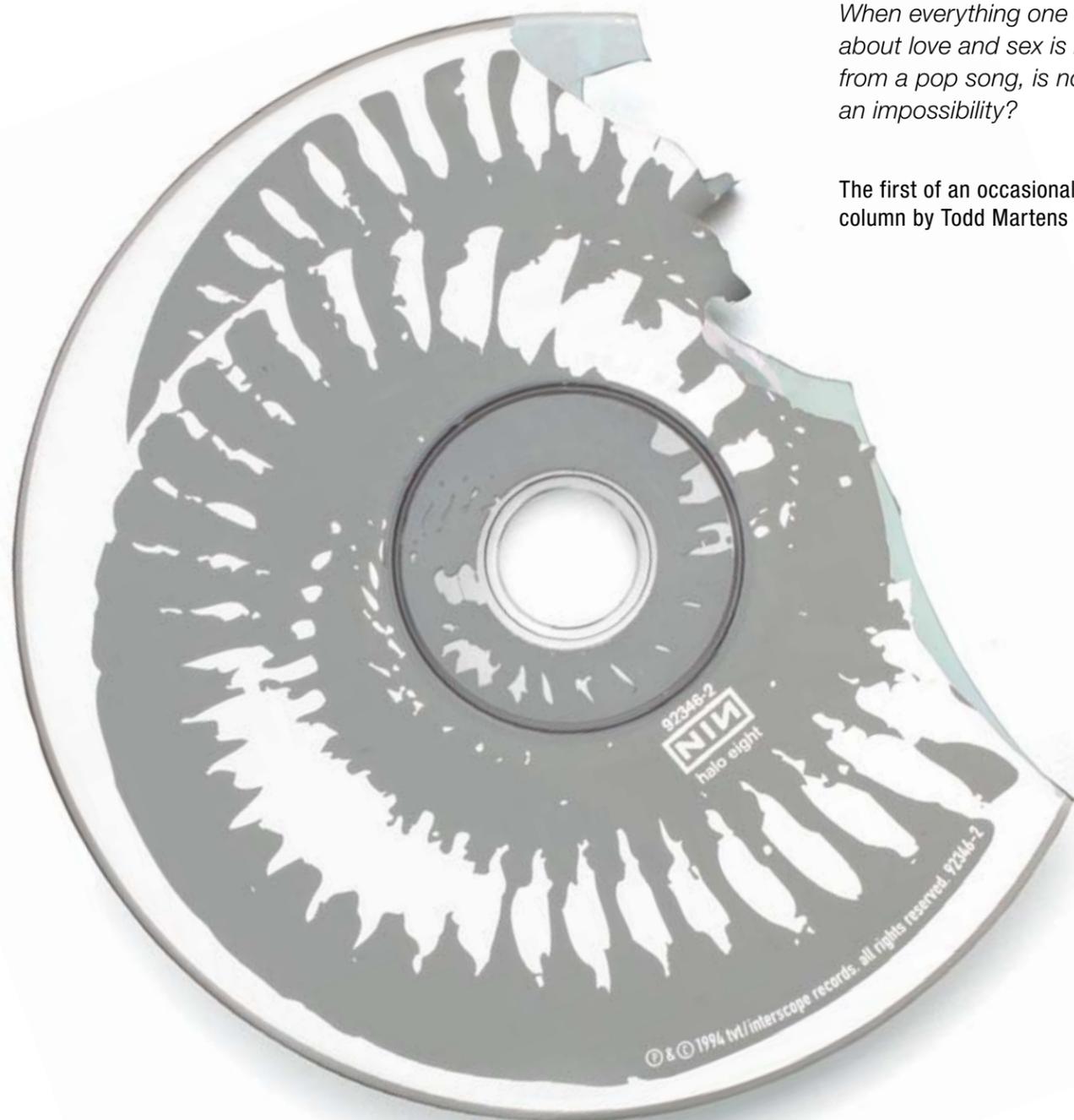
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# Out of Tune With You

*When everything one knows about love and sex is learned from a pop song, is normalcy an impossibility?*

The first of an occasional column by Todd Martens



There are two big warning signs one must heed when flying cross-country to win the heart of an ex.

One, if during catch-up beers on her back porch, the only album you hear is Nine Inch Nails' *The Downward Spiral* on repeat, go and book a hotel room. And, should you find open condom wrappers strewn about her bedroom floor, amidst her unwashed laundry, go and book a hotel room.

Ignore these warning signs at your own peril.

Trent Reznor recently posted online that fans should not, under any circumstance, purchase the 2011 re-release of 1989's *Pretty Hate Machine*. I breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe, perhaps, I had been spared once again from listening to early NIN work, an area that remains a gap in my knowledge. Yet further investigation reveals Reznor was speaking about a particular repackaging, and not the remastering of his catalog as a whole. The shrink-wrapped reissue of *The Downward Spiral* I have in my collection is, in fact, Reznor-endorsed.

I should, I thought to myself, suck it up then. Since 1999, I have used a girl as a reason to avoid a portion of Reznor's music and, as I will soon venture into my mid-30s, it seemed high time to grow up. After all, work required I do so. My day job is soon taking me to Reznor's Beverly Hills house, where I will interview him about his film score for *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.

Should the conversation turn toward his earlier work, I can say I still want a deeper exploration of the politically dead future world of *Year Zero*.

But that would be pretty much about it. I love the electronic expansiveness of *Year Zero*; I have avoided most everything else branded by Reznor. Whereas *Year Zero*, despite its sci-fi trappings, seems topical, I live in fear of *The Downward Spiral* due to its more personal aggression.

*The Downward Spiral* is also closely tied to Nicole. She was, perhaps, the biggest NIN fan I have ever met. For many years, she called to wish me a happy birthday on May 17. Yet my birthday is May 19. This wasn't a completely random mistake on her part; she treated Reznor's May 17 birthday as something of a holiday.

Nicole was my high-school girlfriend, at least for a couple weeks. Right before I left for college, she went back to her ex, and would tell me about their sexual trysts in graphic detail. I tolerated this because when I saw her, we would still fool around. Then she would say, "I'm so glad we can do this without you wanting to date me." Then I would say, "I'm doing this because I'm going to eventually date you." Then we'd fight. This went on for six years—yes, until I was 24. (continued)

In the midst of this torturous relationship, during which I dated no other woman while I was between 18-24 (for the record, this is entirely on me, as I can't pin it on her), Nicole invited me to Detroit. She was a budding designer and had an internship in the city. Away I went. After my flight from Los Angeles landed and Nicole picked me up, I remarked that Detroit looked like Los Angeles if the year was 2032 and robots had destroyed much of earth. She thought that funny, and I figured the weekend would be swell.

I was wrong. Nicole and I made these sort of cross-country flights every couple months. Usually we'd hang out, fool around, Nicole would proclaim us friends, I would be sad, and in three months we'd do it all again. This time, however, Nicole mentioned she had a serious boyfriend.

I heard her say this. But I ignored it. I was no dummy. There were things I wanted to do in Detroit. I had seven days here, and I planned to go to the Motown Museum and the new Tiger Stadium. I could address the boyfriend nonsense after Motown and baseball, two things I did not want scarred by Nicole.

So three days into the trip, it was time to discuss this boyfriend. She politely rebuffed my advances and said, "On this trip we're friends." To which I replied we're not friends, we never have been friends, we never will be friends, and she's a piss-poor friend if she thinks she is one.

Nicole stood up when things finally came to a head around 4 a.m. She put on *The Downward Spiral* and played it loud. Then she looked at me and said, "Call the airline. You're leaving in the morning." I couldn't get a flight until 7 p.m., and we did not leave the house until it was time to go to the airport. Nor did she turn off *The Downward Spiral*.

I heard thirteen hours of that album, as if I was a prisoner of war and Reznor's brutal, digitized anguish was being used to turn my mind to mush. Such was the effect it had, especially during each hour when Reznor screamed "I want to fuck you like an animal," and the image of those open condom wrappers became burned in my brain. I think I cried at first, and just sat there numb, ten hours later.

No, I have not listened to *The Downward Spiral* yet. Now that I've written this, I can't come up with any reason to bother. After all, the emotion I felt—the deadened sensations of paralyzed anger and immobilized anguish that come from having listened to *The Downward Spiral* for thirteen straight hours, all while the girl you tricked yourself into believing you would marry had kicked you out—seems to be the precise adolescent turmoil Reznor wanted. ●

*I remarked that Detroit looked like Los Angeles if the year was 2032 and robots had destroyed much of earth. She thought that funny, and I figured the weekend would be swell.*

*I was wrong.*



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# Fleet Foxes

**Chicago Theatre**  
Chicago, Illinois

**September 30, 2011**

By Bob Gendron  
Photos by Jeff Dorgay

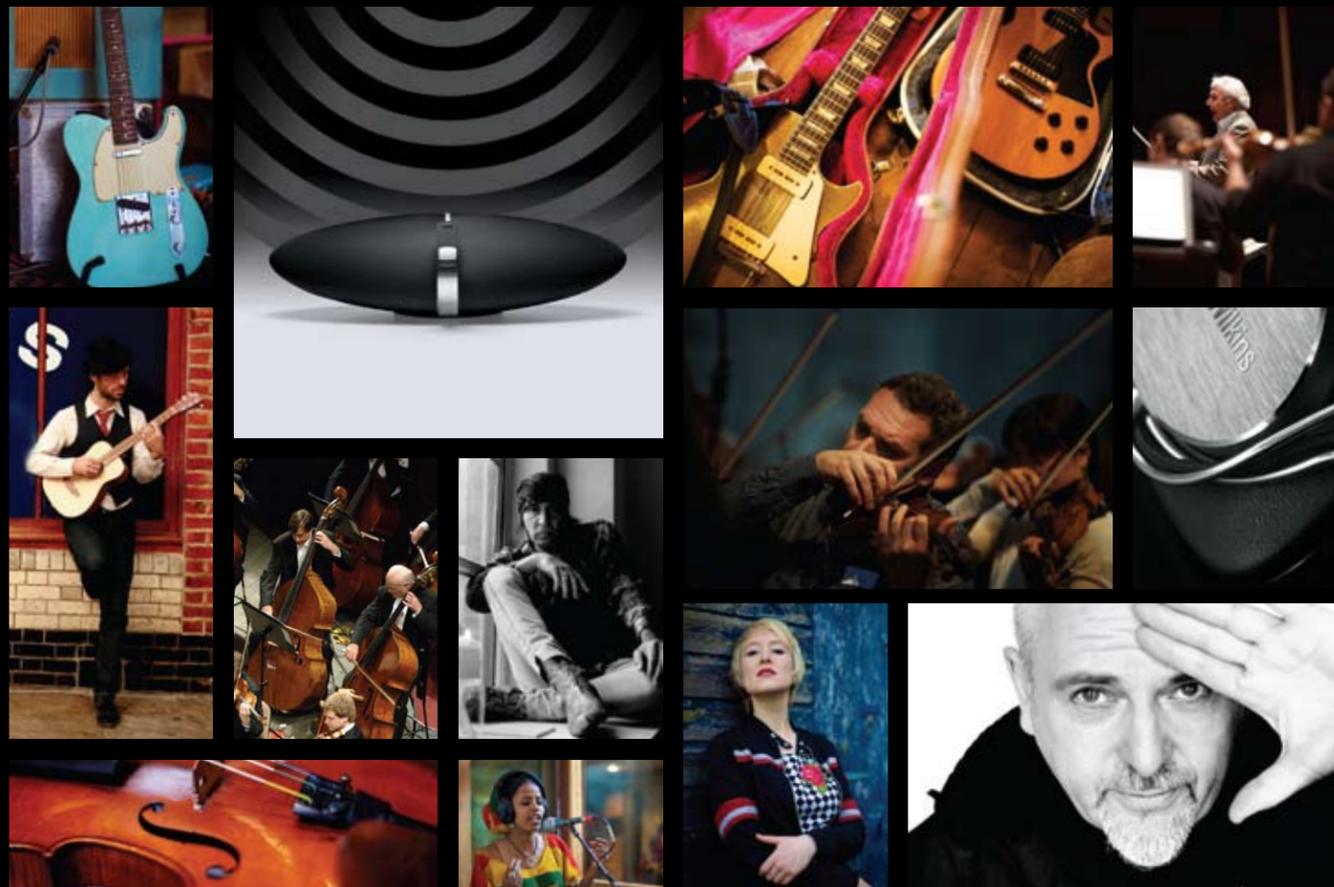


**B**earded Fleet Foxes frontman Robin Pecknold stood alone onstage during the start of the encore, framed by a backdrop on which projections of stars and aurora borealis lights gently flickered. The calming ambience suggested the singer could very well be perched on a mountainside in front of a small campfire, singing to natural surroundings. Organic, intimate, rustic, serene—albeit immense-sounding and group-involving: The first of the band's sold-out two-night stand at Chicago Theatre had all the transcendent makings of a jarring dream in which existential musings and personal reflections come to fore as brief visions before fading away, not unlike the sextet's voices, into an ethereal abyss.

While studio technology affords musicians the ability to manipulate sounds into any imaginable concoction they deem favorable, performing in acoustically reverberant halls can be a less-than-forgiving exercise. Nonetheless, at its headlining appearance earlier in July at the Pitchfork Music Festival, Fleet Foxes seemed up to the challenge of meeting head-on the creative expansion demonstrated on its superb sophomore *Helplessness Blues*. And judging from this event, in the two months that passed, and as summer turned to fall, the Seattle-based collective's mellifluous capacity appeared to increase, with skyscraping harmonies and baroque accents assuming a majestic quality that aligned with songs' mystic imagery and spiritual deliverance.

It's relatively easy for a rock band to shape budding soft-to-loud dynamics to their advantage; it's much more difficult for a folk-rock act—augmented with unplugged accoutrements such as stand-up basses, fiddles, and mandolins—to generate similar swells sans the aid of bruising amplification and overstated orchestration. *(continued)*





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CONCERT



Championing nuance, Fleet Foxes couched multi-part choral sections amidst lithe, airy arrangements that frequently dilated to accommodate crowd-participatory handclaps and tambourine-whacked rejoinders. Shaded in bluegrass, pop, and Americana disciplines, songs inhaled and exhaled, the various combinations of stringed instruments yielding to organ fills steeped in droning intensity as well as sweet, baroque-flavored moments of relief. Nothing appeared out of place or inserted for academic sake.

Guitars chimed like soft bells on "English House." Pedal steel appointment prompted "Grown Ocean" to stomp and soar. Vocal waves rose and fell akin to late-August Lake Michigan tides during the cascading "White Winter Hymnal." A saxophone blared during the segue to the middle of "The Shrine/An Argument," which began as a comforting lullaby and finished as a tussle of conflicting

sentiment, the ascending progression yanking the tune from its safe moorings. No matter how involved the fingerpicked structures or stacked harmonies, Fleet Foxes turned complexity into simplicity, broke down labyrinthine canvases into pinpoint details. Pecknold was there at every turn.

Not only does the 25-year-old singer command an encyclopedic knowledge of his parents' record collection, he possesses a golden-throated timbre that, heard in tandem with the dulcet voices of his mates, radiated an atmospheric glow to which the angels, painted on the venue's arched ceiling, could likely relate. Marveled by the grand dynamics and hushed moods, they—and the verklempt audience—stood in awe, secretly hoping that Pecknold and Co. don't arrive at any definitive answers to their metaphysical questions any time soon.


**Mark Lanegan Band**

*Blues Funeral*  
Beggars Banquet, LP and CD



Photo by Sam Holden

**“If tears were liquor/I would’ve drunk myself to death,”** confesses a troubled Mark

Lanegan on the allegorical “St. Louis Elegy,” a haunting organ-laced ballad that stands in as the second cousin to the Animals’ “House of the Rising Sun” and reinforces the afflicted moods coursing through *Blues Funeral*. Spectacularly diverse and consistently impressive, the vocalist’s first studio album in more than seven years arrives after several rewarding collaborations.

Three duet efforts with Isobel Campbell, a stint with the Queens of the Stone Age, appearances on sets by Marianne Faithfull and Soulsavers, and a go-around as one half of the Gutter Twins gave the ex-Screaming Trees crooner plenty of time to dwell on original material. And akin to 2004’s *Bubblegum*, *Blues Funeral* blows open the primarily acoustic roots-based approach taken on his first five solo records. What hasn’t changed is Lanegan’s impactful voice—impregnated with back-of-throat huskiness, nicotine-stained depth, lived-in wisdom, and liquor-soaked ache. It’s an intense instrument—a soul-penetrating stare wielded with careful precision as it wades into dark landscapes scarred with mental disease, corrosive relationships, sad disgrace, enslaving addictions, and unhealthy fixations.

While his range is limited, Lanegan switches between his shovel-scraping baritone and mellower falsetto capacities. The former digs at unrequited desires while the latter works to convey undying dedication. Measured, dusky, and unhurried, the daylight-allergic frontman’s voice alternately palpitates with claustrophobic presence and tortured mysticism. This is a man for who gray cedes to black, the hangman constantly lurks, and bullets and guns qualify as appealing. Navigating emotions hair-triggered by blossoming chaos, ruined loves, and deleterious circumstances, Lanegan surfs atop brimming tension and sweeping crescendos as well as any contemporary singer. He inhales words into his lungs before exhaling with unforced anguish. A twisted spirituality informs his phrasing and timbre, helping turn deliverance pleas into requiems of Biblical proportions. Lanegan makes feeling bad sound incredibly good, inviting listeners into clandestine worlds in

which temporary visits are preferable to taking up residence.

Obsessive longing recurs, and never more so than on “The Gravedigger’s Song.” Metronomic rumbling and blindsiding guitar riffs coincide with smothering vocals and a verse delivered in seductive, low-register French—the move underscoring Lanegan’s smitten condition and poetic wanderlust. On the electronically textured “Harborview Hospital,” he’s removed from a beautiful union and joyous celebration spotted in the near distance and, unable to free himself from a paralyzed state, asks a sister of mercy, “Are they supposed to be as sick as you and me?” For Lanegan, desolation isn’t a curable emotion or cause for shame; like it is for Kirsten Dunst’s character in Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia*, it’s an ailment that must be tolerated. Salvation, if all possible for this burdened Saturday’s child, comes from blind faith, blunt confessions, and imaginative atmospherics.

Whether via the tangled folk psychedelia of the balladic “Deep Black Vanishing Train” or noisy R&B throttle of the aptly titled “Quiver Syndrome,” complete with doo-wop backing vocals, Lanegan couches shivers, moans, and grumbles amidst mercurial musical combinations. He largely skirts conventional rock structures, daring instead to stir within manipulated trip-hop backdrops (“Phantasmagoria Blues”) and avant-garde chamber-pop melodies (“Leviathan”). On the synth-pop “Ode to Sad Disco,” Lanegan even channels late-80s Depeche Mode and Leonard Cohen. Pairing a drum-machine track with a reverb-spiked country guitar line, he creates a dance number tailored for the coat-check room in Satan’s discotheque. —**Bob Gendron**



Photo by John Peets

**T**he Black Keys might be the only recession-proof thing Akron, Ohio has produced in recent decades. Even as the former rubber capitol—at one point in its history home to four major tire companies—struggles to reinvent itself, the blues-rock duo has continued its rise virtually unabated.

Since *The Big Come Up* first surfaced back in 2002, the group's music has practically become ubiquitous in popular culture, with songs appearing in an endless stream of films and television commercials—a development singer-guitarist Dan Auerbach and drummer Patrick Carney joked about on an episode of "The Colbert Report," engaging in a "sell-out-off" with Vampire Weekend frontman Ezra Koenig that ended in a humorous, *Warriors*-style brawl. More recently, critical success followed. This past year, the duo even netted a trio of Grammys for its 2010 album *Brothers*.

The record's success must have been a nice bit of validation for the pair, who spent a chunk of its creation struggling with internal tensions stemming from Auerbach's decision to release a solo album in 2009 as well as a range of personal issues—including the fallout from Carney's divorce, which took one final ugly turn when his ex-wife published a lengthy article about the dissolution of their relationship on the popular Web site, Salon, earlier this year. Then there was the duo's enviable (if risky) decision to go it alone, producing the album themselves rather than re-teaming with Brian "Danger Mouse" Burton, who helmed 2008's *Attack & Release*. (continued)

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If the in-demand producer had any hard feelings about the slight, they've clearly long since evaporated. He rejoins the fold for *El Camino*, a sturdy, riff-heavy effort that simultaneously sharpens and expands on the Keys' musical palette. Opening song and lead single "Lonely Boy" sets the tone, piling on a thundering drums, a lean and propulsive guitar line, and Auerbach's damaged-soul vocals. "You pulled my heart out," he sings, "And I don't mind bleeding." Perhaps unsurprisingly, it actually sounds like he minds very much.

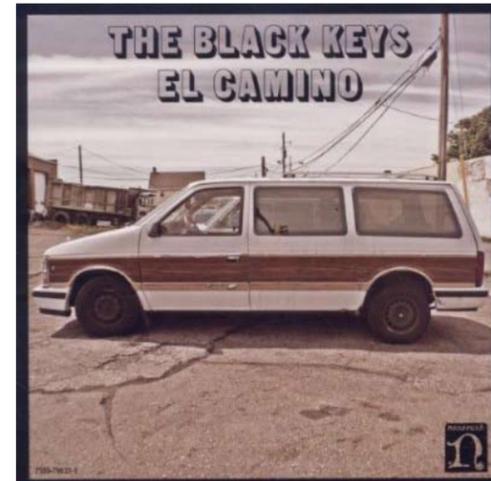
It's a recurrent theme for Auerbach. While happily married with a daughter of his own, the singer, who currently makes his home in Nashville, can't quite shake his she-done-me-wrong woes, singing: "You took advantage of the one who showed you love"; "Everybody knows that a broken heart is blind"; "All this love of mine/And all my precious time/You waste it cause you don't know what you want." Perhaps it's a vestige of his well-documented blues obsession, which culminated in a teenage pilgrimage to Junior's Place, the Chulahoma, Mississippi juke joint run by late bluesman Junior Kimbrough—a spur-of-the-moment trek that has since become an integral part of the band's early mythology.

Of course, each successive album finds the pair drifting further from such primal, bash-it-out blues roots. *El Camino* hits on musical touchstones as varied as T. Rex (the glammy, organ-fueled stomp

of "Gold on the Ceiling"), Michael Jackson (the icy, disco strut of "Sister" bears at least a passing resemblance to "Billie Jean"), and the Clash (the reggae-rock bounce of "Hell of a Season"). This idea that the Black Keys are, at least in some sense, burying the past carries over into the artwork for the "Lonely Boy" single—a photograph taken in Akron of a bulldozer stationed on a barren patch of concrete where the factory that housed recording sessions for 2004's *Rubber Factory* once stood.

In recent years, the Keys have started taking extra musicians out on the road, fleshing out their live sound with the addition of keyboard and bass. Fittingly, *El Camino*—as muscular as the roar emitted by its namesake auto's engine—sounds more like a full-on band effort than the product of two dudes bashing away in a garage. Vintage strains of keyboard weave through much of the album, and a female vocalist adds a soulful punch to several songs, including "Gold on the Ceiling," an insanely catchy number destined to end up in at least a handful of Hollywood films and network programs.

On *Attack & Release*, Danger Mouse and the Keys toyed with tempo, recording two versions of "Remember When," including a folksy, bluegrass-tinged take and a comparatively balls-out rocker. It's a trick they resuscitate better effect here on "Little Black Submarines," which opens amidst casual Sunday-morning acoustic picking



### The Black Keys

*El Camino*  
Nonesuch Records, LP or CD

before jumping into fifth gear, Auerbach laying down a cranky guitar riff that sounds like a heavily distorted take on Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers' "Mary Jane's Last Dance" blasted through blown-out speakers.

Clocking in right around 40 minutes, *El Camino* never risks overstaying its welcome, a point Auerbach seems to hit on with the album-closing "Mind Eraser," repeating, "Oh, don't let it be over." Sure, he's likely singing about yet another relationship gone to pot—in his mind, the dude must be the emotionally battered Charlie Brown of rock stars—but it's a safe assumption many listeners will feel similar pangs as the final seconds of this exceptional record tick down. A suggestion? Simply hit play again and crank the volume till the walls rattle. —Andy Downing


**Kathleen Edwards**

*Voyageur*  
Zoe, LP and CD

**K**athleen Edwards experienced a lifetime of changes during the past three years. She divorced husband and frequent collaborator Collin Cripps. She began a romantic and creative relationship with Justin Vernon, the Bon Iver namesake who helped produce and played on her new *Voyageur*. And, as detailed in witty fashion on the album-opening “Empty Threat,” she temporarily relocated to the United States from her native Canada. She also matured as an artist, expanding on the roots-based palette of Americana and amps-blurring rock of 2008’s *Asking for Flowers* by undertaking a record augmented by a number of co-writers and guest participants. Transformative shifts also extend to her lyrical scenery, surroundings, and situations.



Photo by Todd V. Wolfson

A cult favorite since debuting in 2003 with *Failer*, Edwards stands to benefit from her association with Vernon, who currently can’t do wrong and, more importantly, whose textural motifs adorn the singer-songwriter’s material with evocative layering, greater depth, and music-box fragility. She exchanges the humorous brashness and loose playfulness of her past for concentrated pathos, reflection, and sensitivity.

In doing so, Edwards becomes exposed in ways that, at times, makes listening uncomfortable. Fresh scars, persistent regrets, unanswered questions, two-way accusations, lingering doubts, and consuming guilt pepper her narratives. Her voice often possesses a soul-shattering sincerity and delicate softness that turns the fare into private, reflexive conversations that sound as if they transpire in front of a mirror. A majority of the songs are shot through with transformative anguish and reality-grounded balance. Yet Edwards’ greatest accomplishment on *Voyageur* pertains to the record’s overall mood and perspective. While poignantly addressing circumstances and feelings connected to her breakup, she never settles for vindictive revenge, emasculating blame, or debilitating pessimism.

By confronting her own flaws and roles in the dissolution, Edwards shows she’s already moved beyond anger and acquiesces to the consequences. Despite moments of weakness, disappointment, and disillusionment, Edwards suggests humans haven’t any other logical choice than to move on—no matter how hurtful as such processes can be. Reluctant understanding and

shared acceptance arrive during the heart-lacerating “House Full of Empty Rooms,” an elegy on which the vocalist admits she’s less than perfect while singing, “You don’t kiss me/ Not the way that I wish you would/ Maybe I don’t look at you/ In the way that makes you think you should.” Edwards doesn’t play martyr; rather, she finds fortitude in honest contemplation, recognizing that the process leads to the type of hope embodied in the upbeat “Sidecar” and dissipating darkness of “Going to Hell.”

Space-conscious and hovering instrumental touches—faint electronic washes, subtle xylophones, bluegrass-hinting banjos, filter-echoed guitars—underline Edwards’ guarded optimism, bringing to tunes fleshed-out arrangements and band-involved contributions largely absent from her previous efforts. From the back-and-forth exchanges on the baroque-flavored “Chameleon Comedian” to the militant percussion, sawing violin, and somber piano on the comfort-seeking “A Soft Place to Land,” tonally reverberant blends shade Edwards’ storytelling and singing. The combination is seldom more effective than on the sighing lament “Pink Champagne,” throughout which building notes cut like broken shards of glass and swelling country accents function as pain-dulling whiskey shots.

Indeed, after hearing Edwards scourge herself for mistakes that didn’t seem so, the following two tracks—the last on the album—seem anti-climatic, even as the closing “For the Record” serves as a statement of purpose on an album on which determination isn’t optional but prescribed. —**Bob Gendron**



**Kate Bush**  
*50 Words for Snow*  
 Anti-, 2LP or CD

**A**s Kate Bush's recording output has gotten more and more sparse—*50 Words for Snow* is only her second album of new material since 1993—so, too, have her arrangements gradually calmed. An artisan of the piano, Bush was always more chamber than concert hall. But *50 Words for Snow* begs the listener closer, its hushed quality a cleverly crafted comfort to disguise the turmoil underneath.

The album title only hints at the level of coldness and emptiness explored throughout this seven-track, 65-minute set. "Lake Tahoe," for instance, becomes increasingly gripping as one unravels the story, and it will be downright frightening to animal lovers. At 11 minutes, the song could use some trimming—Bush's airy piano and choir voices largely frame the tale—yet there's a dead body, and an aging dog that misses its deceased owner. "Here's my lap," Bush sings, channeling the dreams of a hound, "that's where you lay your head."

Such an attention to detail is what makes *50 Words for Snow* a remarkable albeit potentially difficult listen. Few songwriters, of course, possess the lyrical gift that can put a decomposing body in a lake and, minutes later, wring tears from thoughts of a lonely pet. On *50 Words for Snow*, Bush splits the difference between such stark realism and the odder, more otherworldly thoughts that mark much of her 80s-era work.

The metaphor in "Snowflake" seems simple enough, but knowing that a bulk of the vocals are handled by Bush's young son, Albert McIntosh, adds a layer of bizarreness. The teenager is billed as lead vocalist, and Bush is resigned to the chorus. Without reading the credits, one would think Bush is playing a character. "My broken heart, my fabulous dances," presumably sings the teenager, turning the no-two-snowflakes-are-alike cliché into a dissertation on fading childhood. *(continued)*



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Photo by John Cardner Bush

Some of Bush's old lyrical oddness returns on "Wild Man," which many longtime fans have excitedly noted, represents her revisiting of the abnormal. The song appears to be about a hunted Yeti. But such a diversion into the mystical isn't nearly as bracing as when Bush touches on very real human emotions. Still, her playfully skittering vocal whisper—and deranged, Cee-Lo-like choirs—ultimately redeems the song.

More interesting, however, are the final two tracks. The title cut does indeed offer 50 words and phrases inspired by snow, with an assist from author/humorist Stephen Fry. But they may as well be 50 words for tragedy and gloominess: "avalanche," "robber's veil," and "bad for trains" among them, all delivered while soulful backing vocalists taunt him on.

The Elton John duet "Snowed in At Wheeler Street," however, is heartbreak at its most haunting. London smog, the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and burning Rome are among the images that reverberate around a buzzing, horror-soundtrack keyboard. "Have we been in love forever?" Bush asks, a narrator unsure of herself, her partner, and her feelings toward nostalgia. In such moments, the languid arrangements seem to come to a halt. After all, the answer to such a question is a deeper look into the abyss than anything involving an Abominable Snowman.

—**Todd Martens**

**F**lorence Welch's voice is an undeniable weapon. It brought concertgoers to a halt in 2010 at Southern California's Coachella Valley Music & Arts Festival. Welch and her band, Florence & the Machine, were stationed at an outpost—a relatively small tent safely tucked away from the two outdoor mainstages. With a mid-afternoon slot, it would have been easy to walk right on by. But Welch shouted, and onlookers stopped.

Hers is a tone that is equally strong and delicate—a versatile instrument that can grind out a soul cover and minutes later force journalists to use clichéd words like “ethereal,” simply because there’s few other ways to describe a voice than can seem to dance over a harp’s fragile tones. Once television-viewing audiences got wind of this dynamo singer, they responded in kind. After an appearance at the MTV Video Music Awards in the fall of 2010, Welch’s 2009 debut, *Lungs*, suddenly took off and earned Florence & the Machine a Best New Artist nod at the Grammy Awards.

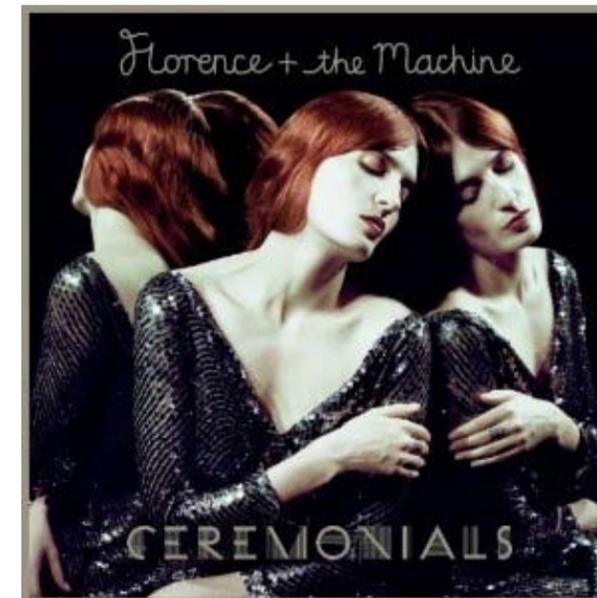
So it’s a strange, head-scratching thing that *Ceremonials* opens with a song in “Only If a Night” that goes all of 60 seconds before completely neutralizing Welch’s greatest strength. It starts slow and brooding enough, with a smattering of piano notes, deep bass tones, and dreamy harpsichords. Then comes the church choirs. This in itself wouldn’t be immediately offensive, as Welch is singing of doing handstands in a cemetery, after all.



But with the choirs come an anchor’s thud of over-production. Strings? Yep. Giant, hip-hop-like beats? Check? A midtempo piano for Welch to go all Alicia Keys? That’s here, too. This doesn’t appear to be the result of some evil major-label overload now demanding a “hit,” as *Ceremonials*, like *Lungs*, is produced by Paul Epworth. Unlike *Lungs*, however, this record feels more like an exercise in production than an expression of artistry.

OK, fine, that’s one track. Next up is the first single, “Shake It Out.” Sadly, this isn’t a song as so much as a piece of music built for gargantuan set-pieces. One can practically see the close-up on Welch as the veins in her neck quiver. And no doubt she’ll look striking in what will surely be an angelic, glitter-filled costume. Yet, as on “Only If a Night,” Welch is soon joined by what sounds like all of London’s entire cadre of backing vocalists. One may as well pile on the window dressing and create a diversion, however, as all the Queen’s singers and even the most trained philharmonic couldn’t add a sense of drama to nonsense lyrics like “damned if I do and damned if I don’t.” Sigh.

It carries on for 12 tracks, much like this. Sure, there are nice atmospheric touches here and there. The tribal drumming of “Heartlines” promises good things to come, as do the scrapes and clacks of “All This and Heaven To.” Likewise, “Breaking Down,” on which Welch sticks close to some steadily building orchestral strikes. But these are cursory nods to experimentation. Melodies are sacrificed for choruses loud enough to be shouted from the Vatican, and Welch can’t go more than 40 seconds without someone thinking she needs layer upon layer of vocals.



**Florence & the Machine**  
*Ceremonials*  
Island Records, 2LP or CD

Even Welch’s trademark harp is denigrated by the studio gloss. It sounds so heavily processed, it feels ripped from a Radio Disney album.

The great crime here is that Welch has a personality that demands attention. *Lungs* is an expansive record full of possibilities, with hints of Gothic blues and rock n’ soul fierceness. It has its share of celestial touches as well, but there’s plenty of theatrics to be pulled from songs that grapple with faith. PJ Harvey and Nick Cave, for instance, have catalogs that prove it. It isn’t until the album’s final moments that Welch seems to seize the potential at which her debut hints. “Don’t need a husband, don’t need no wife,” she sings through gritted teeth on the album-closing “Leave My Body.” The verses are striking in their simplicity, and she sounds angry enough that the gospel choir keeps its distance. It’s the rare moment on *Ceremonials* where the song is placed ahead of the spectacle. —**Todd Martens**

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## MUSIC

**T**

he Big Pink's 2009 debut, *A Brief History of Love*, often sounds out-of-step with its openhearted title. It boasts an array of shoegaze-laden electro-rock cuts as bone-chilling as a winter breeze in a darkened crypt. The British crew's sophomore album, by contrast, is a much warmer affair, blanketed in lush synths, the electronic pulse of programmed drums, and Robbie Furze's casually tossed-off vocals.

Furze, who used to play with Alec Empire, sounds miles removed from his noise-rock past here, and songs like "Rubbernecking" and the kinetic "Lose Your Mind" hew much closer to the gauzy output of revered Britpop acts such as the Stone Roses. Still, it's impossible to shake the feeling that Furze's heart isn't fully invested in this current guise. He's akin to a tattooed biker that, after getting trapped in the 'burbs with his old lady, is forced to swap his leather jacket for pleated khakis. How else to explain the emotional disconnect in the music? Even the prettiest numbers sound somewhat dead inside. Like a Stepford Wife. Or Britney Spears.

That said, the group displays a better command of space and melody than on its claustrophobic debut, and a handful of ear-catching moments punctuate the most memorable tracks. "Hit the Ground (Superman)," built around a sample from Laurie Anderson's "O Superman," layers on deep piano chords, wobbly synthesizers, and a fuzzed-out guitar drone that clings to the tune like barnacles on a ship's hull. Despite lyrics seemingly cribbed from *The Outsiders*, the massive "Stay Gold" (one can almost picture Johnny advising Ponyboy to "stay gold" as the chorus glides in) comes across as



**The Big Pink**  
*Future This*  
4AD, LP or CD

if it's genetically engineered to pack the dance-floor at the now-shuttered Hacienda during the height of the Madchester craze. Similar vibes creep into "Lose Your Mind," which samples Siouxsie & the Banshees and waves the flag for goth night at the discotheque.

Had the Big Pink been content to host its own rave—a number of the album's 10 cuts are decidedly glowstick-friendly, after all—the record might connect better. As it stands, repeated attempts to add emotional heft to the material bogs everything down. Witness the skittish, album-closing "77," for one, on which Furze sings of his late father with the mechanical dispassion of a robot that can't quite grasp the meaning of love.

"There's something missing," Furze yowls on the numbing "13" (the guy loves digits more than the Count on *Sesame Street*). Listening to *Future This*, it's often hard to disagree.

—**Andy Downing**

**A**llow, please, for a left-field link to Sigur Rós, the Icelandic rock band that celebrates the slow-build and mysterious. Listening to this double-disc live effort, a recording tactic employed by film composer Hans Zimmer—a cinematic cheerleader of all things loud and blatant—springs to mind.

Granted, this is the first and likely last time Zimmer and Sigur Rós will be mentioned in tandem. Sigur Rós, after all, writes songs that take their time, pieces that continually ebb rather than ever reach a destination. Yet it was Zimmer who took his booming score for *Inception* and blasted it over the speakers of the Warner Bros. lot. With mics set up around the studio, it was the echoing, dense-with-atmosphere compositions that Zimmer used in the film.

Likewise, Sigur Rós onstage is a slightly different beast than in the studio, as live, the sounds of a bowed guitar feel like communications with a satellite, and accordions and strings are mystical connections to the past. To be sure, the distinctions between recorded Sigur Rós and live Sigur Rós aren't terribly drastic. But what is pristine and elegant on album has much more buoyancy on *Inni*, as if this is music made to traverse the night sky. In fact, for those unfamiliar with Sigur Rós, *Inni* is a rather good place to start. And that's notable, as most live albums tend to be for-fans-only souvenirs.



### **Sigur Rós**

*Inni*

XL Recordings, 3LP box set or 2CD/DVD

*Inni* is different. Jónsi Birgisson's falsetto, which sings lyrics in the band's largely made-up language, is more clearly allowed to drift amidst the classically inspired rock n' roll orchestrations. Where songs begin and end is sometimes only made known by occasional interruptions of crowd noise. The dream-like constructions are equally abrasiveness and pillow-soft. "Ný batterí," for instance, begins with crystallizing electronics that seem to be destroying a solar system before soon settling into a mourning lullaby. Meanwhile, "Við spilum endalaust" opens with old-world church sounds and ascends into a glorious guitar-and-cymbal symphony.

This is music that hints at possibilities, and it's made by a group more interested in explorations than any end goal. The previously unreleased "Lúppulagið" hints at what Sigur Rós still has to offer. Instruments squirm and squeak, moving like some heretofore-unknown alien creatures. Elastic synths and an affectionate piano dot the mix, but it's the ambiguous life beneath that grabs one's attention. If not quite a transport to another world, it is the kind of music, perhaps, that should score films.

—**Todd Martens**



**Los Campesinos!**  
*Hello Sadness*  
 Arts & Crafts, LP or CD

**G**areth Campesinos!, frontman for the sprawling Welsh collective whose members, like those of the Ramones, all share a last name even if they don't share familial blood, has always been infatuated with the way the human form reveals emotional wounds accrued through the years. "I cannot emphasize enough that my body is a badly designed poorly put together vessel harboring these diminishing so-called vital organs," he sang on the title track to 2008's *We Are Beautiful, We Are Doomed*. "Hope my heart goes first. I HOPE MY HEART GOES FIRST!"

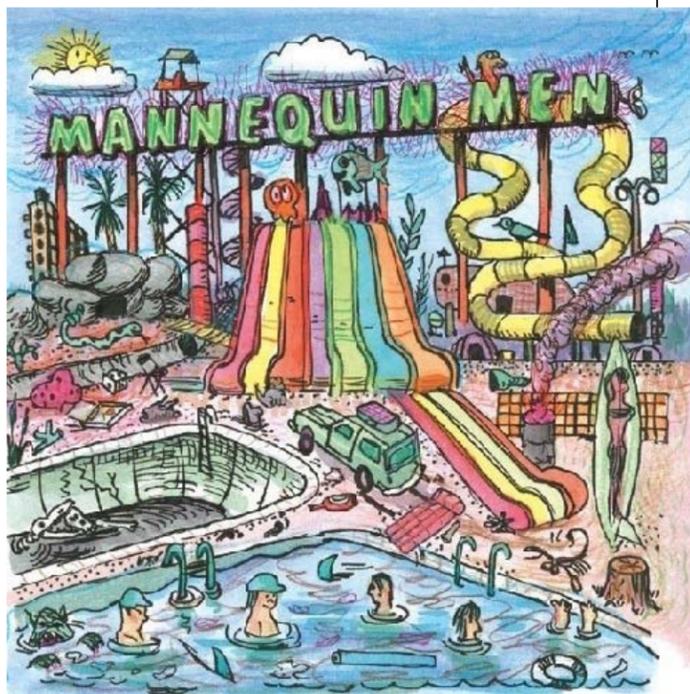
Now, years later, the vocalist's poor heart is still pumping away despite his contrary wishes. Witness the album-opening "By Your Hand," a buoyant indie-pop number on which he invites a lover to take his miserable life, joining his bandmates in a group singalong that could have been choreographed by *Glee* producer Ryan Murphy. "By your hand is the only end I foresee," they wail.

Elsewhere, Gareth examines the emotional damage left by a rocky relationship on "Life Is a Long Time," singing, "There's cartography in every scar" atop jangly guitar and the interwoven vocals of Ellen and the now-departed Harriet Campesinos! Then, on the epic title track that builds to a near-orgasmic crescendo of strings, horns, and chugging guitars, he tries desperately to spackle over the ever-expanding cracks in his busted heart.



While past albums remained relatively merry affairs—the celebratory musical backdrop playing counterpoint to the band's oft-dour frontman—here, Gareth occasionally drags his mates into the morass. "To Tundra," a song every bit as chilly and barren as its title suggests, moves as deliberately as an ice floe. The woozy "Hate For the Island" is similarly ethereal, a funeral ode delivered amidst a wash of ghostly guitar. The frontman's anger ("I've a whole lot of hate for the island") can't quite overcome the obvious grief brought on by his having lost a lover that now rests beneath six feet of sand. While these moments initially feel like a welcome change of pace, the slower tempos don't really suit a band that caps its moniker with a well-deserved exclamation point.

Fortunately, the crew bounces back for "Baby I Got The Death Rattle," a tune that gradually evolves from introspective to celebratory before closing with a full-on group chorus that sounds lifted from an off-Broadway musical. Of course, the song's title is inspired by a medical term describing the phlegm-y sound produced by someone nearing death, and the lyrics reference headstones and digging one's own grave. While this might seem morbid coming from some bands, it's a fitting turn for a group that's made a career mining joy from life's endless stream of disappointments. —**Andy Downing**



### Mannequin Men

*Mannequin Men*

Addenda Records, LP or CD

**E**arly in 2011, there was a girl this particular writer fancied. Don't worry, dear readers that are anti-first person. My story ends soon—as did the relationship. The latter was the long distance sort, taxing for numerous reasons that needn't be discussed in a record review. But an L.A./N.Y. relationship with two workaholics, and one who hates phones (this one), was doomed from the start. One night, when not feeling particularly excited about having a conversation in which each party recounts his/her day, I may have said, "You need a hobby."

Her reply: "Hobbies are stupid."

I will not get into the ins and outs of such a statement, as well the blatant immaturity implied by said statement. Suffice it to say, she was, ultimately, a lovely girl, but a political one, and one who worked for the city. She was, quite frankly, smarter than me in nearly every respect. Yet when someone says, "Hobbies are stupid," no intelligent response can follow it up. Instead, I was exasperated. I knew we were over and wanted to get back to my own, non-conversing-on-the-phone hobbies.

Whether the aforementioned instance is something someone can relate to (or not) is beside the point. Exasperation at the end of a workday, however, is universal. And that's exactly what Chicago's Mannequin Men nail on "Hobby Girl." Go to St. Louis, paint a picture, whatever, pleads drummer/vocalist Seth Bohn. Just leave him alone, as he wants some grown-up time all to his lonesome.

This sort of attitude is captured, musically and lyrically, time and again, on Mannequin Men's fourth effort. Once one of the Windy City's rowdiest, drunkest punk groups, the band takes a more measured approach here. It's as if everyone wants to get crazy—but not so crazy that the next day's hangover will be a complete drag. "Gonna Forget About Me," in fact, could be a straightforward country tune in different hands, but here, it's a matter-of-fact dumping anthem.

"Enough" feels as if it should be shouted by every Occupy movement, overworked union, and underpaid civilian around the country. Kevin Richard's snarl is no longer bitter, just simply resigned to the fact that things ain't looking all that hot. The adult obligations of "Medill" are delivered with pristine, 50s rock guitars that recall the best of the Flaming Groovies. Meanwhile, tracks like "Flying Blind" function as gritty updates of the blues in which urban numbness is a daily affliction. Call this self-titled set punk rock for the daily grind. —**Todd Martens**



### Lou Reed & Metallica

*Lulu*

Warner Bros., 2LP or 2CP

**E**arly on in this ill-advised yet much-hyped collaboration, Lou Reed offers up what must have been the overriding mindset during the recording sessions that spawned this miserable album: "There is no time for guilt or second guessing."

It's clear from listening to this project, which finds former thrash masters Metallica serving up an array of turgid, by-the-numbers riffs while Reed recites lyrics that read like the rejected Penthouse Forum letters of a creepy sociopath, that no one involved gave pause to consider what exactly it was they were trying to accomplish. How else to explain a song like "The View"—admittedly not among the five or six most egregious efforts here—on which Metallica singer James Hetfield repeatedly howls "I am the table."

Elsewhere, the famously pugnacious Reed takes center stage, delivering an assortment of cringe-worthy, spoken-word bon mots in his graveled timbre, rasping: "I swallow your sharpest curdle like a colored man's dick";

"Spermless like a girl"; "If I waggle my ass like a dark prostitute would you think less of me and my coagulating heart?"

Uhh, right. Can we get back to Hetfield's philosophical carpentry talk now?

What it lacks in quality, *Lulu* makes up for in sheer, unforgiving length. Clocking in at nearly 90 minutes, the album runs longer than most feature-length films, and you feel the weight of every second during molasses-slow tracks like the eight-minute-plus "Little Dog."

Indeed, it's difficult to think of a more unlistenable musical pairing. Maybe Kurt Cobain and author William S. Burroughs on *The "Priest" They Called Him?* But even that drug-induced guitar squall/beat-poet collaboration spawned a great quote from the Nirvana frontman. Asked about his playing on the recording, Cobain simply said, "I just masturbated for 20 minutes." If someone posed the same question to Reed, he'd likely respond with a 40-minute dissertation on human sexuality and German expressionism (the project, after all, is inspired in large part by German expressionist author Frank Wedekind). As far as "super groups" go, Loutallica (or is it Metallica Machine Music?) makes Chickenfoot sound like goddamn Temple of the Dog.

In a small bit of redemption, the album does manage to close on a slightly positive note with the orchestral "Junior Dad," although I feel saying so is a bit like praising the cup of coffee at the close of a bad meal because the waitress managed to get it to you hot.

When it comes right down to it, it's not at all surprising that the combination doesn't work. When the concept was announced—Lou Reed and Metallica collaborate on a batch of songs inspired by a German expressionist—only a small subset of Reed obsessives clutching dog-eared copies of *Metal Machine Music* and one national magazine held out any hope that this thing would work. What we got is what virtually everyone else expected: A Reed/Metallica *Human Centipede* as horrifying as that movie's unholy creation. Now please, god, somebody kill it. —**Andy Downing**

# Deadmau5

**Aragon Ballroom**

Chicago, IL

**October 22, 2011**

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Jeff Dorgay

f Deadmau5, a.k.a. Toronto native Joel Zimmerman, ever tires of his gig as an electronic artist and producer, he could probably secure a job as a media consultant or party coordinator without problem. At the first of two sold-out shows at Chicago's Aragon Ballroom—performances that came on the heels of a headlining Lollapalooza appearance as well as an unprecedented multi-night run in New York City—the man that conceals his head with a rodent-themed mask (on this night in the shape of a piece of Swiss cheese) gave a clinic on how to make a concert into a sensory-triggering event.

While dizzying light displays and thumping speaker systems are *de rigueur* at raves and other electronic-minded spectacles, Deadmau5 took such normalities to a plateau on par with the mind-rattling exhibitions staged by arena-rock acts.



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Taming the Aragon's nightmarish acoustics to the point where sound is largely free of echo is laudable; turning the 5000-capacity venue into an aural funhouse, as Zimmerman did, borders on miraculous.

He proved equally adept with aesthetics. Two geometrically matched risers functioned as projection screens, each flanking an approximately 20-foot-tall command module on which Deadmau5 stood, operating computers, mixers, and sequencers. Rather than bomb the audience with blinding strobes and incessant flash, the visual array (which also included backdrop screens) worked in tandem with the tempo of songs. Pop-culture-referencing symbolism, sequences, and similes enhanced the dance-centric blend of techno, trip-hop, soul, and pop; sound and sight converged into coordinated, progressive-house-music symphonies. Seemingly aware of how and why music continues to cross over into and become an inextricable part of multi-tasking, entertainment, and language, Deadmau5 excelled at rendering meaningless any separation between gaming and art, social networking and entertainment, artificial and real, original and borrowed. *(continued)*

CONCERT



**The lanky 30-year-old creative wizard transcended genres in the similar fashion that today's most immersive, plugged-in entertainment systems explode cultural parameters.**

Scenarios stemming from popular video games, witty taglines and phrases, iconic shapes and matrices joined a miasma of advanced graphics in simultaneously stimulating the imagination and punctuating the liberation inherent in primarily instrumental tracks such as "Bad Selection," "Professional Griefers," and "Some Chords." Affording the fare a more sensual feel, vocalist Sofi joined Deadmau5 for "Sofi Needs a Ladder" and "One Trick Pony," with the host stepping down from his perch and removing his mask for a brief moment—a well-deserved victory lap before he, once again, climbed back into his technologically savvy tree house for another hour of programming, knob-twirling, and oscillating.

By frequently narrowing and expanding pitch and frequency, slowing and quickening rhythmic speed and pace, Deadmau5 toyed with textures and moods, as well as the ignorant notion that anyone, provided the requisite equipment, can string together loops, grooves, beats, samples, and percussive noises into coherent, cerebral music. Linking together dubstep and psychedelia, club and ambient, trance and rock strains into both mellow and hyperactive expressions, the lanky 30-year-old creative wizard transcended genres in the similar fashion that today's most immersive, plugged-in entertainment systems explode cultural parameters. Welcome to the future.



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# Audiophile Pressings

## 2011 in Review

It didn't have quite the same sweeping impact as 2009's Beatles reissues, but Capitol's enhanced Pink Floyd catalog rollout nonetheless anchored a year during which labels big and small made the old new again.

Vinyl-based imprints continued to woo audiophiles with resurrected gems and fresh remasters. Yet few companies outside of Mobile Fidelity demonstrated a welcome boldness of moving past traditional fare and releasing future-to-be-audiophile classics from the likes of artists such as R.E.M. and, yes, KC and the Sunshine Band. The strategy is essential to not only the health, but survival, of the high-end industry.

Since the music on most audiophile pressings is already a well-known entity, *TONE Audio's* coverage of said releases focused on sonic merits, packaging, comparisons to the original pressings, and, ultimately, whether or not a certain reissue is worth your hard-earned cash. In other words, we made sure reissues really rocked, and if they didn't, we advised you to stay away and spend your hard-earned cash on worthier titles. And now, the envelope, please.

# Eclipse

## EMI'S EXHAUSTIVE PINK FLOYD REISSUE SERIES

By Bob Gendron and Jeff Dorgay



Photo by Storm Thorgerson

**Why Pink Floyd?** So asks the clever tagline given to EMI's exhaustive overhaul of the British legends' catalog. The statement also doubles as a straightforward query that begets two easy answers. While the group's records have seen myriad reissues, the band has never unlocked its vaults and allowed for the release of sought-after oddities. And, from a commercial standpoint, Pink Floyd and its record label realize that the open window on marketing physical media to the mainstream is quickly closing. A more apt slogan for the archival project might be "If not now, when?"

Spread across several phases and categories, the campaign is designed to please casual fans, newcomers, and diehards. The 16-disc *Discovery* box collects the band's studio records (also available individually) in newly remastered form, while Experience versions of *The Dark Side of the Moon*, *Wish You Were Here*, and *The Wall* add a bonus disc of previously unreleased related content to the classic album. Yet the greater temptations come courtesy of multi-disc Immersion box sets of the aforementioned titles, Pink Floyd's three most celebrated efforts. Loaded with extras, collectables, and options, they seemingly respond to one of the only criticisms of EMI's Beatles reissues—specifically, a paucity of bonus material.

Of course, sharp redesigns and lavish booklets mean little if the James Guthrie-remastered sound and assorted rarities fail to live up to expectation. Beginning with the first stage of releases, *TONE* takes you through the sonic merits of each studio-album remaster via tireless comparisons to myriad original LP pressings as well as previous digital editions. In addition, we interview Pink Floyd drummer Nick Mason and get lost inside *The Dark Side of the Moon* Immersion box set, emerging with fresh perspectives on content, sound, packaging, and value. (Similar explorations of the *Wish You Were Here* and *The Wall* Immersion sets will occur closer to their respective November and February 2012 release dates.) And yes, we spin and compare the new LP pressing of *The Dark Side of the Moon*.

Set the controls for the heart of the sun and prepare for interstellar overdrive. —**BG**



## Discovering the New Pink Floyd Box Set

By Jeff Dorgay

**F**ive years ago, Pink Floyd released *Oh, By the Way*, a catalog-encompassing European-made box set limited to 10,000 copies. Issued internationally in mass quantities, the new *Discovery* box set contains the same lineup of studio albums. Yet it's also worth mentioning that the *Oh, By the Way* retails for close to \$300, making *Discovery* a better value at \$199.

After spending several days listening to as many variations on the Pink Floyd catalog as imaginable, to me it's evident that the big jump in performance stems from *Oh, By the Way* as compared to the original CDs, which sound flat. Think of the contrast between the early Beatles CDs (also produced by EMI) and the recent remasters; the prior Floyd set represents a similar leap in quality. While the generic, late 80s Floyd releases are not overly harsh, they claim a smaller soundstage than either of the remastered versions.

James Guthrie gets the mastering credit on *Discovery* and a "remastering production" credit on *Oh, By the Way*, on which Doug Sax is listed as mastering engineer. But here's where the mystery thickens. Extensive A-B listening between the 2007 box and the new one reveals the slightest distinction between the two—and one that this writer strained to hear on a \$60,000 dCS stack. At times, it feels as if the new box has a few more molecules of dynamic range, but overall, the sound is basically identical. There is absolutely no difference between the two sets as experienced on a \$2,500 CD player, meaning, that for the mainstream listener, the box sets might as well be the same product.

That said, while the 2007 and 2011 remasters are essentially twins, enormous differences exist between the new discs and original CDs, even when played on a budget transport. Whereas the original CDs keep the sound distinctly between the speakers, the new discs provide a more expansive left-to-right presentation, along with more depth. The high frequencies are free of grain and distortion, and the slight bit of tape hiss, especially on the oldest discs, suggests that the analog masters were procured. All the remasters boast a level of warmth and openness not always associated with digital.

On the band's debut, *Piper at the Gates of Dawn*, the psychedelic classic "Interstellar Overdrive" offers more defined bass lines. And while the re-

channeled stereo effect on CD might not appeal to purists that love the original mono release, it adds a welcome hallucinogenic element. Moving up to 1971, *Meddle* reveals a much more elaborate and dense mix. The remastered CD again gets the nod over the original, revealing a wealth of cool electronic effects as well as a heavy bass line.

Such factors helped make Pink Floyd a favorite in hi-fi-store demos for years to come. Unless you have a pristine UK version, the new *Meddle* sounds considerably more dynamic than the US LP, especially on Side Two, on which "Echoes" (at 23:29) takes up the entire side. The howling dog at the beginning of "Seamus" is more convincing on the CD, too. *(continued)*



(For coverage of the biggest-selling Floyd albums—*Dark Side of the Moon*, *Wish You Were Here*, and *The Wall*—please see our reports on the Immersion box sets.)

On *Momentary Lapse of Reason* and *The Division Bell*, the two albums created after bassist/vocalist Roger Waters' departure, the gap between the original CD and the remastered discs converges—probably because the pair was recorded digitally, whereas the rest of the catalog was recorded on analog equipment. Again, the remasters get the nod, but just slightly, as they show subtle traces of extra depth and clarity.

How does *Discovery* (and the set's individually available CDs) fare against vinyl? In an exhaustive comparison of the *Discovery* discs and various LP releases, the former are equal to and, on the whole, more enjoyable than garden-

variety US vinyl pressings—particularly worn copies. And, be honest: you probably spun these records to death in the 70s. While the US LPs get a slight nod in regards to analog warmth, they are fairly murky, lack in midrange clarity, and, in some cases, fall short in dynamics. The first thing you notice with the CD remasters is their extra punch and sparkle.

Those fortunate enough to have early-stamper UK, German, or Japanese vinyl pressings own the motherlode. The aforementioned match the detail of the digital discs and claim peerless tonal purity. However, the new CDs are good enough to please even collectors by functioning as daily drivers that will minimize wear on the more valuable vinyl. Listeners with excellent digital front ends should come away extremely impressed. I did.

Like its predecessor, *Discovery* offers mini-LP packaging. However, the printing lacks the intricate nature of the 2007 box, which features heavier cardboard sleeves and disc artwork that mirrors that of the original LPs. The discs in *Discovery* claim stylized artwork unique to the set. Similarly, an exquisitely rendered 40-page book contains unpublished artwork from Storm Thorgerson, yet the printing quality doesn't carry over to the CD covers. Stylistically, the Japanese Mini LP versions remain the benchmark for the Floyd CD catalog. In terms of reproduction quality, they are the equivalent of the recent Beatles discs.

Yes, completists will want everything. But if you already own *Oh, By the Way*, you will gain no new ground with *Discovery*. However, if you still just clutch the original CDs or worn vinyl copies, these new remasters provide a highly satisfying upgrade.

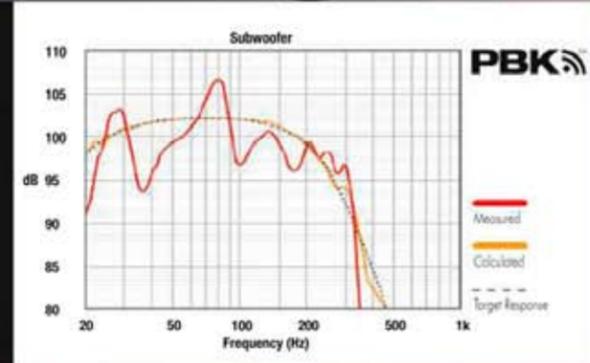
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## The Dark Side of the Moon Immersion Box Set

By Bob Gendron

Three prism-stamped black marbles that likely will never see much daylight outside of their pouch. An 100% viscose printed scarf that wouldn't be out of place around an opera patron's neck. A facsimile concert ticket tucked into a professional envelope. Four collector's cards meant to mimic the cigarette cards of yesteryear. Nine thematic coasters on which no self-respecting human will dare set a drink. An art print suitable for framing. These tokens represent much of the memorabilia stuffed inside the six-disc *The Dark Side of the Moon* Immersion box, a tricked-out set that aims to be the end-all-be-all version of the iconic 1973 album.

Immersion volumes for *Wish You Were Here* and *The Wall* will follow, and the rest of the British group's catalog has been remastered in the newly minted and illustratively appointed *Discovery* set. It's all part of a capacious reissue project that could very well be the last of its kind in an era turning away from physical digital media. (Note: Obsessive types will probably detest one aspect of the Immersion packaging. While placed on lock-down mechanisms, discs can come loose in transit and slide around the inside of the box.)

Featuring new graphic designs by the band's resident artist, Storm Thorgerson, and the iconic record in every conceivable digital fashion, as well as two 26x26-cm booklets, the heaviest of all *The Dark Side of the Moon* reissues is in many aspects true to its name. Visually and aurally, it immerses fans into its contents and presents no less than ten ways to experience the studio LP. Audiophiles strictly bent on sound—forward, sideways, and reverse—get their holy grail. Yet, ironically,

in a year in which opulent and expensive box sets that honor single albums are the norm, the ostensibly stuffed package unintentionally begs the question: Is it enough?

On the surface, raising such an issue seems greedy and grumpy. Short of containing replica vinyl seven-inch singles or any vinyl itself, the Immersion entry covers the bases on how *The Dark Side of the Moon* can be experienced. In addition to a traditional CD, diehards get a DVD-A that boasts 2003's 5.1 surround mix in both 448kbps and 640kbps; 1973's 4.0 Quad mix in 448kbps and 640kbps; and 1973's LPCM stereo mix (newly remastered). Toss in a Blu-ray disc that presents the 5.1 surround, 4.0 Quad, and original stereo mix in 86kHz/24-bit audio—and another CD that makes available the original 1972 mix supervised by Alan Parsons for the first time—and repeat listeners stand to gain a better understanding of instrument placement than the artists that created the album. (continued)



Photo by Hipgnosis © Pink Floyd Music Ltd

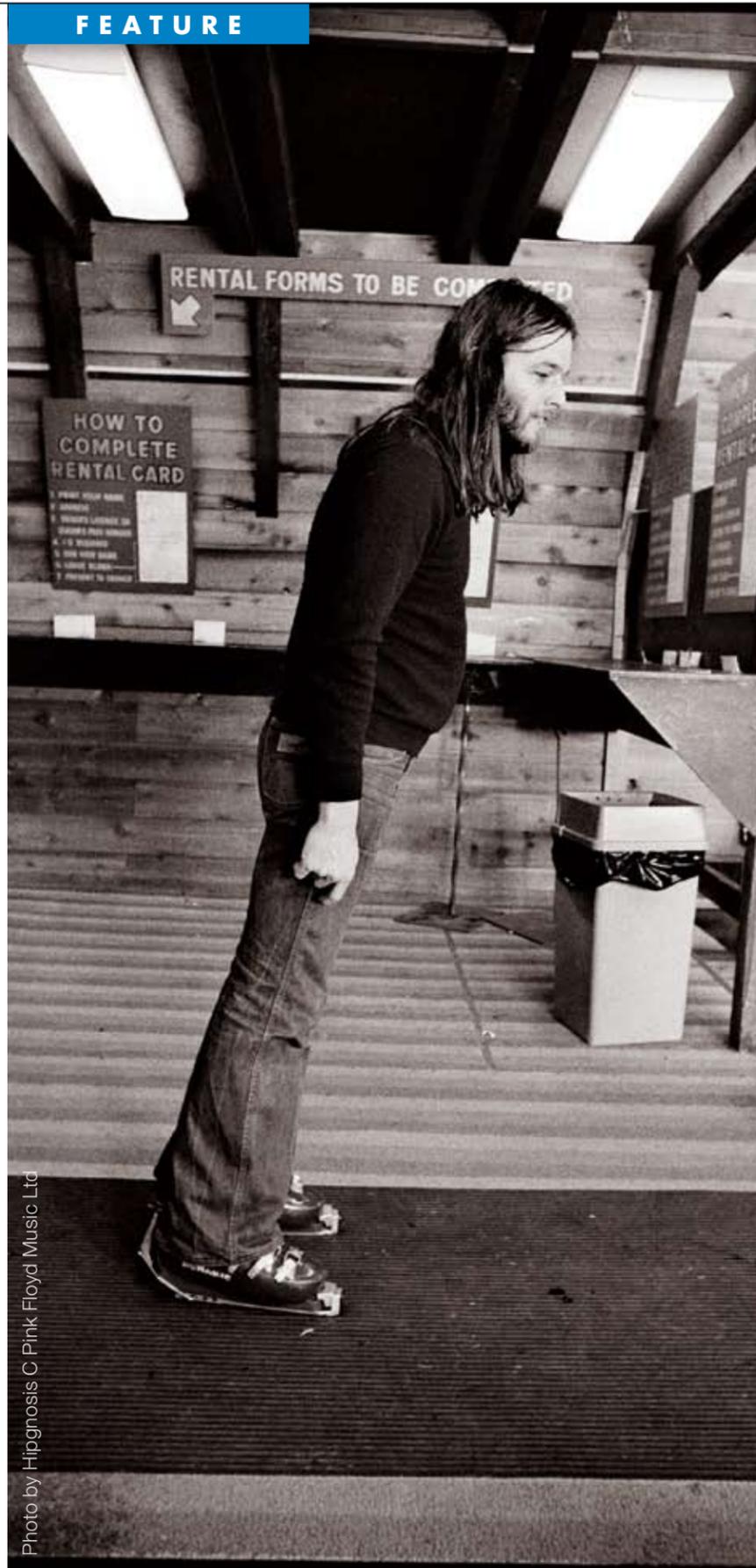


Photo by Hipgnosis © Pink Floyd Music Ltd



Photo by © Jill Furmanovsky-rockarchive.com

If it isn't expected in these situations, overkill is at least welcome. Yet while multichannel aficionados should have a feast dissecting and comparing different sonic choices, a more important quandary rests with the fact that more than half of the material here has already been released. The reservation as to whether this particular Immersion probes deeply enough isn't related to the recycling of the surround mix or Quad program but, rather, concerns what's absent. Namely, rarities in the form of demos, outtakes, and live cuts. The few intriguing tidbits that appear leave one wanting more.

Flashing a lascivious smile that would make the Mona Lisa proud, and bathed in dizzying red light, Roger Waters looks as if he's just swallowed a tab of LSD and entered a parallel universe. The blissed-out

scene marks the beginning of "Careful With That Axe, Eugene," captured live in Brighton 1972 in all its hazy full-color glory. With a smoking cigarette tethered to the end of his bass, Waters whispers wordless calls into the microphone and Pink Floyd ascends into psychedelic nirvana. Related visuals inform a spooked "Set the Controls for the Heart of the Sun," from the same concert. Nick Mason wallops the drums, mystical Indian melodies coarce across the slow-building arrangement, and, at fever peak, a gong's outer edges burst into flames. Inhale, and you might still be able to get a whiff of the scent of hallucinogenic drugs perfuming the air.

Such vignettes are exactly why super-deluxe box sets exist. However, they're the only live audio-video examples afforded.

They're teasers, brief hints of a bigger payoff that never arrives. Instead, three Concert Screen films constitute a bulk of the visual elements. These concise films were used as background projections while Pink Floyd played in Britain, France, and the United States, respectively. As historical relics, they're passably interesting. Computer-generated graphics of heartbeat monitors, images of landing strips, cartoon-sketched natural landscapes, animated clocks, pictures of working-class office dwellers, montages of exploding refrigerators, interiors of clinically white hospitals, and surrealist collages complement the album's lyrical topics and moods. But do even the most dyed-in-the-wool Pink Floyd zealots need to see and hear the cumulative hour-long footage in DVD stereo and 5.1 as well as Blu-ray LPCM stereo and multichannel? *(continued)*



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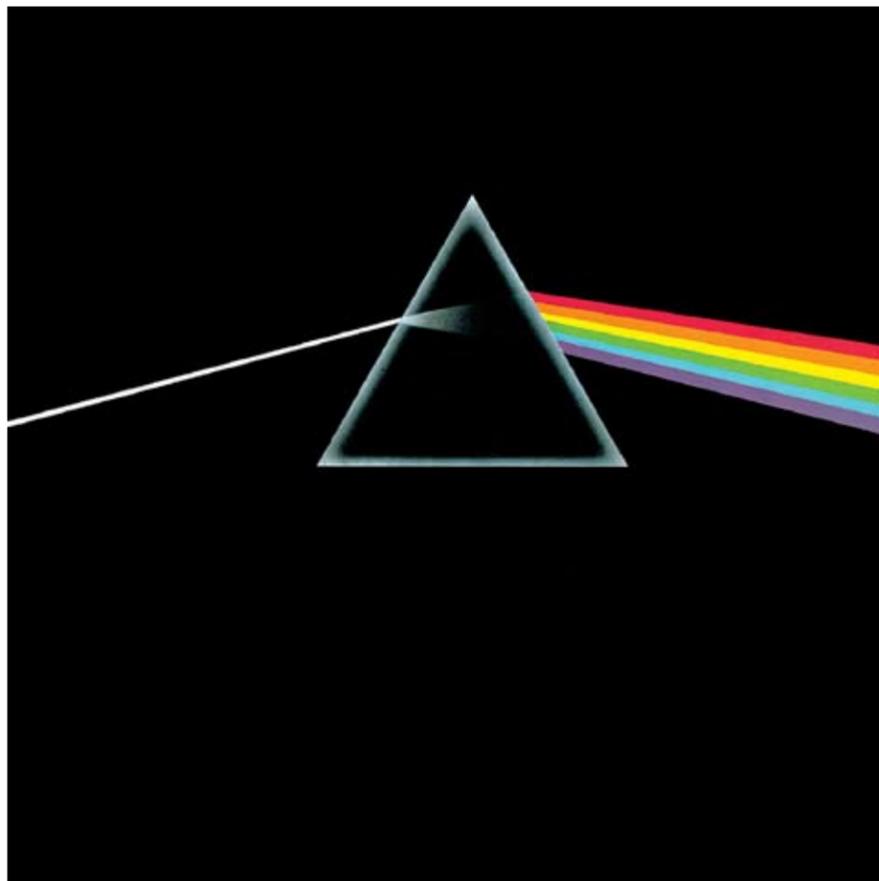


Photo by Storm Thorgerson

A 2003 documentary on *The Dark Side of the Moon*, shot to coincide with the SACD release, does nothing to ease the disappointment over the dearth of revelatory material.

Granted, the high-resolution stereo and surround mixes sound exceptional (see the "Immersed in the Dark Side" sidebar). And the live performance of *The Dark Side of the Moon* at Wembley from 1974 (the same disc that accompanies the Experience version) demands frequent listening. Onstage, the music takes on a more impacting geometry, with knifing guitars and aggressive percussion driving the rhythms forward. An extended rendition of "Money," especially, transcends its studio counterpart, courtesy of funk washes and David Gilmour's sharply penetrating treble-based guitar fills. Here, the group sticks to an exactness demanded by omnipresent pre-recorded voices and effects yet manages to transcend potentially sterile limitations.

Further insight is gleaned from a pair of demos on the set's final CD. Richard Wright's solo piano interpretation of an early "Us and Them" enchants with simplicity, beauty, and austerity. Waters' acoustic framework for "Money" foreshadows the blockbuster that would soon be adorned with ringing cash registers. Alas, the original mix for the album contains few surprises, and the live instrumental tracks from 1972 that served as foundations for several *The Dark Side of the Moon* songs cry out for context. The latter should've been provided by the kind of encompassing essay that usually graces normal-scale box sets. However, apart from a Thorgerson-dominated art booklet and an adjoining tour-related photo-essay booklet, perspective is left to the listener. None of the band members contribute reflective prose, an unthinkable shortcoming given the record's stature and myth. Is that really all there is? In this case, yes.



## The Final Cut

**The Latest Vinyl Pressing of *The Dark Side of the Moon***

By Jeff Dorgay

Just when it seemed that there couldn't be any more variations on Pink Floyd's classic *The Dark Side of the Moon*, especially given the new Immersion box set, out comes another vinyl edition. This EMI pressing claims to be sourced from the analog master and remastered by James Guthrie, the same engineer that handled remastering duties on the 0 and *Discovery* box sets.

With the valves in my phono preamplifier still warm from my other Floyd comparisons, and prime pressings of *The Dark Side of the Moon* on hand from Germany, Britain, and Japan, it was time to give everything one final spin. Critics tend to rate the Japanese Pro Art and early UK Harvest pressings at the top. Both sound excellent. Yet the Japanese pressing has a slightly forward edge and the UK's mids are consistently pushed back by an equally miniscule amount.

While the -2 German pressing (our staff collector's favorite edition) possesses excellent tonal balance, Mobile Fidelity's UHQR version reigns in my system—especially with the AVID Acutus Reference SP 'table, SME V tonearm, and Koetsu Urushi Blue cartridge. (Note: This conclusion came via extra-credit listening after I made initial comparisons on identical AVID Volvere SP turntables.)

While some listeners claim to enjoy the 30th Anniversary edition of *The Dark Side of the Moon* pressed in the Netherlands several years ago, apart from the rumored-to-be-excellent test pressings, the product that made it into consumers' hands falls short. As our collector, Tom Caselli, says: "It sounds as if when they were cutting the lacquer, someone forgot to turn the Dolby on." I couldn't agree more. The highs sound off-kilter. The new EMI LP looks identical to the latter reissue, with the blue triangle on a purplish black background. Of course, the numbers in the dead wax indicate that this is, indeed, *another* pressing.

Fortunately, the sonic difference is night and day, and for the better. While the new pressing lacks the ultimate ease of the finest vinyl, it is reasonably good and,

if anything, closest to the Japanese Pro Art disc. Cymbals are vaguely forward and a tad crunchy. I would not be surprised if someone confirms at a later date that this LP is actually sourced from a high-resolution digital file, albeit an excellent transfer.

In terms of texture, the LP greatly exceeds all the other US pressings—even if it falls short of the best European and Japanese pressings. When auditioning any superior *The Dark Side of the Moon* LP, you can hear breathing during the saxophone part in "Us and Them." Moreover, the voiceover at the end of "Eclipse" effortlessly blends into the mix and offers an all-encompassing presence. Here's where the current remaster falls short. It's as if the notes are well played but not felt.

If you already own one of the aforementioned excellent examples, there's no reason to spend another \$30 unless Floyd madness ensues and you just have to have it. However, the reissue will do wonders for fans only in possession of a worn or US pressing. The same can be said for the standard MoFi version that, sonically, isn't far removed from the UHQR edition and can be had used for about \$15-\$25.

### Pink Floyd

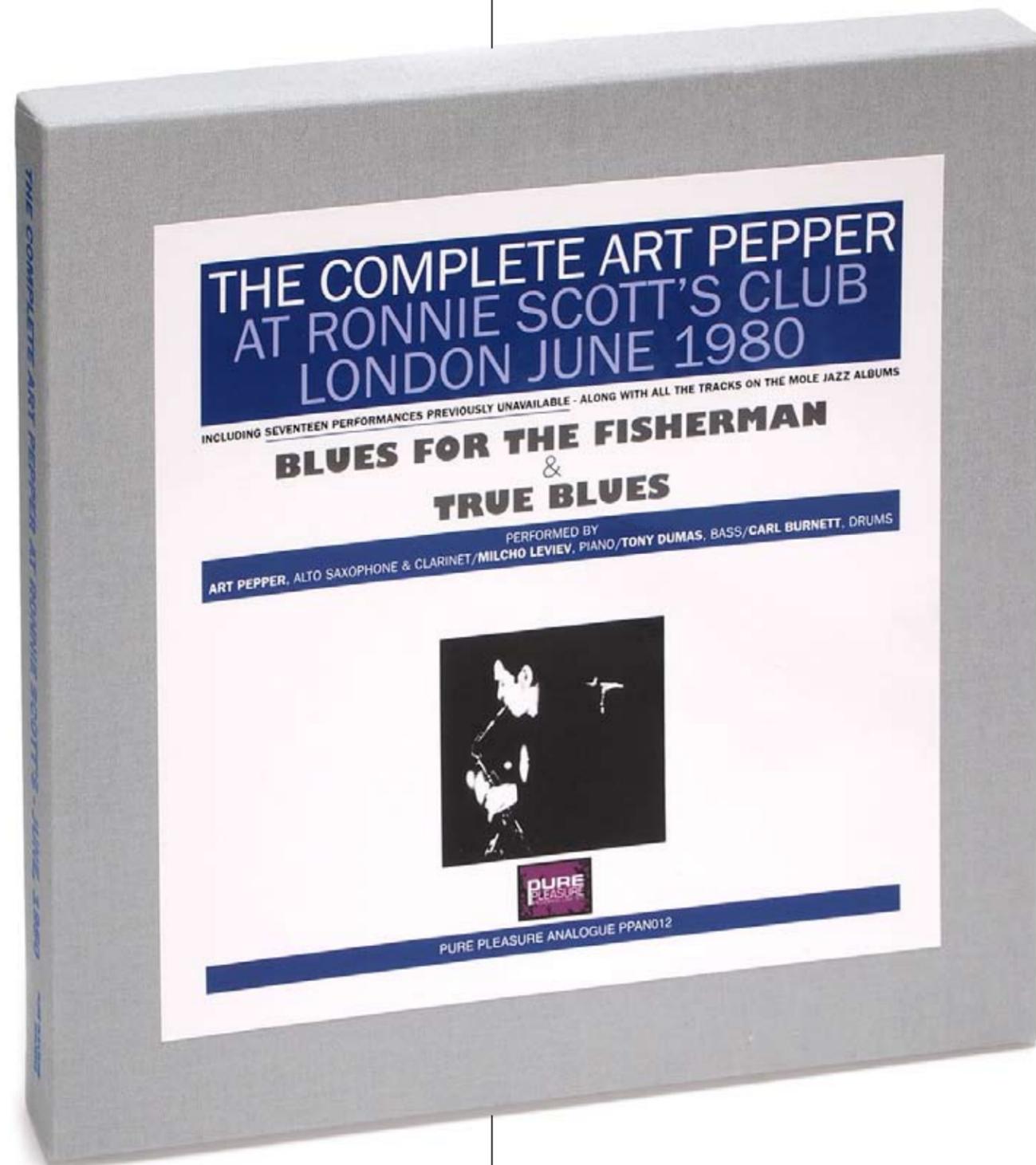
*Wish You Were Here: Immersion Box Set*  
EMI, 2CD + 2DVD + Blu-Ray

Saddled neither with the trumped-up myth of *The Dark Side of the Moon* nor the pompous grandiosity of *The Wall*, *Wish You Were Here* remains Pink Floyd's pinnacle commercial achievement. Inspired by founding member and former mate Syd Barrett, the group addresses longing, madness, and loss with rare poignancy and instrumental acumen.

Mirroring *The Dark Side of the Moon: Immersion Box Set*, this edition is arranged in similar fashion, featuring a newly remastered CD; a disc of previously unreleased tracks; a DVD containing surround, Quad, and LPCM stereo mixes; a second DVD replete with concert-screen films and a six-minute short film; and a Blu-ray disc that replicates most of the content on the DVDs. Newly designed books round out the graphic element. Unique coasters, marbles, memorabilia, and a scarf address the wants of collectors that crave Pink Floyd-related imaging on everything imaginable.

Of course, the reservations that plague *The Dark Side of the Moon: Immersion Box Set* resurface here. While it's almost impossible to fault this *Immersion* volume when it comes to experiencing *Wish You Were Here* in myriad configurations—and few albums are better-suited for debates regarding the merits of a 5.1 surround mix versus the benefits of a Quad presentation—the archival material falls short. Yes, there's the rendition of the title track with violinist Stephane Grappelli, a take so heartwarmingly transcendent it's a mystery as to why it wasn't utilized on the final studio album, and a few free-form live cuts that ultimately morphed into songs for *Animals*. Nonetheless, there's an overwhelming sense that Pink Floyd and/or EMI is holding back vault content. Welcome to the machine?

—**Bob Gendron**



# Art Pepper

*The Complete Art Pepper At Ronnie Scott's Club:  
London June 1980*  
Pure Pleasure Records, 7LP Box Set

Pure Pleasure always does a great job of bringing obscure treasures to light. In the case of rescuing Art Pepper's legendary shows at Ronnie Scott's in 1980, the label has struck pure gold. Originally recorded for the long-defunct Mole Records, these records became nearly impossible to find and, if you did manage to locate them, incredibly expensive. This remastered 7LP set includes both Mole releases as well as 17 previously unreleased tracks, courtesy of Pepper's wife having uncovered the lost material.

The performances are simply fantastic. Pepper's playing is awash in nuance, and the Milcho Leviev Quartet is in constant sync with the saxophone master. Moreover, the audience is so quiet that you almost forget the music is played before a crowd. And, there's only a slight duplication of material, with "Red Car" and "Ophelia" played at both the June 27 and 28 shows. However, the different renditions, performed on back-to-back days, reveal Pepper's genius. His audience banter, also preserved on the albums, adds to the fun and realism.

As for the sound? Studio-like, with the venue's dimensions perfectly recreated. All 14 LP sides are immaculately clean; not a click or a pop anywhere, and BIG dynamics throughout. Better still, the liner notes claim that the records were made "using multi-microphones in a straight stereo mix with no noise reduction, limiting, compression or EQ."

The set also includes a booklet with photos, program notes, and commentary—great for any aficionado. Whether you are a completist that owns practically everything, or a relative newcomer to jazz or analog, this box set should be in your collection. —*Jeff Dorgay*

## Iron and Wine

*Kiss Each Other Clean*  
Warner Bros., 180g LP and CD



If you didn't know better, you might think Brian Eno had a hand in this record instead of resident Iron and Wine producer Brian Deck. It's a very cool departure, but Beam doesn't go so far out of his orbit to completely abandon the sound that originally put him on the mainstream radar a few years ago. A cursory listen to "Half Moon" anchors you to the band's past.

And the recording quality is outstanding. Calbi has taken care not to push up the levels and squeeze the life out of the intimate recording. From the start, on the opening "Walking Far From Home," the bass rattles the floor while the entire record has a very wide, lush soundstage reminiscent of the best studio creations of the 70s.

As a bonus, a CD is included for the iPod and music server generation. Once again, it's nice to see the major labels nail it. And with vinyl sales up again in 2010, it would be great to see the \$20 LP-and-CD combination become the norm. Sign me up.

—Jeff Dorgay

Though not a remastered album, the newest record from Iron & Wine is certainly produced to high audiophile standards. Mastered by Greg Calbi, Sam Beam and Co.'s latest has much more of a pop feel than his past effort, *The Shepherd's Dog*, which possesses more of a folk/Americana flavor. Longtime fans may even be taken back at the approach, which at times takes a turn down a highly ambient path. Those encountering Iron & Wine for the first time may be equally surprised, provided they explore the group's earlier works.

## INXS

*Kick*  
MoFi Silver Label, 140g LP

It's somewhat ironic that MoFi kicked off its new Silver Label with a mainstream pop title, but a sense of humor is always welcome in this wacky business. According to Josh Bizar, head of marketing for Music Direct, owner of the MoFi label, "While we can't always put our hands on the original master tape for the Silver Series, as we do with our standard pressings, we get as close as we can, and on some of these records, we've actually managed to get the original master. The big difference is that these records are mastered and cut in real time on 140g vinyl instead of 180g vinyl. The quality is still to the high level you've come to expect from MoFi."

When *Kick* was released in 1987, the LP was on its way out the door, and though many records were still recorded and mastered on analog tape, most of the vinyl getting pressed was mediocre at best. Originally produced by Chris Thomas (Pretenders, Elvis Costello) and mixed by Bob Clearmountain (Van Halen, Doobie Brothers), *Kick* proved no exception; revisiting my original pressing revealed CD-like sound, with healthy doses of compression and treble boost. MoFi's version



still has a touch of HF boost, but it's a huge improvement over the analog original and miles ahead of the CD. The radio and MTV classic "Need You Tonight" doesn't even feel like the same tune. Replete with added spaciousness, you can hear lead singer Michael Hutchinson's vocal stylings much easier and, like the rest of the album, there is now a welcome amount of LF energy. The bass is consistently heavier throughout, giving this record a much fuller sound, perhaps the most so on "Mystified" and "New Sensation."

Should you find yourself in a totally 80s mood, *Kick* is fun to revisit as it's chock full of familiar hits and finds INXS at the top of its game. It's amazing at how much more music there's on this record that many of us never heard the first time around. And after spinning both sides, it's clear that MoFi has kept its promise. The surfaces are just as quiet as any of the label's recent half-speed-mastered LPs, and while the latter still possess extra degrees of ultimate smoothness, the results are excellent and worthy of your hard-earned cash. And for any collectors concerned about cover quality, the printing is first-rate, too.

—Jeff Dorgay



## The B-52's

*The B-52's*  
MoFi Silver Label, 140g LP

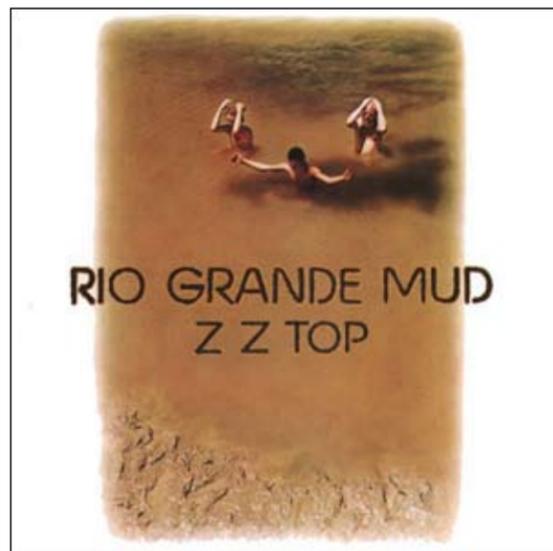
Much as I love the B-52's, I forgot just how *awful* this record sounded. And really, there's excuse for the shortcomings. In 1979, the CD was still years away, but you'd never guess by giving this new wave classic a cursory listen. Compression is king; cymbals are crunchy and the soundstage is flat and two-dimensional. To make matters worse, the group's signature "Rock Lobster" tune is plagued with inner-groove distortion. Arrgh.

MoFi's Silver Label version instantly trounces the standard issue pressing. During the opening "Planet Claire," there's a great bongo track that is all but lost in the mix on the original. The remaster gives the aforementioned instruments plenty of room to breathe along with the vocal tracks. This pressing has oodles of bass energy; by comparison, the original sounds like a system with the subwoofer off and seems to roll off around 80hz with no weight. (Like all of the early Van Halen albums.)

And "Rock Lobster" now sounds incredible. Vocalists Fred Schneider and Cindy Wilson now have a much more distinct sound, especially when experienced after hearing the original pressing, on which they just blend in to be one, fat vocal track. And all traces of inner-groove distortion are banished on both sides of the LP, a testament to the care put into this pressing.

MoFi's Silver Label is just getting started; the label has many interesting titles in the queue. Who needs another copy of *Kind of Blue* anyway?—Jeff Dorgay

## ZZ Top



*Rio Grande Mud*  
Rhino, 180g LP

**B**ack before the two front men in ZZ Top had massive beards and kicked their space shuttle into autopilot, the Texas trio really rocked. Need evidence? The band's second album, *Rio Grande Mud*, is a blues-rock powerhouse. Bassist Dusty Hill's rendition of "Francine" sounds like Ted Nugent turned up to 12, and guitarist Billy Gibbons demonstrates serious grit.

Unfortunately, this record is flat. While the sticker on the cover talks about all the care that went into the pressing, the highs are muffled and shallow. It sounds like the LP was transferred from a cassette tape, not a master tape. If the label read "Friday Music," I wouldn't be so surprised, but given that Chris Bellman at Bernie Grundman did the work and claims an excellent track record, I'm reserving judgment until another copy is procured.

—Jeff Dorgay



*Deguello*  
Rhino, 180g LP

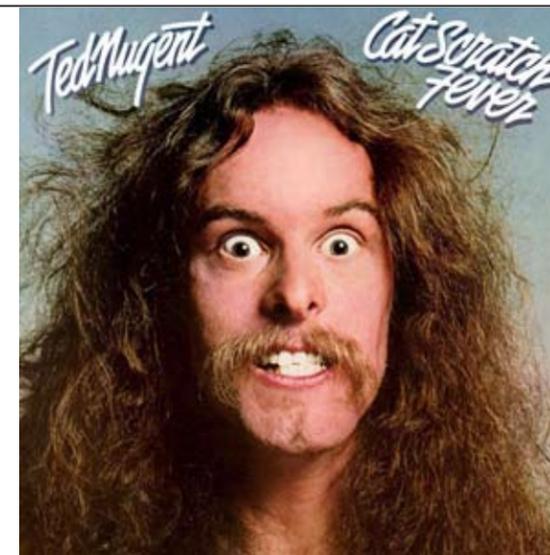
I was a little scared to lower the tonearm on Rhino's pressing of this 1979 set after my dreadful experience with *Rio Grande Mud*, but this one brought my faith back. (This leads me to believe that my copy of *Rio Grande Mud* is defective. I've had much better than average luck with audiophile pressings over the years, so perhaps my number was up.) Everything you love about ZZ Top is here in spades: big blazing guitar riffs, grumbling bass lines, and powerful albeit sparse drumming that has made this band famous.

How can you not love a record that features "Cheap Sunglasses" and "I'm Bad I'm Nationwide" as well as deep cuts such as "Hi Fi Mama" and "A Fool For Your Stockings?" While some might dismiss the fare as party music, the playing on *Deguello* is top-notch, replete with guitar sounds that could easily be mistaken as those of Stevie Ray Vaughan. When these guys weren't clowning around, they were damn good musicians.

Dusting off the original pressing revealed an overall flatness and fairly high level of surface noise. The new Rhino version offers mega dynamics, with Gibbons' guitar cutting through the grunge and now front and center. Frank Beard's drumming is also much cleaner, with the cymbals enjoying huge helpings of decay and smoothness.

My only complaint? Rhino didn't pay the same level of attention to the album's packaging as it did with *Rio Grande Mud*. The cover came apart in my hands as I removed it from the shrinkwrap. Tough to swallow for collectors that really obsess over replication, and for \$25, we deserve better.

—Jeff Dorgay



## Ted Nugent

*Cat Scratch Fever*  
Friday Music, 180g LP

**B**olstered with confidence from my recent experience with Friday Music's remaster of Robin Trower's *Bridge of Sighs*, I decided to give the label's offerings another spin, especially considering it just pulled another one of my 70s favorites out of the vault: Ted Nugent's *Cat Scratch Fever*, the record that in 1977 made the Nuge an ubiquitous presence on rock radio.

A quick switch between the Friday version and my early stamper original reveals the former being quieter and smoother—definitely a job well done by Kevin Gray this time. While most of us have heard the title track more than enough, *Cat Scratch Fever* boasts a handful of great tunes that did not get much airplay before 10 p.m. Thanks to the extra air on "Death By Misadventure," you'll now hear more drumming finesse as well as a few extra layers of background vocals where, previously, there was only one fat background vocal track. And "Live it Up" has way more cowbell than on the original. (I'm not kidding.)

Combine these improvements with dead-quiet surfaces and zero inner-groove distortion, and the results maximize the heaviness of this rock classic; Friday's edition is a major success. Let's hope Gray and Co. soon get their hands on *Free For All* and *Ted Nugent*. That said, the packaging is sub par. The cover is dreadfully reproduced, very yellow with so much contrast it looks like the color separations were made from a color copy made at Kinko's. But I'm guessing you aren't buying a remastered copy of *Cat Scratch Fever* for the album art.

—Jeff Dorgay



While

while this performance was captured at the apogee of Carole King's career, between *Tapestry* (which would sell more than 11 million copies) and *Music* (her only other platinum release), it wasn't released on CD until 1996, and it failed to chart. The marginal sound quality on the original CD has helped lead to it being left in the bargain bin for about a dollar these days, but the rarely visited performance is exceptional nonetheless.

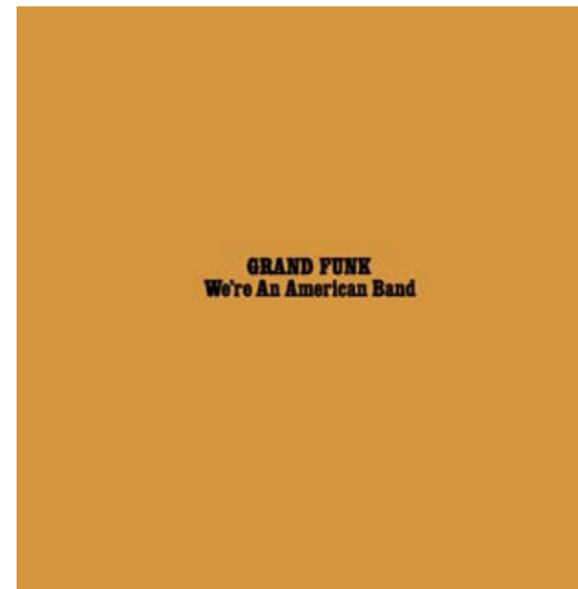
## Carole King

*The Carnegie Hall Concert:*  
June 18, 1971  
Mobile Fidelity, SACD

Mobile Fidelity's new SACD still contains a few of the foibles present on live records made in the early 70s, but the sonic improvements are dramatic. The mid-90s Sony release is very compressed, with King's vocals somewhat buried in the mix—not unlike her recent *Live at the Troubadour*, on which the band constantly overpowers her.

By comparison, this archival set showcases King, front and center stage on grand piano, with minimal accompaniment from Charles Larkey on bass and Danny Kortchmar on guitar. James Taylor makes a guest appearance on “You've Got a Friend”; just listen to the youthful age in his voice here, completely different than that on the *Troubadour* album. And where the original pressing lacks any depth whatsoever, the MoFi disc reveals hall ambience, evident from the first few piano notes and surprisingly apparent in the applause-filled breaks between songs. King fans should be pleased at the treatment MoFi has afforded this obscure gem.

—Jeff Dorgay



## Grand Funk Railroad

*We're An American Band*  
Friday Music, 180g LP

Few rock anthems received more airplay during the 70s (and, for that matter, the 80s) than “We're An American Band.” The song remains a classic-rock radio staple. As one of Todd Rundgren's earliest production efforts, this Grand Funk Railroad record has less of the signature Todd “sound” than his later attempts, but that's a debate for internet forums.

Comparing Friday Music's *We're An American Band* to an early stamper yellow original pressing amounts to a dead heat. The yellow vinyl original still has the edge in top-end smoothness as well as more low-level detail. The discrepancy in smoothness is most evident on Side One's “Creepin'.” On the original, the high hat rather effortlessly fades into oblivion, while the effect on the new orange pressing (not yellow when you do a side-by-side comparison) is slightly grainy. Similarly, the reissue's dynamics fall slightly short; when the train roars across the soundstage on “The Railroad,” it doesn't as forcefully jump out of the speakers.

But the Friday LP receives the nod as you get closer to the center of the record; inner-groove distortion is definitely higher on the original.

It also appears that the Friday version is cut at a slightly lower level than the original, always a good thing. Moreover, the amount of tape hiss in the presentation convinces me that Friday utilized the actual master tape, just as advertised. However, while the pressing is quiet and the jacket printed on decent stock, it's unfortunate that the cool red and blue “We're an American Band” stickers aren't included; they would've been a nice touch.

If you have a mint original of *We're An American Band*, there's no reason to buy another copy. But if this LP is one of your favorite rock records and your original is not up to snuff, or you happen to be starting over with vinyl, forget those black vinyl copies in your used record store. Friday's orange edition is a worthy addition.—Jeff Dorgay

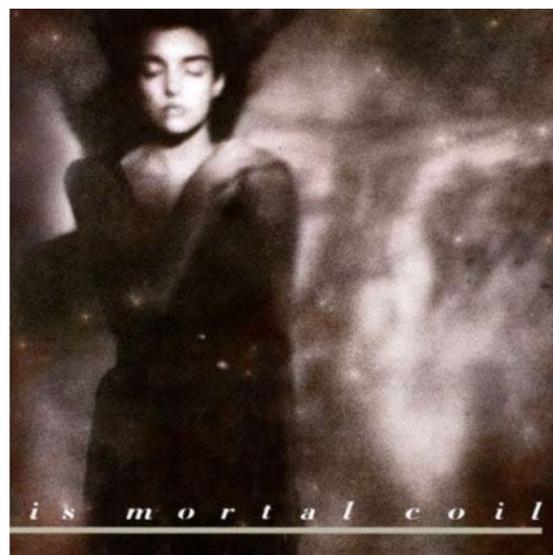


## Boston

*Boston*  
Friday Music, 180g LP

Another ubiquitous 70s rock record, Boston's self-titled album garnered the band a monumental legion of fans that had no idea that it would take the band almost a decade to release a sophomore album. Friday Music hasn't made any major missteps here; the record is basically quiet, but it's just as bright as the original, and relatively flat. Adding insult to injury, my copy was slightly off center. Again, such faults are inexcusable when being asked to pony up \$30 for an LP.

The worst news for those that already shelled out for Friday's pressing? *Boston* sold 17 million copies and, as a result, I was able to pick up a clean used copy for four bucks at a local store. And it sounds just as good as the reissue. For those keeping score: Grand Funk, yes; Boston, no. —**Jeff Dorgay**



## This Mortal Coil

*It'll End In Tears*  
ORG Music, 180g LP

For totally 80s Goth fans, this Morrissey-meets-Twin Peaks effort is sure to please. This *This Mortal Coil*, consisting of Dead Can Dance and the Cocteau Twins members, along with other artists from the 4AD roster, is very interesting to say the least.

Like so many 80s and 90s releases, used CDs of *It'll End In Tears* are cheap, plentiful, and possess relatively poor sound quality. By comparison, the LPs are tough to find on local store shelves. Amusingly, a few Goth record store clerks I encountered in Portland couldn't hold back a smile when I asked for the album *on vinyl*.

ORG again adheres to its consistently high level of quality and production sensibilities. Whether or not *This Mortal Coil* is your cup of tea, the label should be applauded for producing another creatively outstanding record that's not just another boring audiophile female vocal set. Pressed in Holland by Furnace MFG, the LP is dead quiet from start to finish, with a very smooth and sultry top end. The silent surface also helps expose the multiple layers of vocals and strings, adding to the songs' overall creepiness. And I mean that in the best possible way. For those requiring an even more exclusive edition, ORG pressed 500 copies on white vinyl. —**Jeff Dorgay**

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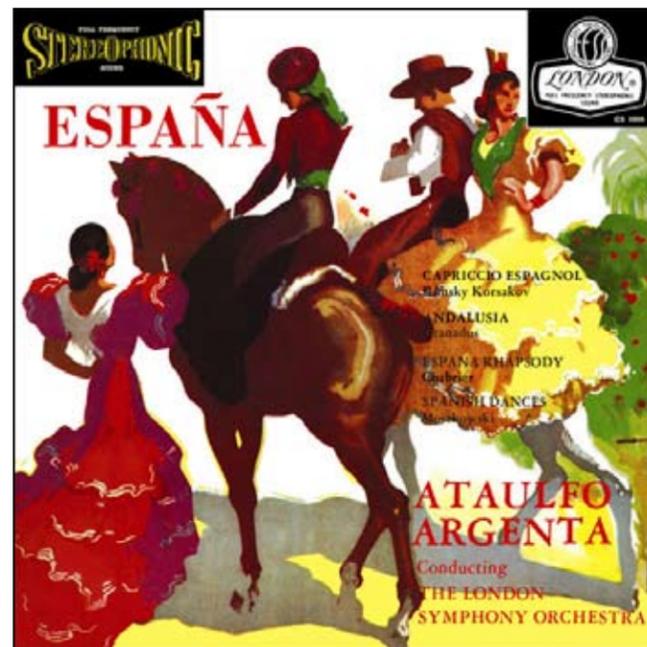
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Most classical devotees know that *Espana!* features legendary Spanish conductor Ataulfo Argenta leading the London Symphony Orchestra in a program of so-called “Spanish” blockbusters. But, ironically, only one piece is penned by a Spanish composer (Granados, *Danza Espanola*) while the others are by a Russian (Rimsky Korsakov, *Capriccio Espagnol*), German (Moszkowski, *5 Spanish Dances*), and Frenchman (Chabrier, *Espana*).

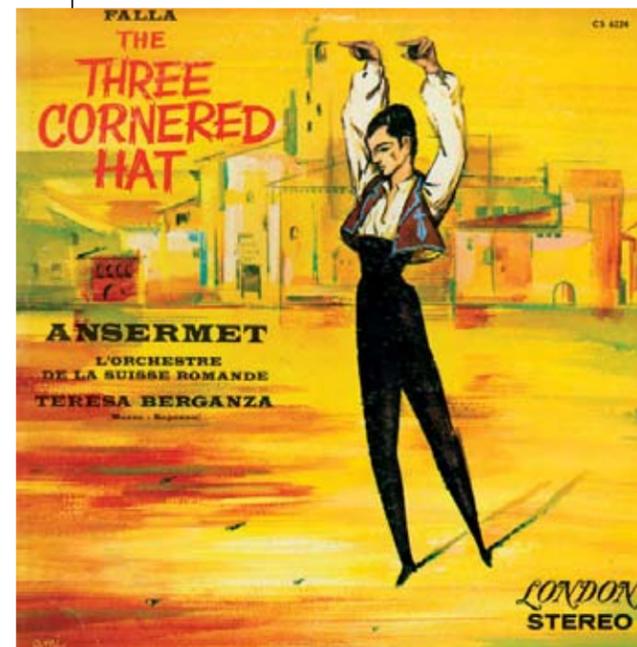
**Espana!**

Ataulfo Argenta/London Symphony Orchestra

London/Original Recordings Group, 2 180g 45RPM LPs

The LP was initially issued in the United States as one of the index recordings of London Records’ vaunted “blueback” series, known for its demonstration-quality sound. Original bluebacks often sell for hundreds of dollars but, truthfully, many are overly bright or have serious groove noise that’s readily audible on high-end turntables.

This ORG reissue has dead-quiet surfaces that would not be very meaningful if the sound quality was not up to that of the original issue. It is. And because ORG spread the program over three sides (the fourth repeats *Capriccio Espagnol* and *Danza Espanola*) and issued the set at 45 rather than 33 1/3RPM, the sonic benefits are immediately apparent. Beginning my listening with *Capriccio Espagnol*, the most popular selection, was a real thrill. From the opening brass chords and the subsequent massive pulse, the selection represents orchestral playing at its best. And while you have to get up and change the LP sides twice more, you will do so eagerly in anticipation of hearing the other works. If the original blueback is a classic, this limited-edition, Bernie Grundman-mastered set is a classic-beater in every sense of the term. —*Lawrence Devoe*



**Falla**

*The Three Cornered Hat Ballet; La Vida Breve: Interlude and Dance*

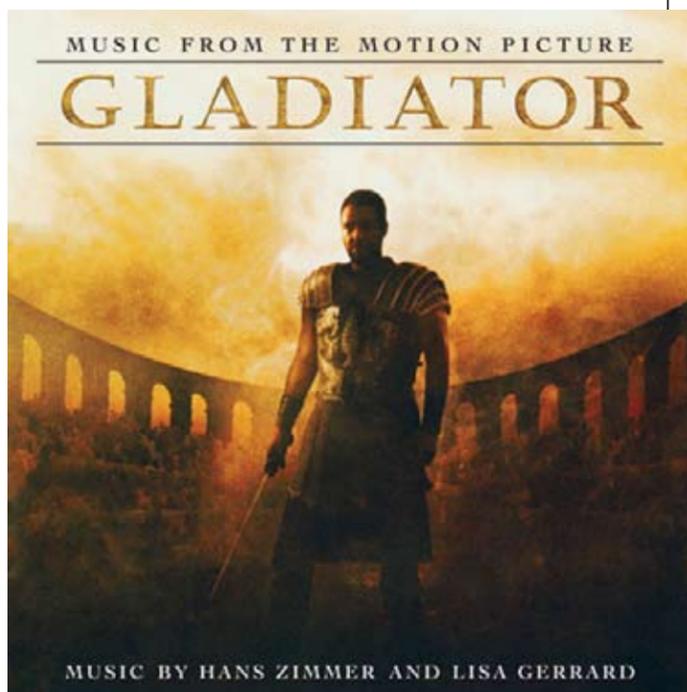
Teresa Berganza, mezzo/Suisse Romande Orchestra/Ernst Ansermet

London/Original Recordings Group, 2 180g 45RPM LPs

**Manuel de Falla was one of Spain’s most popular 20th century composers. This rousing 2-LP set from ORG shows why. His *Sombrero de tres picos* (or *Three-Cornered Hat*) is a spirited ballet with clear echoes of its flamenco roots, beginning with opening olés and castanets.**

Manuel de Falla was one of Spain’s most popular 20th century composers. This rousing 2-LP set from ORG shows why. *His Sombrero de tres picos* (or *Three-Cornered Hat*) is a spirited ballet with clear echoes of its flamenco roots, beginning with opening olés and castanets. It’s complemented by a cameo appearance—complete with birdcalls—from the great Spanish mezzo-soprano Teresa Berganza. Swiss conductor Ernest Ansermet, leading his personal band, the Suisse Romande Orchestra, premiered the piece in 1919, which helps makes this 1961 recording the definitive reading. It’s obvious from every bar recorded here that Ansermet possessed a natural affinity for Spanish music. I have the original London blueback recording, long considered a sonic spectacular.

ORG reissued this classic over four LP sides, and also included two selections from Falla’s opera *La Vida Breve*. The advantages of the 45RPM mastering and silent surfaces are plain as day. The label’s engineers also tamed the brightness that was typical on some early London LPs. Just listen to “Miller’s Dance” with its pounding rhythms and massed strings, the saucy quote from Beethoven’s 5th Symphony, or the concluding “Jota,” with its sharp brass attacks and bass drum thwacks. As good as the original recording was—and still is—ORG managed to improve a legendary recording that I did not think could be bettered. Spanish music aficionados need to put this LP set on their short list of essential purchases.—*Lawrence Devoe*



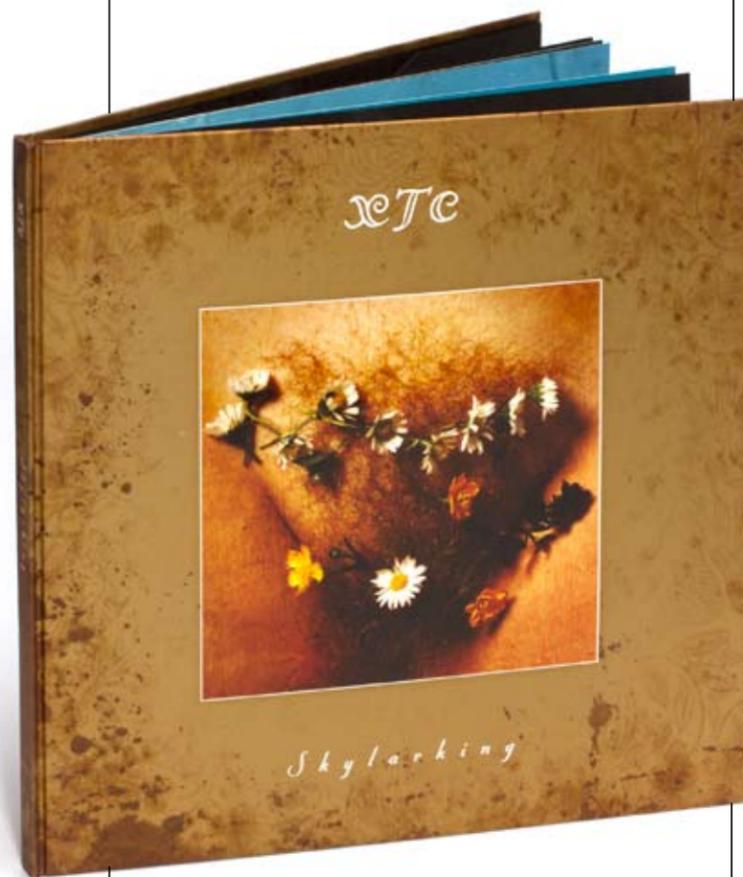
*Gladiator: Music from the Motion Picture*  
London/Original Recordings Group,  
2 180g 45RPM LPs

Largely thanks to enduring themes of persecution, freedom, and heroism, *Gladiator* counts itself as one of the new millennium's blockbuster movies. Yet Hans Zimmer and Lisa Gerrard's score has as much to do with the film's impact as the visuals or narrative.

Initially, the collaboration between the veteran film composer (Zimmer) and pop singer (Gerrard) seemed an odd pairing. But as Dead Can Dance fans knew, Gerrard is not a typical pop vocalist. The resultant score sounds nothing like conventional Hollywood Roman extravaganzas, ala *Spartacus* or *Ben Hur*.

Presented on this 2LP set in spectacularly huge orchestral sound, you can readily hear Gerrard's otherworldly contributions to Zimmer's punchy, pungent tonal palette. The 17 selections provide contrasting albeit evocative styles, ranging from exotic Middle Eastern harmonies ("The Wheat") to more conventional brassy martial music that echo Gustav Holst's *The Planets* ("The Battle"). The overall tone tends toward somber, so the need for three side changes provides welcome breaks in the prevailing mood. And the level of musicianship produced by Gavin Greenway and the Lyndhurst Orchestra is first-rate—as is the ethereal female vocalist who intermittently appears during the proceedings. As expected, the records' surfaces are spotless and the packing superb.

—**Lawrence Devoe**



The feud between producer Todd Rundgren and XTC, which transpired during the recording of *Skylarking*, has been exhaustively covered in myriad articles and in several books over the past two-plus decades. Yet, buried in each band member's liner-notes prose on this deluxe edition of their 1986 epic is that, in retrospect, Rundgren was actually much more of a genius than they realized at the time. Not that some bad feelings don't remain. In closing his essay, vocalist/guitarist Andy Partridge can't resist taking one last parting passive-aggressive shot at Rundgren: "Thanks Todd, time wounds all heels."

## XTC

*Skylarking*  
Virtual 180 Records, 2 45RPM LPs

On a more pragmatic level, Partridge mentions that while neither XTC nor Rundgren know what became of the master tape, they found some alternates that were used instead; Partridge refers to it as a "sales tape." Moreover, he claims that the original as well as all subsequent remasters (Mobile Fidelity's mid-90s CD release included) were all produced out of phase, and that this new version is finally correct and features the tracks in their original intended order, with the missing "Mermaid Smiled" in the 11th position.

While the additional groove width and velocity certainly give this set some much-needed dynamic range, it still sounds slightly mechanical—as if it's produced from a high-res digital copy. Partridge also notes that this version is "approximately 30% better than the MoFi." But a quick comparison reveals that the audiophile imprint's 16/44.1 disc

was handled with extreme care, and claims a naturalness to the midrange that even this analog pressing can't quite match.

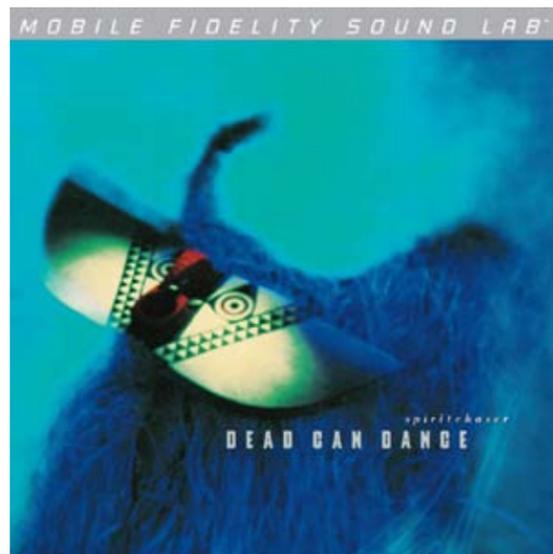
However, when comparing the 45RPM set to average vinyl pressings that fetch between \$5 and \$15, the new version boasts improvement in all aspects. It has considerably more punch and more depth; the three originals in my collection are fairly compressed. Surface noise is greatly reduced in this version, too, and since this record hails from the early Geffen years, you know what that means.

So, \$45 bucks gets you a competent mastering job (no mastering credit is given), quiet surfaces, and the original banned artwork—a girl part on the front cover and a boy part on the back cover—along with photos and commentary that will likely amuse and entertain loyal fans.

—**Jeff Dorgay**

## Dead Can Dance

*Spiritchaser* and *Into the Labyrinth*  
Mobile Fidelity Silver Label, 140g LPs



Mobile Fidelity handled the SACD remastering of these albums a few years ago with excellent results. If you are a Dead Can Dance fan and into vinyl, these records are guaranteed to please. For those not completely familiar with MoFi's new Silver Label, its LPs are still pressed at RTI in California and under the same conditions as the imprint's 180g Original Master Recordings—with the same skilled people at both ends of the process. However, there are two main differences between the two product lines.

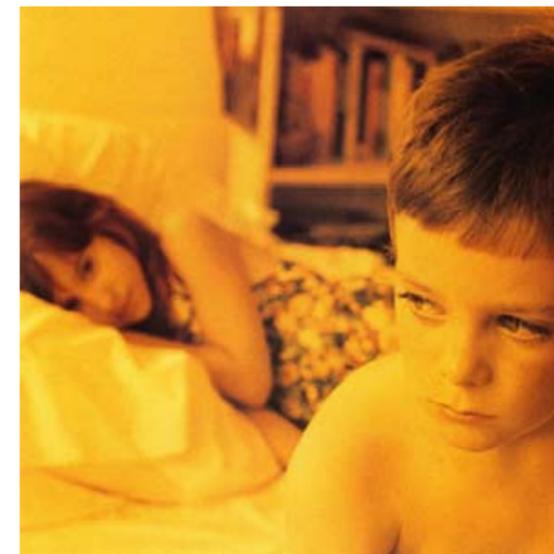
According to Mobile Fidelity's John Wood, Silver Label titles will use "the best tape available" instead of *only* the original master, as they do with all Original Master Recordings. This qualification opens the field and maintains MoFi's impeccable dedication to getting all the detail from the original tape. In addition, the mastering process for Silver Label LPs is performed in real time; ORM titles are half-speed mastered. Finally, Silver Label records are pressed on 140-gram vinyl instead of the 180-gram vinyl format used for ORM albums. The good news for vinyl lovers is that the lower price of Silver Label pressings (\$22.99 vs. \$29.99 for single records, \$34.99 vs. \$39.99 for double album sets) makes them easier on the wallet as well.

Technology and economics aside, these Dead Can Dance releases represent an unqualified success. Having extensively listened

to the SACDs, I can't imagine these records sounding any better, even if they were mastered at half-speed. The backgrounds are perfectly silent, and the high end exquisitely smooth. The nod goes to MoFi when comparing the new pressings against my original vinyl copies. But when pitting the analog against the SACDs, digital wins out.

Both Dead Can Dance albums feature ultra-wide dynamic ranges and subterranean bass groove; the LPs are fantastic, but this is clearly a case of high-resolution digital having an edge. The minute I pushed the "play" button to begin *Spiritchaser*, the extra air on the SACD grabbed me. The new pressing does an admirable job reproducing the bass line in "Song of the Stars," yet switching to the SACD is akin to adding a subwoofer to my system and yielded genuine room-shaking grunt.

Completists should grab both versions. But if you have a great digital front end, you may find yourself just slightly a bit disappointed with the presentation on the analog records, especially if you possess a system capable of reproducing that last octave of bass.—**Jeff Dorgay**



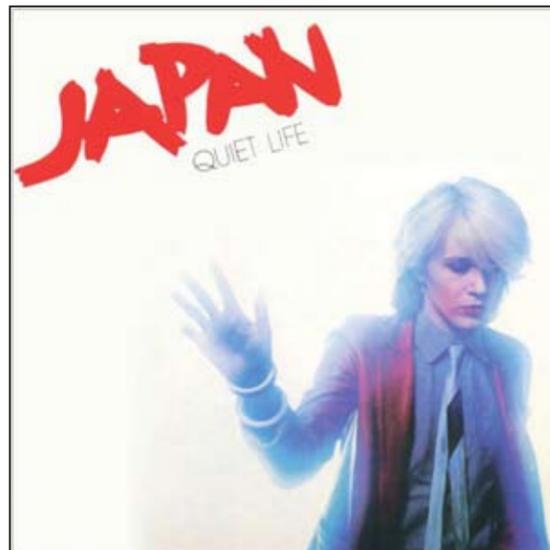
## The Afghan Whigs

*Gentlemen*  
Hi-Speed Soul Records, 180g LP

If I missed buying the Afghan Whigs' *Gentlemen* on vinyl the first time around upon its original 1993 release, rest assured that this remastered version of what is considered by many to be the band's best and most musically sophisticated effort needs to be part of any record collection. And while the CD can be had for a few bucks, it doesn't do justice to the layered guitar work, driving beats, and textural atmosphere that feels like it could be right at home on a Brian Eno and U2 collaboration. Indeed, the LP is where it's at.

While the Cincinnati-based group never got the popular recognition it sorely deserved before calling it a career in 2000, word later got out. A quick perusal of eBay reveals the quartet's albums selling for \$30-\$100, with harder-to-find EPs shooting towards \$250. Two record stores in my area were even selling less-than-pristine copies of *Gentlemen* for \$40. A few eBay merchants are vending this new pressing for \$30, but you can grab it from most online vendors for \$20 and it includes a foldout of the album art, complete with lyrics.

The magic is apparent right from the beginning: The tambourine level on the opening "If I Were Going" comes out from above the wind noise, floating about 8 inches from the front of your face while the lead and rhythm guitars blaze in sync with lead singer Greg Dulli's voice before gently fading back out on the intro of the second song, the title track. All of the extra ambience and depth add to the tension, and at the same time, show off the precision with which this record was created at Memphis' legendary Ardent Studios. Highly recommended.—**Jeff Dorgay**



## Japan

*Quiet Life*  
Music On Vinyl, 180g 3LP

This new reissue is aptly timed: Music On Vinyl created a back-cover tribute to Japan bassist Mick Karn, who passed away this past January. It is here, too, that you realize that this is no ordinary reissue as the track listing reveals that the original single-disc LP has grown into a 3LP package on limited red vinyl.

Unravelling the bonus tracks breaks down to this: Out of the four extra sides, there's the UK 7" version of "Quiet Life" and a special remix of "Life In Toyko" from *The Very Best Of Japan*; a remix of "Life In Tokyo" from the album collection *Assemblage* and a 12" extended remix of "Quiet Life"; a 12" version of "I Second That Emotion," three further versions of "Life In Tokyo"; "A Foreign Place" (the B-Side of the "Quiet Life" 7" single); a 12" version of "Fall In Love With Me"; and three Steve Nye remixes of "All Tomorrow's Parties," "I Second That Emotion," and "European Son," all found on the rare *Singles Compilation* previously issued in Japan (the country, that is). You also get the Japanese lyric insert found in the original LP issue.

Holland-based Music On Vinyl has the benefit of owning and running its own pressing plant. There are definite advantages, and two positives stood out after just a few seconds. First, the pressing is dead-quiet, ranking up there with Mobile Fidelity's standards. The presentation offered tremendous clarity; Karn's bass and David Sylvian's voice emerge from an inky blackness. Second, the recording yields impressively deep bass that helps drive the music forward. Low-frequency output can be a real diaphragm-mover given the right hi-fi rig. The album's cohesive nature has also been measurably improved because the instruments occupying the broad soundstage now have more room to maneuver, providing a sense of calm and ease. Even if you have the original issue, you'd be wise to consider this upgrade. **—Paul Rigby**



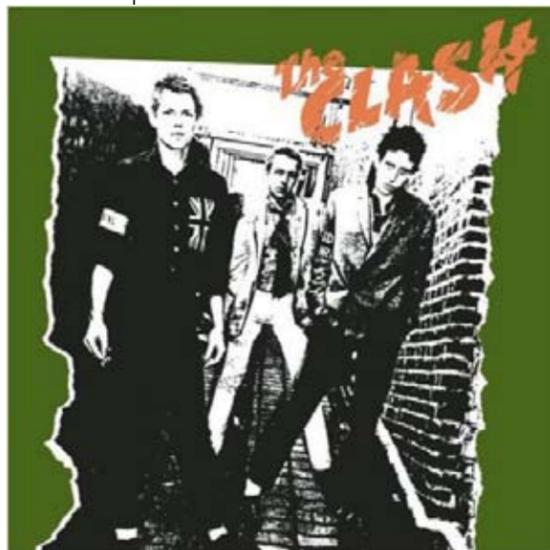
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## The Clash

*The Clash*  
Music On Vinyl, 180g LP



**T**he Clash's 1977 debut has always been a source of confusion given the presence of conflicting UK and US versions. This reissue focuses on the US edition, with the logo on the top right-hand side of the sleeve as opposed to the UK copy, which places it on the bottom right. As some may remember, the US version came out nearly two years after the British edition. Industry observers believed the Clash too severe for American audiences, a misbegotten opinion that led to the UK LP becoming the highest-selling import record in US history.

Not happy with only delaying the American release, Epic Records also decided to alter the track listing. "Deny," "Cheat," "Protex Blue," "48 Hours," and the original version of "White Riot" were removed in favor of "Clash City Rockers" (a 1978 A-side), "Complete Control" (a 1977 single), a re-

recorded "White Riot," "White Man In Hammersmith Palais" (another 1978 UK single), "I Fought the Law" (a 1979 UK EP cut), and "Jail Guitar Doors" (a '78 UK B-side). The replacements gave the US version an intentional "best-of Clash" feel.

Close listening reveals that the LP's mastering has stood the test of time. There's energy, rage, and power by the bundle, plus an under-produced claustrophobia, especially on the guitars, which sound like they want to burst out into extended upper-midrange splendour but never do, thus enhancing the overall tension. This pressing is also nicely executed, with a quiet background that yields a great sense of clarity—well, as much clarity as is possible with a bunch of blokes exploding all over the soundstage. A bonus 7" with "Groovy Times" and "Gates of the West" is included with the package. Essential.

—Paul Rigby

## Canned Heat

*Boogie With Canned Heat*  
Pure Pleasure, LP



**C**omplete with groovy 60s psychedelic album art, Canned Heat's second album is anything but. It's pure blues, containing perhaps the band's most memorable tune, "On the Road Again," featuring great guitar and harp work that comes through loud and clear on this reissue. The rest of the record, consisting primarily of Canned Heat originals, is equally as much fun, especially the group's intro to "Whiskey Headed Woman."

While this pressing sounds ever so slightly crunchy on the high end, Tony Hickmott, the head of Pure Pleasure Records, said that he used the UK analog master tape and did the work at Abbey Road, "figuring the UK tape probably had less

wear than the US version." The end result is remarkable given that the album is more than 40 years old.

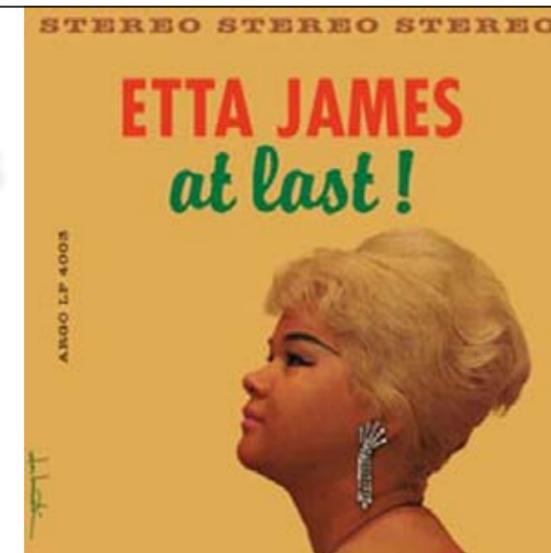
The record boasts the trademark kind of spacious separation that graced records from its era, but vocals are clean and the electric guitar claims plenty of bite. I did not have a mint original for comparison, but my Columbia House copy—purchased in the late 70s—sounds terrible, overly compressed and somewhat rolled-off. Most repressings from late 70s sound similar and sell for \$10 or less.

The Pure Pleasure reissue maintains the label's high standards. The LP is flat, very quiet, and the artwork faithfully reproduced without having any of the heavy contrast buildup so often introduced by other reissue labels. With mint copies of the Liberty label original inching towards \$100, this Pure Pleasure version is a safe bet and good deal at \$35.

—Jeff Dorgay

## Etta James

*At Last!*  
Speakers Corner, 180g LP



**B**efore you drop the needle on the groove, look at the sleeve. It is a perfect duplicate. No modern ephemera, no barcodes, no modern label logos, no modern dates. Aesthetically, this is a "perfect" reissue. And listening to the recording proves equally fascinating as you can hear a real tussle going on with the remastering.

Speakers Corner obviously wanted to retain as much of the atmosphere and flavor of the original recording as possible, keeping James' signature strength, power, and "bad girl" delivery. You can effortlessly hear James' rasping, guttural power on the remaster. At the same time, however, you can also hear the German imprint wishing to push the technical boundaries as much as possible. And the label accomplishes this goal with a vastly improved soundstage as well as a richer, broader vocal. James really flows here, her emotional texture conveying a deep understanding of the lyrics and a close relationship to the song itself.

But the real magic happens when the audiophile imprint's two aims clash. Sparks fly; you can clearly hear James play with the microphone. She moves around it like Cassius Clay dancing around his opponent in his prime. Listen to her stand away from the mic, giving some distance as she strikes a high note before moving back in to tackle a softer line. Then, she surprises you. She darts in and hits you with a massive, volcanic eruption—a primeval shout that literally whacks the needle into the red and slams the signal to the ceiling. Even the Speakers Corner remaster can't cope, and this is the point where the mastering engineer must think, "OK, that's it. This is the line. This is where we stop." Because, to process and develop the signal any further would take away James' passion.

And that's what we have here: Pure, unadulterated passion. There's no covering, no skin, no protection. It's bare, vulnerable. It could shrivel up in front of you or blast you in a moment's notice. Etta unleashed. —Paul Rigby



## Billy Joel

*Piano Man*  
Mobile Fidelity, SACD

**F**or most fans, Billy Joel's second album is where their journey with the artist began—primarily with Joel's big radio hit "Piano Man." While many AM radio stations played the heck out of the aforementioned tune, AOR FM stations made a favorite out of "Captain Jack." Admittedly influenced by Elton John's *Tumbleweed Connection*, *Piano Man* went on to four-times platinum status.

Rob LoVerde has done an excellent job capturing the soul on this 1970s classic. The CD layer sounds great, but the SACD takes advantage of the additional dynamic range and allows for a slightly more open sound. Turning up the volume reveals a smidge of tape hiss, but that's what analog is all about. Compared to those on the original US CD, Joel's vocals have more space. His piano also sounds larger, with better overall tonality. Akin to other MoFi reissues of 70s classics with which I'm very familiar, a layer or two of grunge is removed from the mix, permitting listeners to hear further into the tracks.

Note to collectors: If you have an early US copy, or the semi rare "target" Japanese copy that fetches upwards of \$100 on eBay, the increase in sound quality here may not be worth it if you do not have SACD capability. Considering what MoFi accomplished, the upcoming LP might be the edition to grab, especially if you prefer analog. However, if you are a digital fan and don't have a CD made from the early US mastering, this one, as Wayne and Garth would note, is worthy. SACD listeners are in for a treat.

—Jeff Dorgay



## Lard Free

///  
Wah Wah, LP

**I**n technical terms, Lard Free was a French prog-rock group. However, such a description is slightly oxymoronic given that the band boiled down to one man—drummer and synth specialist, Gilbert Artman—accompanied by a host of additional artists that populated the collective's three excellent albums on a rotating basis.

And while the music may be prog, it's only so in the loosest sense. 1977's *III*, the band's best record, is centred around a synthesizer core and owes much to the Krautrock sensibilities of Tangerine Dream and early Pink Floyd. Shades of the latter surface in spades: Plenty of organic instruments such as guitar, drums, and clarinet betray the band's earlier jazz inflections. Add a sprinkling of Can's harder-edged style, and you've got a fair summation of the outfit's capabilities.

The new edition of *III* contains a 24" x 12" poster that includes (on the flip side) two sets of notes (in English and French) detailing the band's history as well as a selection of rare photos and art. During playback, the 70s vintage sound is very audible. Caveat: The mastering lacks the dynamic clarity that characterizes modern-day audiophile pressings; there is no dramatic instrumentation that hits you in the face. What you have instead is a warm, friendly re-master with rolled-off upper frequencies that provide a unique sense of time and place, and add to the character. One could easily describe the master as "authentic." And yes, this also means that the original mastering engineer had a fine old time panning the stereo image from the left to the right with gay abandon.

Drenched with a psychedelic fugue, hypnotic looped synth sections, and deep, dark percussive effects, *III* demands to be played whilst wearing flares, staring into your lava lamp, and eating questionable biscuits. Fire it up. —Paul Rigby



## Supertramp

*Breakfast In America*  
A&M, 180g LP + 2CD + DVD Box Set

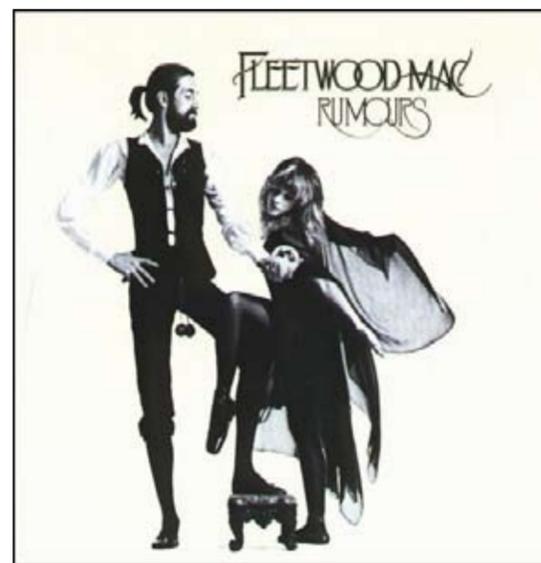
Universal has finally given *Breakfast In America* the special treatment it deserves via a deluxe version that contains analog and digital remasters of the original album plus a slipcase of goodies, to boot. You get the album on 180g vinyl plus CD; a second CD that features live tracks from 1979 and which are presented in an intimate, splendidly raw manner; and a DVD that features videos of singles from the album and rare footage broadcast on the classic, late-night UK cult-music show *The Old Grey Whistle Test*. Finally, there's a 60-page hardback book replete with interviews, photographs, lyrics, poster, replica concert ticket, patch, and program.

The whole lot is stuffed within a hard slipcase cover; what's more, the vinyl and CDs are contained in a separate, heavy-gauge gatefold cover. Compared to the original pressing, the cover art is vastly improved with a clearer, more vivid series of colors and slightly more space afforded to the band's name at the top. The photo of the band on the back cover is also brought into better focus.

I compared the new remaster to the 1979 original. From the first few seconds of the opening track, "Gone Hollywood," the remaster revealed a more sumptuous presentation. Universal's reissue is much more relaxed, and sounds suitably matured. Framed by an absolutely enormous soundstage, every instrument and vocal is surrounded by so much air that you might be prompted to reach for a coat and scarf. Bass has been lifted and fattened, while previously over-sibilant passages are eradicated with a midrange and treble blend that's now appreciably extended. The latter effect is ably shown off during the first minute of "Take The Long Way Home," on which the lower-frequency range of the featured piano exhibits real power and the accompanying harp displays startling dynamics.

The digital version also wows. In this era of overly compressed and/or excessively peak-limited CDs, it was a joy to hear a quieter mix that allows natural volume levels to reveal new details. Nothing less than a party in a box.

—Paul Rigby



## Fleetwood Mac

*Rumours*  
Warner Bros., 180g 45RPM 2LP or 33RPM LP

After years of delay, Fleetwood Mac's 1977 blockbuster *Rumours* finally made its way to the pressing plant—the Pallas plant in Germany, to be exact. True to its past performances, Pallas has done an exquisite job on these four vinyl surfaces. Though the cover printing has picked up a bit of contrast from the original, it's printed on heavy stock, and there's evidence of spot varnish having been applied. Very nice touch. Steve Hoffman and Kevin Gray have performed the remastering duties, and Hoffman has chosen to include a different intro to "Gold Dust Woman." Fittingly, then, the record retains some of its original relationship-related controversy.

Those who have been waiting for this reissue since 2006, the year a few test pressings slipped onto the market, will be rewarded the second they drop the tonearm on the opening track. It sounds scrumptious. Thanks to the almost CD-

quiet backgrounds, you hear much more of Mick Fleetwood's percussion. On "Dreams," Lindsey Buckingham's backing vocals have considerably more space than they do on early pressings. A smidge of tape hiss creeps into "Songbird" at the end of the second side, but that's not a bad thing. It actually reinforces the material's analog greatness. Moreover, Christine McVie's voice never sounded better and, thanks to the extra grooves made possible by the 45RPM extension, possesses more delicacy than the original pressings. "Songbird" is the best example of low-level detail; the following track, and beginning of the third side, "The Chain," offers up the best example of dynamic punch. "I Don't Want To Know" comes a close second.

The best news? Warner Bros.' pressing is flawless from beginning to end. This is definitely the super-sized version of *Rumours*: It goes beyond big sound. You can just feel this record breathe, in and out, while listening to tracks that you thought you knew like the back of your hand. Wait until you experience the new information that's available. And the soundstage is massive. If the music doesn't float well past your speakers' boundaries, it's time to go shopping for a new stereo.

So, take a trip back to 1977 when Stevie Nicks had small breasts and Buckingham sported big hair. If you've got a rare, early first-stamper pressing, you may not need to add this one to your collection unless you are really obsessive compulsive. But if you love *Rumours* (and almost everyone does) and you don't have a flawless copy, this edition is worth every penny. A 180g 33-1/3RPM version is also available for around \$25. But fairly priced at \$45 for four sides, the deluxe audiophile edition is the way to go.

—Jeff Dorgay

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## Abba

*The Vinyl Collection*  
Universal, 9LP Box Set

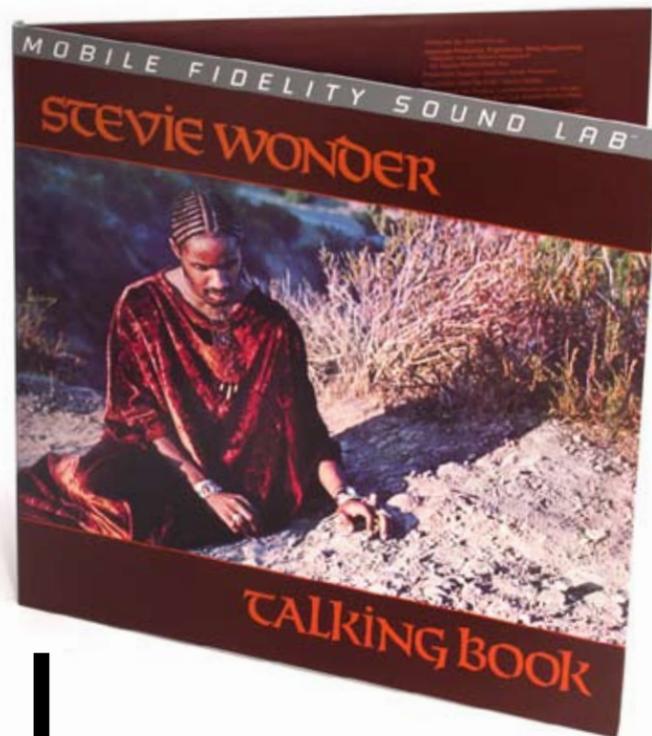
**P**op fans, this one's for you: All eight ABBA studio records plus a ninth LP containing extra tracks. The latter record, *ABBA Tracks*, features the five A-side singles not included on the original studio albums, a selection of B-sides, plus a rare track, "Put On Your White Sombrero," that first saw the light of day in the late 90s. A 50+-page booklet delves into the band and albums.

*The Vinyl Collection* is notable in that all of the albums are exact replicas of the original Swedish editions. Hence, three of the earlier LPs contain inner sleeves featuring Swedish advertisements. Of course, in listening, it quickly becomes evident that this is not an audiophile box set.

Then again, ABBA was never an audiophile band—the group was recorded and mixed for radios, cheap record players, and the mass market. So the sound is a little lacking in dynamics, which boast something along the lines of a "wall of sound" approach. On the plus side, the records here are sourced from the original analog masters. The sonics won't blow your socks off, but the bass is a mite fuller and the mids a touch more detailed than the original issues. The pressings are appreciably quiet.

Yet what matters most is that this box set is a testament to the purity of pop and my assertion that "Dancing Queen" is the best pop single the world has ever seen. Go ahead—have the time of your life.

—**Paul Rigby**



Let's face it: Most Stevie Wonder albums, and in fact, most Motown albums, sound fairly awful. But how can you *not* dig Stevie Wonder, even on a table radio? Regrettably, that's what many of his records were mixed and mastered for when originally released. On many levels, it's a crime that so much of the best R&B ever created didn't get the production respect it deserved. Which is reason to celebrate this edition of *Talking Book*, on which Mobile Fidelity's Silver Label makes great strides.

For those not familiar with the difference between Silver Label and MoFi's standard Original Master Recordings (OMR), the former records are still pressed with care at RTI in Southern California, albeit on standard-weight 140 gram vinyl, and at real time instead of the half-speed rate. And whereas Silver Label titles are cut from "the best tape they can source," OMRs are only produced from the original master tape. The good news is that Silver Label releases come close in sound quality to OMRs and carry a lower price.

## Stevie Wonder

*Talking Book*  
MoFi Silver Series, LP

Paul Stubblebine takes the helm on this release, but MoFi engineer Rob LoVerde notes: "This record was produced from an analog production master that Wonder personally EQ'ed for Tamla at the time of its original release. There's nothing digital involved on this record or any of the other three Wonder titles planned for the Silver Series."

We'll call this pressing a triple, as it's one base short of a home run. Compared to my well-worn LP purchased back in the 70s, a *huge* layer of grunge has been lifted. *Talking Book* now actually throws a soundstage—and a very wide one at that—into the room, along with myriad minute bits of funk heretofore lost in the mix. With major hits "You Are The Sunshine of My Life," "Superstition," and "I Believe (When I Fall In Love It Will Be Forever)," this record brings back great memories and, from an audiophile perspective, is much more enjoyable than ever before.

Yet the 1972 masterpiece is still slightly bright and forward, so those possessing a system with a warmer tonal balance will likely enjoy it more than those with a highly analytical system. I really loved this album played through my Koetsu Urushi cartridge, but when switching to the Clearaudio DaVinci, not as much. On the first side, "Tuesday Heartbreak" appears moderately compressed and "You've Got It Bad, Girl" doesn't sound much better. If I didn't know,

I'd swear I was listening to an SACD of fair quality. It appears that the hits were treated with more care. "Sunshine" doesn't have as much compression and EQ as the rest of the record. Again, keep in mind that I'm referring to the master mix here; I'm *not* implying that MoFi added EQ and/or compression.

If anything, this record is worth the money just for the sound of "Superstition"; it's by far the best-sounding track on the disc. Wonder's voice has plenty of body and the horns come through in larger-than-life fashion; the cymbals are also less crunchy here than elsewhere. Listeners accustomed to original copies will definitely hear a few more layers of horns and percussion than they remember.

Yes, it all makes for an odd blend. There's a larger soundfield, exceptionally quiet surfaces, and a solid helping of midrange bloom, but residual glare on the top end prevents the LP from qualifying as a truly stellar-sounding recording. A gnarly copy in a local record store will probably set you back five or six bucks, so \$22.95 isn't crazy. Since it's graduation time, we'll give the folks at MoFi a B for ultimate sound quality and an A for effort. I'd be thrilled if the label can get the rest of the key Stevie Wonder catalog to sound this good. —**Jeff Dorgay**



## Frank Sinatra

*Swing Along With Me*  
Mobile Fidelity, 180g LP

The only album Frank Sinatra released with Billy May on the Reprise label, 1961's *Swing Along With Me* is so good, he didn't need to do another.

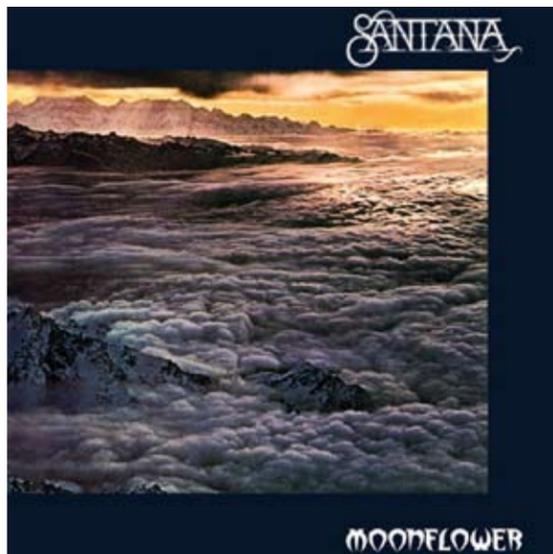
Comparing the recent Mobile Fidelity reissue with the original release proves startling because, immediately, it reveals how rushed Sinatra sounds on the original. This is a guy who has a cab waiting for him outside. Also, on the original pressing, Sinatra resembles the typical "Shouty Man" that blasts his lungs about incredible offers on TV advertisements; such is the LP's well-lit upper midrange effect. Mobile Fidelity's version issue calms the great man, unveiling the playful Sinatra.

Now, with Ol' Blue Eyes' delivery during "I Never Knew," you can almost hear his eyebrow raise and see his half smile appear. And on this track on the original, the orchestra overheats—an engine run so hot, it melts into a combustive blob. By contrast, the reissue offers superb instrumental separation wherein the

saxophones have texture and the trumpets a grizzled grain. Moreover, the bass never dominates, and new details emerge. For example, during the instrumental break, there's a brief piano solo wrought with lightness and delicacy that, honestly, I hardly noticed on the original. I was too busy tensing my shoulders in reaction to the rough mix.

Tensing, too, on the original, is the soundstage that, on "Have You Met Miss Jones?," gives the impression of an orchestra falling over itself before being crammed into a closet. Mobile Fidelity's 180g LP reorganizes the backing orchestra amidst a space the size of a roomy aircraft hanger; the soundstage expands, allowing each instrument to not only find its place but express itself fully enough to enhance dynamic contrast ratios.

Along with the equally superb *The Concert Sinatra*, chalk this up as another splendid entry in Mobile Fidelity's definitive Sinatra reissue catalog. —**Paul Rigby**



## Santana

*Moonflower*  
Friday Music, 180g 2LP set

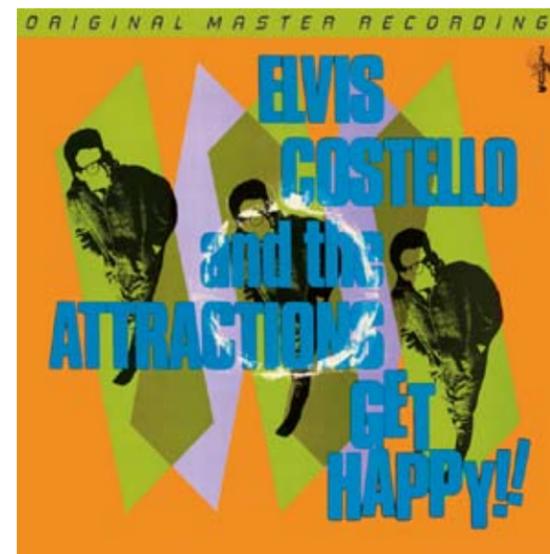
Originally released in the fall of 1977, Santana's rendition of the Zombies' "She's Not There" proved a serious crossover hit on the rock and jazz charts, propelling the man, his band, and their then-new album back into the limelight. And while it only hit #10 on the *Billboard* chart, *Moonflower* achieved double-platinum sales. Unfortunately, it represented Santana's last chart success until his Grammy-winning *Supernatural*—and it still stands as the last major success he achieved wholly on his own merit.

The two-record set combines classic Santana tracks captured live in Europe and new material recorded in San Francisco. The original Columbia LPs were mastered by Bernie Grundman, and while my early pressings suffer from a bit of cloudiness and a touch of distortion, they possess much better fidelity than most of the day's Columbia pressings, which were often aimed at AM radio play.

From the moment a needle is dropped on its surface, it becomes obvious that the Friday Music version boasts much smoother treble, with less grunge overall, allowing you to listen further into the mix than before. The difference becomes even more apparent on the live tracks, where the applause starts to sound remarkably realistic and the drums become more powerful, both in soundstage size and attack. Just listen to the last cut on side three, "Head, Hands and Feet," where the high-hat cymbals finally sound as if they are actually being played up above the drum heads. Santana's wailing lead guitar now bursts way out in front of the speakers, adding to the illusion of a live performance—provided your system is up to task.

The LP's surfaces are exceptionally quiet, contributing to increased tonal contrasts and exposing more low-level details that place more emphasis on the keyboard and percussion work. And while the quality of Friday Music's output is often sporadic, the label has made excellent choices when it comes to titles that help listeners relive classic rock's past. The imprint's treatment of *Moonflower* rates a solid "A." Well done.

—Jeff Dorgay



## Elvis Costello and the Attractions

*Get Happy!!*  
Mobile Fidelity, 180g 45RPM 2LP

"High fidelity/Can you hear me?" asks Elvis Costello on the hit from *Get Happy!!*, the song cleverly adopting the phrase associated with accurate sound reproduction and using it in the service of describing a fractured relationship. His intention aside, listeners can finally answer the rhetorical question with a sonorous "Yes!"

Mobile Fidelity did an admirable job resurrecting the first three Costello albums, but *Get Happy!!* arrives as the audiophile imprint's masterpiece. Partially because the iconic singer/guitarist's outstanding 1980 R&B- and soul-drenched studio effort has always begged for more groove space. Featuring 20 tracks crammed onto two sides of a 33RPM record, the original LP is a nightmare of compression and inner groove distortion. (Can anyone say *Something, Anything?*) No more.

Now you can enjoy *Get Happy!!* in a way most never thought possible due to the extensive extra room opened up by changing to the 45RPM format.

The new pressing begins with "Love For Tender" on side one, but follows the order of the original cover on the flipside of the jacket, showing "I Can't Stand Up For Falling Down" as the first track. Side four benefits the least from the MoFi treatment. Songs here still lack dynamics and dimension, yet they're not in as bad of shape as before.

Revisiting an early copy of *Get Happy!!* proved as scary as remembered. The vinyl sounds like AM radio: noisy and zero dynamic range, while the CD adds yet *another* layer of harshness. Residual compression still exists even at 45RPM, yet the MoFi version is light years ahead. Costello's voice possesses a lot more body, and the vocal processing is easier to digest. The biggest treat comes via the clarity in which Steve Nieve's organ parts resonate. "B Movie" and "Motel Madness" are perhaps the best examples; no longer buried in the mix, Nieve finally shines.

Car aficionados like to say "there's no substitute for cubic inches." The same holds true for a vinyl record—one can only fit so much musical information in those tiny grooves. Along with dynamics, bass response suffers when tracks are tightly squeezed together. And while the original *Get Happy!!* offers no real bass, this pressing has a proper foundation—as well as increased presence of guitar and keyboards.

High fidelity? Indeed. Pitch your old copy and revel in the ability to crank this one up. —Jeff Dorgay



## Cheap Trick

*In Color*  
Audio Fidelity, 180g LP

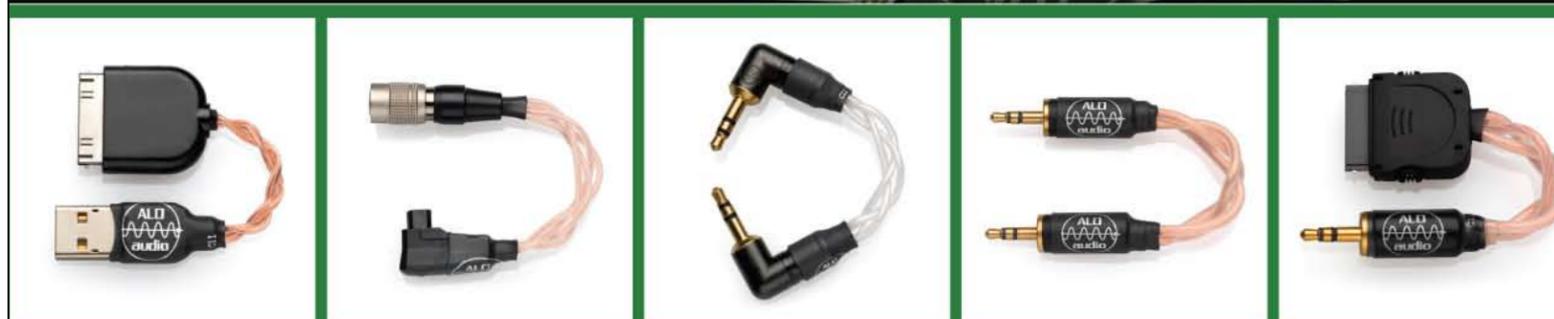
If you've seen Cheap Trick live, you know that this pillar of power pop has a *big* drum sound thanks to Bun E. Carlos. Unfortunately, that key sonic characteristic has rarely translated to LP. Until now. Released at the end of 1977, the same year that Cheap Trick hit the charts with its self-titled album, *In Color* was criticized by some for having slick production that was more pop than power. Others felt the record emphasized the Rockford quartet's Beatlesque charm. Time has proven the latter camp correct; the 32-minute-long platter is now recognized as an all-time classic.

Mastering engineer extraordinaire Kevin Gray managed to transform this record into a diamond, bringing out layers of previously unheard detail that on original pressings remained buried in the mix. Multiple spins revealed major treasure, yet the booty will be delivered the second you drop the stylus down on the short intro track "Hello There," the group's trademark concert-opening song throughout much of 1977 and 1978. Lead singer Robin Zander's vocals explode center stage between the speakers as he wails "Are you ready to rock?" On this Audio Fidelity pressing, he sounds like he means it.

It's now also much easier to hear all of the backing vocals, adding to Cheap Trick's massive sound. *In Color* finally has seemingly limitless depth; guitarist Rick Nielsen's backing vocals on "Oh Caroline" almost sound as if they are coming from behind the listening chair, and he is much more discernable throughout. And, for the first time, you can actually hear bassist Tom Petersson's vocals. Both Petersson and Nielsen's guitars claim more dimension, which aids the closing "So Good To See You," a track that takes the Fab Four feel to the extreme, complete with a huge helping of Sgt. Pepper trippiness.

All of the other standard audiophile criteria are passed with flying colors (pun intended): quiet surfaces, a flat and centered pressing, and a package that features a stunning cover replete with a healthy clearcoat finish. Awesome.

—Jeff Dorgay



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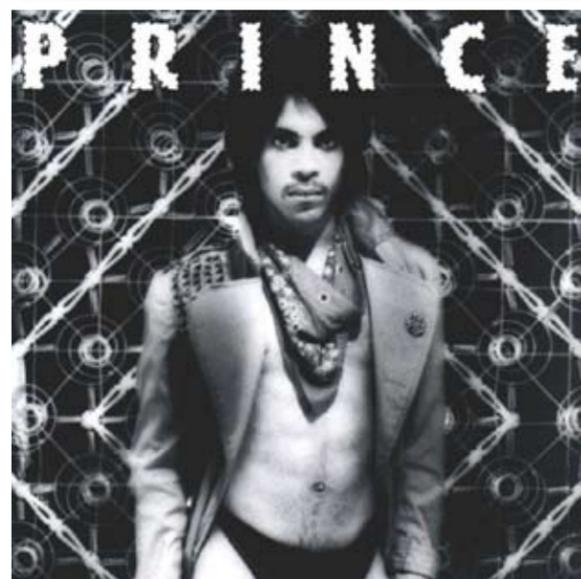
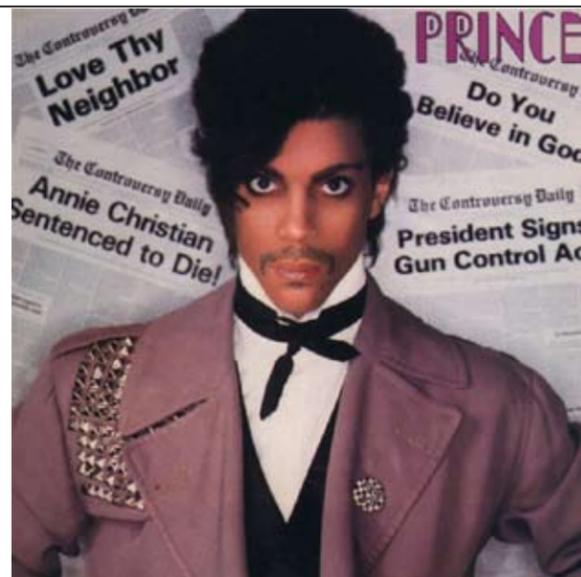
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## Prince

*Controversy*, *Dirty Mind*, and *1999*  
Rhino/Warner Bros., 180g LPs

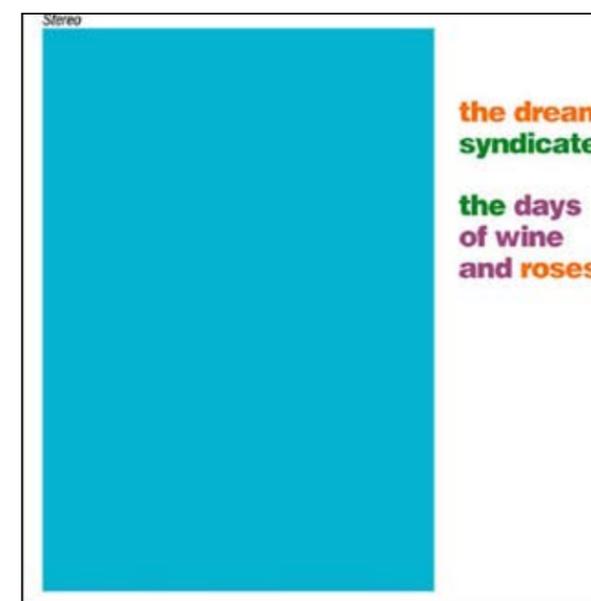
**C**ontroversy, *Dirty Mind*, and *1999*: Quite a threesome. Newly remastered on 180g LP by Warner Bros., these iconic albums chronicle the evolution from Prince's early sound—deeply rooted in dance and disco—to the heavily laden funk he arrived at by 1980's *Dirty Mind* and its follow-up, *Controversy*. *1999*, Prince's second-best-selling record, reveals the sonic chameleon changing again, trading in a more commercial vein. No wonder many fans consider the 1982 double-LP the most accessible effort in his catalog.

Perhaps it's the heavy use of drum machines and synth drums on *Dirty Mind* and *Controversy*, but these outings still sound brittle on the extreme high end. Bernie Grundman takes the helm on all three, but upon revisiting originals, you'll see Grundman mastered them the first time around. Original LPs of these titles can be purchased for about \$5 in good condition, and the CDs don't sound half bad. The biggest differences in sound quality between the original and remastered versions? Additional midrange depth and extra warmth in the bass register. Such warmth may actually make the aforementioned drum machines stand out; it's a double-edged sword.



If you are sitting on the fence and trying to decide on just one of these titles, *1999* is the one you want. The new version offers a big jump in low-level detail over that on the original. In addition, it's substantially smoother throughout the high-frequency spectrum, particularly compared to the original as well as *Controversy* and *Dirty Mind*. A smattering of vocal distortion sneaks through, especially during Prince's loudest screams, but again, even these parts have been substantially tamed.

Moreover, vocal harmonies are more easily discerned and the record seems to have better overall pace, with the upper bass coming through much more clearly and cleanly. These enhancements add to the enjoyment of the dense production Prince puts forward on *1999*. He stacks the deck with the title track, "Little Red Corvette," and "Delirious," finishing hard with "Lady Cab Driver" (the church bell and squealing girl in the background never sounded so vivid), "All The Critics Love U in New York," and "International Lover." The 2nd LP's flip side unveils Prince plotting another moderate style change, headed towards what would soon become The New Power Generation sound. —**Jeff Dorgay**



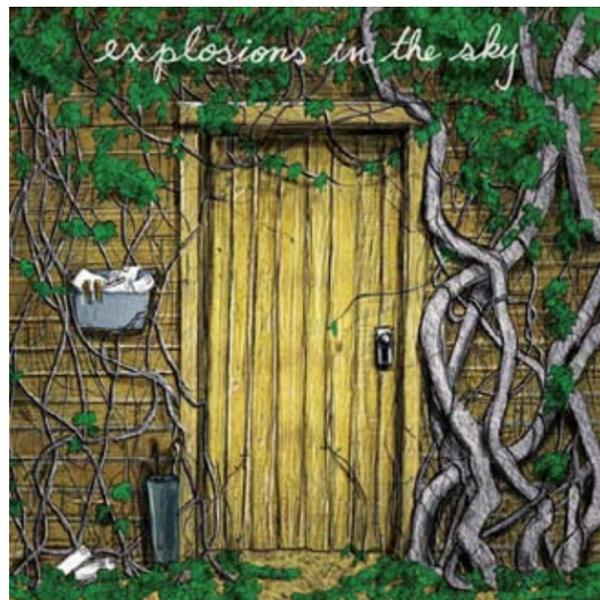
## The Dream Syndicate

*The Days of Wine and Roses*  
4 Men With Beards Records, LP

It might be easy to dismiss *The Days of Wine and Roses* as borrowing too heavily from the Velvet Underground's playbook, but this vital Paisley Underground band's full-length debut has more than enough depth and diversity to carve out its own distinct space. Hitting the scene at the end of the punk era, the Dream Syndicate achieved a balance of raw energy with a polished level of musicianship that becomes easier to acknowledge when looking at the music that arrived after the group faded away. Then there's the guitar work of Steve Wynn and Karl Precoda that, back in 1982, had few—if any—rivals.

Sure, a well-recorded record with quiet surfaces isn't all that punk, but this pressing contains so much texture that listening to the original is now criminal. Lead singer Wynn possesses a larger space, and it's much easier to hear the key mood swings in his delivery, which reach their peak on the rousing "Then She Remembers."

It's also not very punk to go into minutiae on a vinyl reissue, audiophile pressing or not. Here, you're just going to want to get to the music, so know this: The original Sire pressing is highly compressed, as most early Sire pressings are, and this new version from 4 Men With Beards constitutes a major improvement in every way. Essential. —**Jeff Dorgay**



## Explosions in the Sky

*take care, take care, take care*  
Temporary Residence, 2LP

Rapidly shaping up as one of the premier instrumental rock bands of the past decade, Explosions in the Sky brings symphonic breadth to modern guitar-influenced electronica. The burgeoning group's new *take care, take care, take care* represents another creative step forward.

Recorded on a pecan ranch in Tornillo, Texas and mastered to three sides of vinyl by Greg Calbi in New York, this 2LP pressing epitomizes what needs to be done to get the under-50 crowd interested in hi-fi. Live, the band presents a dense wall of sound with incredible dynamic range, going from quiet interludes to metal massacres at the drop of a hat. Past CDs took some of that magic away on record. That's not the case here.

Presenting the quieter, gentler side of Explosions in the Sky, the record's opening "Last Known Surroundings" ethereally begins with a highly distorted wailing guitar located far behind a front line of guitars. It takes on a texture that feels like equal parts The Edge, a handful of power chords, and early Radiohead crossed with Neu!. The track starts and ends slow, with the band's trademark use of multiple crescendos incorporated in the arrangement. Only "Trembling Hands" and "Let Me Back In" ever hint at making a ruckus, and yet, they remain subdued.

Temporary Residence's LPs present the power and delicacy that the performance deserves. Seven tracks are spread amongst three sides, so there are dynamics to spare; the vinyl is miles better than the CD and nearly as quiet. Framed with type that you might see in a Rene Magritte painting, packaging is also stellar. The deluxe edition is exquisitely boxed as a four-part foldout complete with poster and free download of the album in the 320kb MP3 format. Audiophiles that happen to be Explosions in the Sky fans, rejoice. Your ship has come in.

—Jeff Dorgay



## Sisters of Mercy

*First And Last And Always*  
Mobile Fidelity Silver Label, LP

Originally released on Elektra in 1985 and reissued on LP via Mobile Fidelity's Silver Label, *First And Last And Always* stands as Sisters of Mercy's debut and one of the most influential goth records ever issued.

The lead track, "Black Planet," showcases the new remastering to full effect. The song features an all-encompassing bass rhythm that, with every strike, infects the tune like mustard gas unleashed in a trench. On a poor master, the bass would threaten to suffocate the rest of the arrangement.

But Mobile Fidelity keeps it in check with a distinct, sparkling, upper-mid sensitive guitar; the bass merrily sits on the edge of the soundstage.

Such attention to detail is shown in more subtle terms on "Walk Away," which contains periods when singer Andrew Eldritch says too much in one breath, resulting in a slightly wavy and strained delivery. Again, on an inattentive master, the approach can sound both monotonous and monotone. Here, however, Eldritch's voice modulates with a wide array of variation.

This pressing is also notable for the space that it provides the band. Yes, the soundstage is wide but, without the measure of instrumental separation it instills, the master would fail to fulfil its promise. For example, on "Marian (Version)," the music is layered like an aural lasagne. Percussion sits underneath the rhythm guitar and bass while vocals act as a dripping sauce. In the meantime, the metallic-tinted acoustic guitar is sprinkled about like an herb topping. Yum. On "Possession," instruments are grouped between the speakers—recipe for disaster given the potential for each to stumble into another or, worse, merge into a glutinous blob. Not here. The band sounds compact, calm, well adjusted, and efficient, leaving the soundstage extremities to create an effective stereo vocal effect.

A highly entertaining reissue, *First And Last And Always* is a lesson in how to retain artistic vision while satiating the audiophile heart.

—Paul Rigby

MOBILE FIDELITY SOUND LAB



## KC and the Sunshine Band

*KC and the Sunshine Band*  
MoFi Silver Label, LP

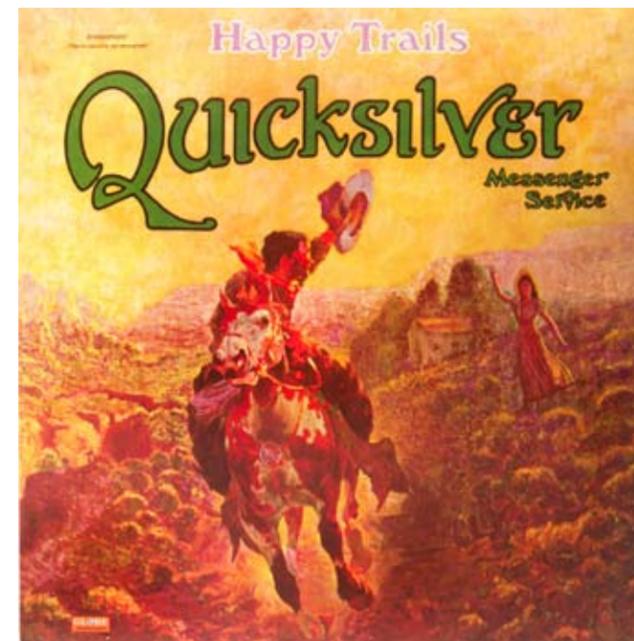
**B**ack in July 1975, when roaming Milwaukee's Summerfest grounds, trying to sneak into Shank Hall for a beer, and searching out heavy rock while wearing the quintessential "Disco Sucks" t-shirt, it would have been unconscionable for me to own *KC and the Sunshine Band*. Even thinking about it would have been the equivalent of suicide amongst peers.

But in retrospect, it's an amusing record. With so many 70s rock platters being remastered to death, I applaud Mobile Fidelity for having the guts to step so far out of the audiophile box and produce something this much fun. And since I happened to have an early pressing on hand for comparison—Columbia House sent it as a Selection of the Month and I forgot to return it, honest—I was surprised at just how good this reissue sounds.

Of course, what really makes this record click are the three hits you know by heart: "That's the Way (I Like It)," "Boogie Shoes," and of course, "Get Down Tonight." Heavy with funk riffs and analog synth fills, *KC and the Sunshine Band* finally has some solid bass response—even if *TONE*'s art director caught me goosing up the Gotham subwoofer's level control when cranking "Get Down Tonight." Given the additional bass energy, most of the murkiness from the original is gone, leaving behind some serious dynamic range. The original is so heavily compressed for radio play that it doesn't have more than a couple of dB total.

The end result moves to the top of my audiophile pressing guilty pleasure list. You know you want it too. —**Jeff Dorgay**

## Quicksilver Messenger Service



*Quicksilver Messenger Service and Happy Trails*  
Pure Pleasure, LP

**T**he first two albums from QMS are considered by many devoted fans and critics to be from the "classic period" before the original lineup underwent a series of changes. The reputation is deserved.

*TONE* staff collector Tom Caselli, always on the alert for additional clean copies of these LPs, notes that early stamper originals are "tough to find that aren't beat. These were the ultimate party records back in the 60s." If you can find them, early stamper black label Capitol LP's are the ones you want. Clean copies fetch about \$100 each. UK import pressings can go for twice that amount, and it remains open for debate about whether they sound any better than US versions.

Compared to the later-version Capitol LPs, Pure Pleasure's reissues sound fantastic and reveal layered sound, not unlike my favorite Dead albums. The sound instantly brings back a 60s jam band vibe, and both records offer tremendous depth and guitar texture. What the albums lack in modern studio trickery, they make up for in spades with soulful performance. The self-titled set possesses a soundstage with more depth than width, with only an occasional drumstick hitting the rim of a snare on the far right or left to remind you that this is, in fact, a stereo recording. Hearing "The Fool" restored to its former glory is worth the price alone.

While barely a year separate the self-titled record and *Happy Trails*, the latter possesses a much bigger and cleaner sound. The latter spreads well beyond the speaker boundaries, and guitars occupy not only a larger space but enjoy greater prominence on the recording. *Happy Trails* also has stronger dynamic contrast than the first, with instruments convincingly fading into the distance, and much greater low-level detail, revealing more nuances in the guitar playing.

Pure Pleasure has more QMS titles on the way. For now, this pair makes for an excellent addition to any psychedelic collection. —**Jeff Dorgay**

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## Madeleine Peyroux

*Standing on the Rooftop*  
Decca, 2LP

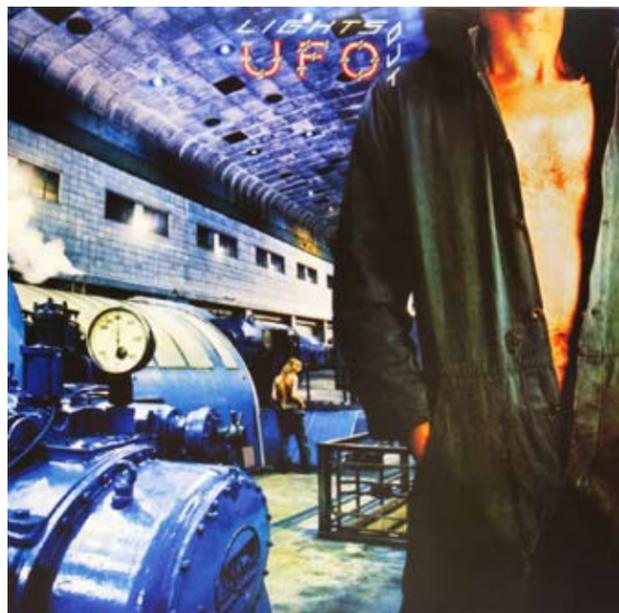
As she's done throughout her career, Madeleine Peyroux continues to evolve on her fifth solo effort. Her songwriting has become more sophisticated and choice of covers more intelligent—perhaps even quirky—but it works well. Earlier this summer, a message on her Web site promised a “more roots oriented record,” and *Standing on the Rooftop* follows up on the pledge.

It starts with a slow, sparse rendition of the Beatles' “Martha My Dear” that fortunately doesn't set the vocal tone for the rest of the record. On the song, Peyroux stretches a bit too far, her voice straining to hit and hold the high notes. The next track, “The Kind You Can't Afford,” picks up on a tempo that's similar to that of the singer's from *Careless Love*. But there's a much funkier thing going on, thanks to virtuoso guitarist Mark Ribot and bassist Meshell Ndegeocello. As she lazily raps to a male friend, Peyroux jokes about him “cruising in a Mercedes” while she's “broke down in a Ford.” (Speaking of disparity: It's too bad Peyroux doesn't give her poor friends that bought the \$30 LP an included CD or download of the album.)

The remainder of the set dramatically slows down, as it's rich with environmental texture and big, muddy drum beats with slow attack. While Ribot does not play guitar throughout, his influence is everywhere, as it adds a tonal complexity that feels like a soundtrack to a film that takes place in a rainy, desolate location. In the same way that you have to pay close attention to someone speaking softly in a room, the listener is forced to sidle up closely to the music. And we learn that we're suddenly a long way from *Careless Love*. There are a few light spots, but this is a primarily dark ride.

Mastered by Greg Calbi at Sterling Sound, the two-LP, 33RPM set offers sound on par with Peyroux's last two Mobile Fidelity LPs. Surfaces are exceptionally quiet, complementing her voice perfectly and allowing Ribot's reverb-laden guitar to stretch out to infinity. Ndegeocello's bass is full of rich overtones that perfectly translate, and infrequent bursts of percussion emerge across a very wide soundstage. Props to Peyroux for again taking an enthralling detour from a path she's already traveled.

—Jeff Dorgay



*Lights Out*  
Back on Black, 2LP

## UFO

A *Spinal Tap*, the two-word review for this record would be “shit sandwich.” To elaborate a bit further, this two-record set—pressed on green vinyl and encased in a beautifully printed cardboard sleeve to keep pace with the best remasters—disappoints the second you lower the stylus onto the wax.

The first two sides feature the original 1977 album; the live tracks from the 2008 remaster are on sides three and four. Flat and compressed with a harsh, crunchy high end, this version sounds no better than the 128kb Rhapsody file on my iPhone. A \$5 US pressing of this blows the Back on Black edition—currently (over)priced at \$38—out of the water.

This is truly a crime against metal. Avoid at all costs.—**Jeff Dorgay**

## Bon Iver

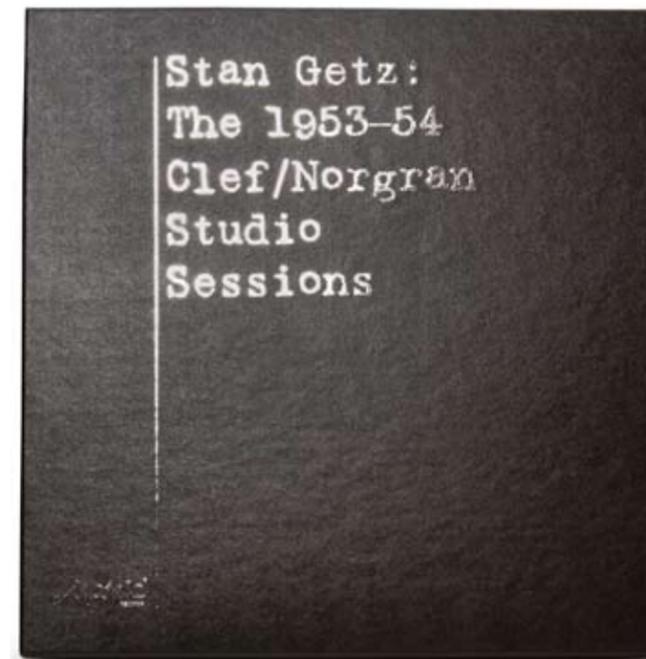
Staff writer Andy Downing wrote an insightful review of this, Bon Iver’s recent album, in Issue 38. But since he was then only in possession of the advance CD, he was unable to comment on the LP’s sound quality.

Greg Calbi at Sterling is at the helm here, and does an acceptable job but no more. The pressing is quiet, though, which adds to the music’s ethereal feel. Where the CD is slightly flat in terms of soundstage, the LP has more width and a modest helping of depth. But where Justin Vernon’s wispy voice resides on the same plane as the music in the digital version, he’s relegated to the rear of the stage on vinyl. Similarly, the low-level keyboard bits have more room to float, yet the more prominent keyboard riffs now sound more like mellotrons—ironic given that the liner notes specifically say, “No mellotrons were used in this recording.”

So something is gained, and something is lost on the LP version. Also note: The additional warmth gained from going to analog may prove too much for anyone having a system with a tonal balance skewed to the romantic side.—**Jeff Dorgay**



*Bon Iver*  
Jagjaguwar, LP



## Stan Getz

*The 1953-54 Clef/Norgran Studio Sessions*  
Mosaic Records, 180g 4LP box set

Mosaic’s latest unburied treasure compiles mono recordings produced on the Clef, Norgran, and Verve labels during one of the lowest points in the career of legendary saxophone player Stan Getz, who, at the time, was battling heroin addiction and assorted personal problems. Such circumstances made it tough for the jazz icon to land a major recording contract. Indeed, if Getz’s story were written today, it might read that he was “in-between projects.” A quick Google search fills in the gaps on Getz’s career, yet Ashley Kahn’s liner notes here offer an even better history lesson.

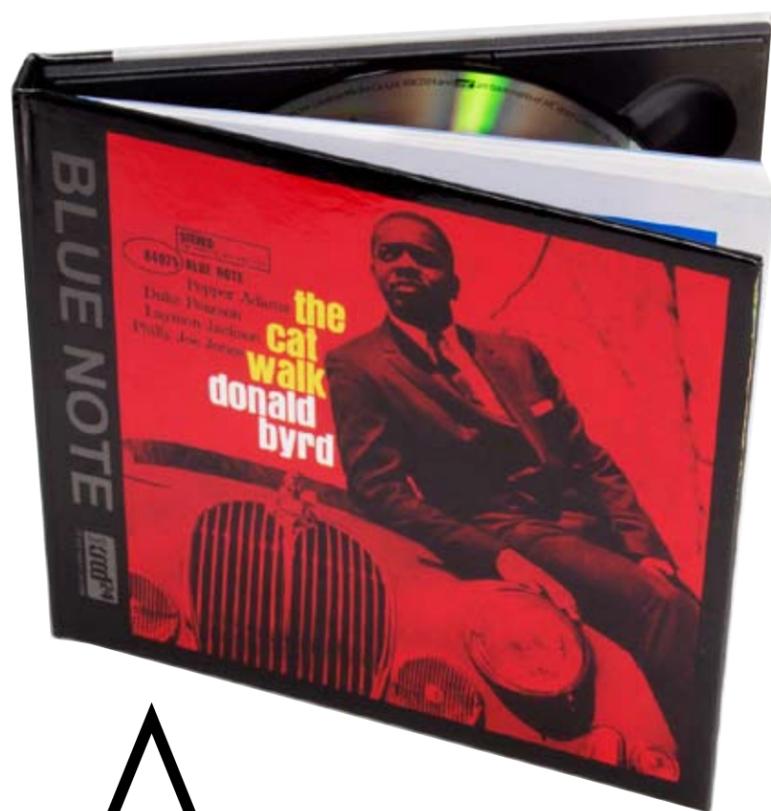
Independent of how small or large the label for which it was made, the music from the seven albums that comprise this collection should be savored. Even if they can be located, the original LPs command a premium price and are often of questionable quality. Yes, the fare can also be had on CD, but be forewarned: Verve/Hip-O all but squashed the life out of them. Even the most modest analog rig will bring these tunes to life in a manner that’s impossible on the existing CDs.

Mastering engineer Kevin Gray took great care with this set, sourced from the original full-track mono masters. (Well, all save for an alternate take of “Pot Luck” transferred from an original 78.) As with all of the Mosaic titles we’ve sampled, the sound is spectacular. Gray preserves the musical delicacy, and it does not feel like the EQ has been goosed or other alterations made.

Because these records have been cut on a modern lathe, you will not need a mono cartridge to take full advantage of the rich, warm sound presented on these grooves. It’s easy to see why Getz got the nickname “The Sound.” The soundscape feels as if comes through in stereo, as the best mono material always does.

A slight bit of tape hiss exists in the quietest part of some tracks, but everything else is exceptional. How so? These records do not feel “remastered” in the classic sense. Rather, they sound as if you had uncovered a pristine original set in a hermetically sealed, temperature-controlled environment.

—**Jeff Dorgay**



**A** stalwart 1961 Blue Note recording, Donald Byrd's *The Cat Walk* features pianist Duke Pearson, bassist Laymon Jackson, energetic drummer Philly Joe Jones, and baritone saxophonist Pepper Adams. Pearson does more than hit a few blacks and whites. He adds a selection of his own arrangements and contributes three originals, including "Say Your Mine," which highlights the reissue's cosy sonics. Unlike poor masters, Audio Wave's disc presents Byrd's trumpet in an intimate fashion. The headliner lazily skims over the hills and troughs of his first solo. The passage is an early test for detail, and the XRCD24 passes with flying colors, also lending a carefully controlled bass support structure.

## Donald Byrd

*The Cat Walk*  
Audio Wave XRCD24

Indeed, the XRCD reveals a change in basic philosophy. This is not a straight remastering. Compared to the admirable Rudy Van Gelder CD edition, the XRCD is much quieter. I upped my amp gain by five notches to reach the same volume pushed out by the Gelder CD. On "Say You're Mine," the XRCD presents a wider soundstage on which Byrd is pushed way to the left instead of just left of center. Adams' baritone sax is nothing short of a revelation, and Jones sounds like he's been woken from a slumber. His animated percussion is now rife with clipped, sudden strikes and generous attack missing from the Gelder edition.

The title track is a perfect example of the two different approaches. The Gelder version begins the song with a wallop as Byrd's trumpet dominates and, if anything, is forward and a little bright in the upper mids. XRCD's take is cooler, more mature, civilized, and calmer, taking the music in stride. The introduction no longer punches between your eyes. Instead, you're treated to a multi-toned percussive entree and reminded that Byrd actually duets with Adams. Here, the sax has time to flow, providing a superior ensemble feel.

Moreover, on "Duke's Mixture," Pearson's piano is centrally placed, acting as a sort of fulcrum around which Byrd's trumpet and Adams' sax spin. The XRCD helps keep the entire track afloat with a sense of purpose and a level of transparency that gives the upper-midrange frequencies time under the sonic spotlight. Those that value tonal richness will be in heaven. —**Paul Rigby**

## Hiromi Kanda

*Days of Yesterday*  
Music Gate, LP and CD

**W**hile I found singer Hiromi Kanda's last release, *Hiromi in Love*, quite charming, her new record offers more of the same—and that's not necessarily a plus. Think Hello Kitty meets Diana Krall, but without the sparkles. The album credits reveal that Al Schmitt (the engineer on Krall's early albums) to be present, as well as a 50-piece orchestra. Another household name, Bernie Grundman, turns in an exemplary performance as mastering engineer. And while it doesn't possess the LP's last bit of vocal warmth, the CD comes very close, indicating the amount of care given the entire project.

Some might think Kanda's vocal tone polarizing, but her level of craftsmanship remains indisputable; she is a perfectionist. Having taken four months to produce at Capitol Records, the record is squeaky clean—albeit too clean. But those simply looking for great sound will be pleased; no fault can be had with the recording. This is a sonic spectacular that "deep listening" audiophiles will enjoy when the lights are down low.

Alas, due to the pedestrian arrangements and safe approaches, no musical boundaries are pushed, no borders crossed. Kanda includes three original compositions and utilizes legendary keyboardist Joe Sample to good advantage.



Still, the songs unfurl to a monotonous sleepy tempo that seemingly repeats itself on every track.

As one who is bored beyond belief with the vocal grifters of the "Great American Songbook," I'd love to see what Kanda could do with truly interesting material; she's definitely got the chops. But I'm of the mind that if you want a Harley, you should buy a Harley and not a Yamaha Gold Star. *Days of Yesterday* falls short in a similar way. In the end, if you'd like another sultry female vocalist to add to your stack of scrumptious recordings, Kanda nicely slips in between Diana Krall and Eva Cassidy. Me? I want the real thing and will take Ella any day. —**Jeff Dorgay**



## Horace Silver

Audio Wave XRCD24

Created in 1965 after the seminal *Song For My Father*, this Horace Silver classic counts Joe Henderson on tenor saxophone, Woody Shaw on trumpet, J.J. Johnson on trombone, Bob Cranshaw on bass, and Roger Humphries on percussion.

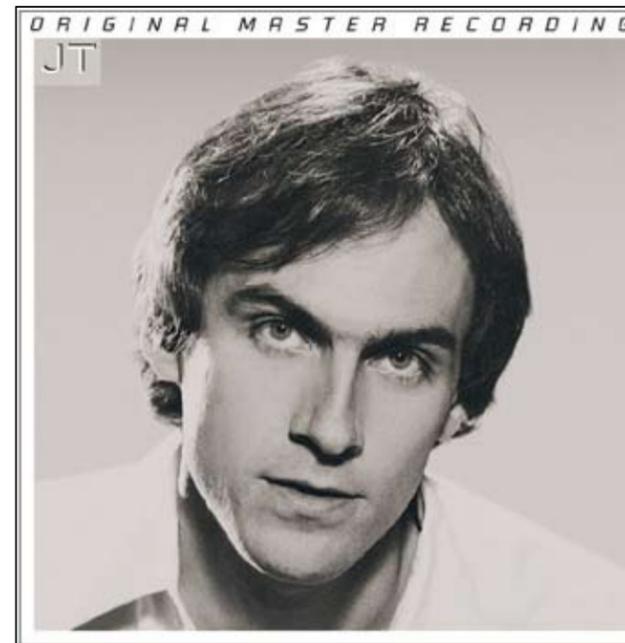
After the tropical-themed title track reaches back into Silver's Portuguese roots, serious work kicks in with "The African Queen." It's also where the XRCD24 mastering plays a key role. Humphries' drumming establishes a dramatic tone and gives the upper-bass regions pause for thought, at which point a walking rhythm increases tension.

This music is all about shadows, meaning that the mastering must tread a careful yet subtle tightrope to maintain instrumental balance. On the standard Rudy Van Gelder CD, the track is bright and unfocused, with sonic smudges occupying spaces where grammatical intonation should be. The XRCD is the opposite, constantly stimulating the senses by offering startling textures instead of blaring noises and ribald tension in place of flatness.

While the Gelder CD is awash in almost-chaotic upper midrange frequencies that, on the title track, dance around with an exotic beat, the supremely balanced XRCD permits the ear to discern more personality within the percussion. Silver's rhythmic piano work is also enhanced with natural musicality. More importantly, his intricate keyboard work stands tall and finds room amidst Henderson's towering tenor sax.

The differences between the discs are never more apparent than on "Nutsville," during which the XRCD's pinpoint brass maintains drum momentum, driving the rhythm as whole. Moreover, Silver's piano is prevented from drowning within the height-ened activity, affording it a Fred Astaire position where Silver hotfoots around each of his mates. Scintillating.

—**Paul Rigby**



Part of its ongoing James Taylor series, Mobile Fidelity's remaster of the singer/songwriter's eighth album is a smash. Each side of the 1977 effort begins with big, radio friendly hits—"Your Smiling Face" and "Handy Man," respectively. Indeed, *JT* stands as Taylor's last great record from both creative and sales standpoints. Only his earlier *Sweet Baby James* equaled this set's 3x-platinum status; none of his other studio records, however consistent, generated these numbers. (His 1976 *Greatest Hits* did sell 11 million copies.)

## James Taylor

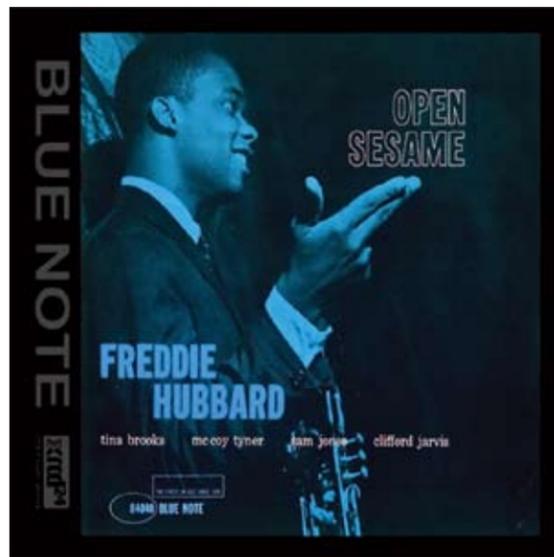
*JT*

Mobile Fidelity, 180g LP

A side-by-side comparison with a 1A Columbia pressing reveals that while the original possesses a smidge of compression, it has more punch on the bottom end, serving as a perfect example of how judicious use of a compressor can make a rock record rock. Everywhere else, the MoFi gains the upper hand. Considering that a majority of songs on *JT* are of the slower variety, the audiophile label LP's sumptuous presentation is a treat. Taylor's voice is large and breathy, and surrounded by great guitar attack.

In addition, the MoFi edition boasts higher quality in two critical areas, the first being surface noise. Many 70s and 80s Columbia pressings are plagued with noise; this record is no different. Thanks to better vinyl and half-speed mastering, the new *JT* is extremely silent. My pressing lacks any clicks, ticks, or pops. MoFi's lower overall level eliminates the original's compression, which benefits all tracks save for the opening numbers on each side.

Moreover, the remainder of the album yields more low-level detail as well as extra space between notes. Taylor's acoustic guitar playing offers added resonance and decay, drum fills are better defined, and it's much easier to pick out Carly Simon's backing vocals. —**Jeff Dorgay**



## Freddie Hubbard

*Open Sesame*  
Audio Wave XRCD24

**O**n this 1960 release, tenor saxophonist Tina Brooks, pianist McCoy Tyner, bassist Sam Jones, and drummer Clifford Jarvis join trumpeter extraordinaire Freddie Hubbard. It's Hubbard's first outing as the main man, and his promise is there for all to hear on the title track. This reissue grabs hold of Hubbard's playing and has it cut right through the mix, providing a dynamic upper midrange that imposes itself with force. Audio Wave lifts the bass, supplying form and roots with additional rhythmic support.

One of the most visible aspects of this title is how XRCD treats the upper midrange, a critical area in any jazz recording. On the Rudy Van Gelder CD, the title track is almost unlistenable—and this via a warming valve system complete with a valve-stage Icon Audio CD player. During Hubbard's solo, the upper mids feel uncomfortable at reasonably high volumes. The XRCD totally removes this forward aspect, allowing you to increase the volume and hunt for more detail. The latter duly arrives with the relatively subtle albeit insistent bass line which, on the Gelder edition, stays buried underneath Hubbard's blare. On the XRCD, Jones' bass functions a road—a guiding pathway upon which the other musicians frolic. Similarly, Brooks' tenor sax sounds far more relaxed, opening up to provide a more nuanced presentation.

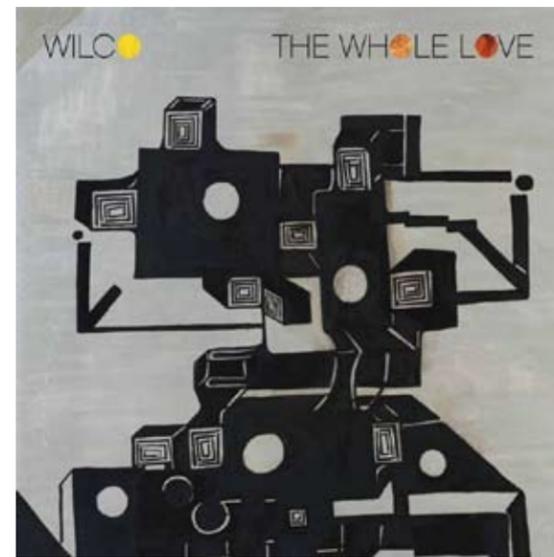
My lone beef with most Blue Note recordings is how they treat supporting piano. Tyner seems like he's positioned 100 yards away, trussed up in a sack. The XRCD doesn't wholly correct the problem but manages to open up the piano, giving it a more rhythmic presentation.

More benefits occur during "All Or Nothing At All," on which Hubbard's complex solo work stumbles and sways like a gin-soaked drunk on the Gelder edition. The XRCD version restores order and stability, and Brooks' sax better blends in with Jarvis' drums, allowing successful interplay that defines this classic.

—Paul Rigby

## Wilco

*The Whole Love*  
dBPM/Anti, 180g 2LP



**W**ilco

has always championed a dense aural dynamic.

On recordings such as *Sky Blue Sky* and

*Summerteeth*, LP

versions unscrambled

the band's mix

better than their CD

counterparts. In keeping

with tradition, Wilco again

includes a full-length CD

with the vinyl edition of

*The Whole Love*.

But this time, it's different. Once you hear the disc, you may never go back to the vinyl. Mastered by Bob Ludwig, the latter is compressed and rolled-off—and not by a small margin. The CD is tipped a shade to the bright side, but at least has air and dynamics.

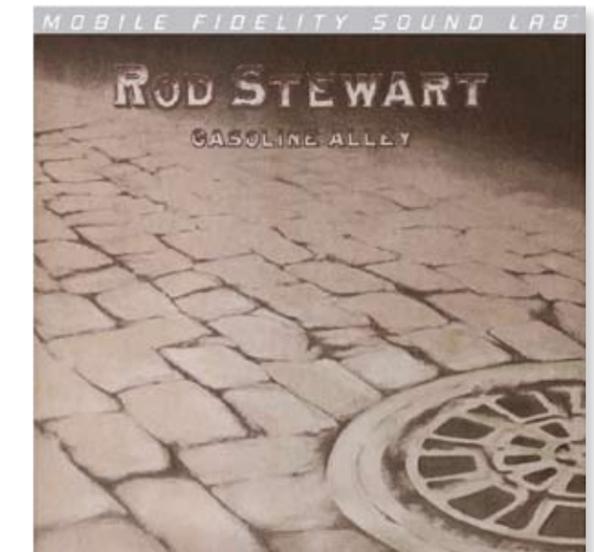
From the first track, "The Art of Almost," the soundstage on the CD extends well beyond the speaker boundaries, exuding life, whereas the LP just presents the song as a little ball of sound between the speakers. If you didn't know better, you'd swear the vinyl was the CD and vice versa. Unfortunately, it doesn't get any better. Blasé sound infects the entire LP.

It's unfortunate that, for the first release on its new label, Wilco lets the analog quality control slide. Get the deluxe version of the CD that comes with four bonus tracks. This is one instance where the vinyl doesn't guarantee better sound.

(For a feature-length review of *The Whole Love*, please see Todd Martens' piece in this issue.) —Jeff Dorgay

## Rod Stewart

*Gasoline Alley*  
Mobile Fidelity Silver Label, LP



**W**ith early-stamper US Mercury pressings of this Rod Stewart classic only fetching \$10-\$12 and early British Vertigo pressings going for as high as \$100, Mobile Fidelity Silver Label's recent edition gets the good value award.

Comparing the Silver Label LP to the somewhat naff Mercury copy at my disposal proved interesting, even as the Mercury gave a good showing. While not as quiet as the new version, drums on the Mercury claim more texture. Cymbals are also more natural, but the Silver Label LP reveals warmer bass response. Stewart's voice is solid and clean on both pressings, so the burning question becomes: Do you want a quiet record and squeaky clean jacket, or do you prefer a little more soul in the mix? I'll take the Silver Label pressing, thanks. —Jeff Dorgay

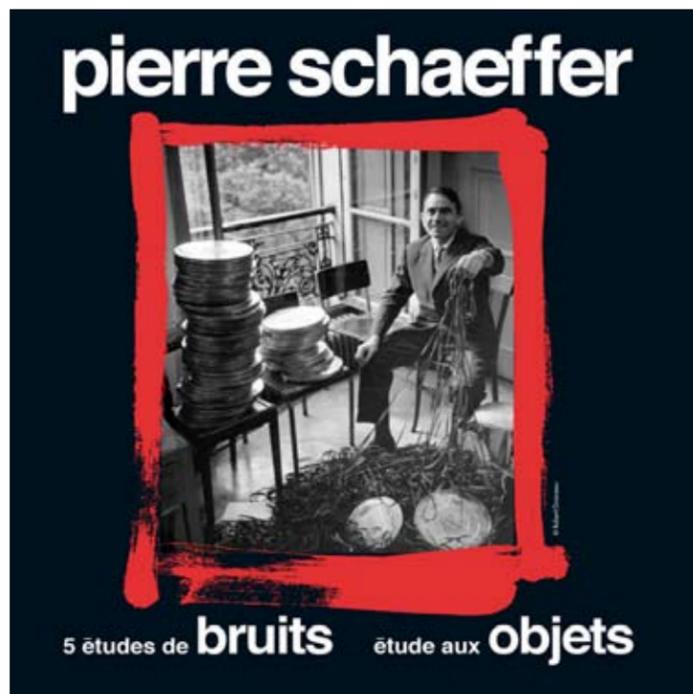
**Jean Michel Jarre**

*Rarities, Oxygene, Equinoxe, and Magnetic Fields*

**Pierre Schaeffer**

*5 études de bruits/étude aux objets*

For all: Dreyfus 180g LPs



If you want to understand Jean Michel Jarre, then you cannot ignore his teacher of three critical years, Pierre Schaeffer. A French musician and giant of the avant-garde scene, the *musique concrète* pioneer is largely responsible for the musical structures of modern electronica and hip-hop. *Musique concrète* takes an acousmatic sound approach—that is, you hear the sound but you might not necessarily know its source. Schaeffer lived to play with sounds, and *5 études de bruits/étude aux objets* serves as a superb demonstration of his practice. Indeed, Schaeffer loves to see how sonics interact and react with each other, and how listeners respond to this sequence of noises. As for melody? What melody?

Effectively two works on a single LP, Side A's *5 études de bruits* stems from 1948 and sounds it. The master is clear and content concise, but you get the obvious impression that it's an archival piece and demands to be listened to as such. The master's quality far exceeds the capability of the original recording, which is sometimes deficient and distorted, especially in the upper-mid regions.

The flip side finds material captured in 1959. Now that tape enters the equation (as well as improved studio facilities), the quality dramatically improves, making the subtle and startling effects of *étude aux objets* more immediate and engaging. The purpose seems to force bystanders to ask, "What comes next?" A playful and often witty recording, the LP teases the senses. Once it finishes, you might feel like a lab rat in a scientific experiment.

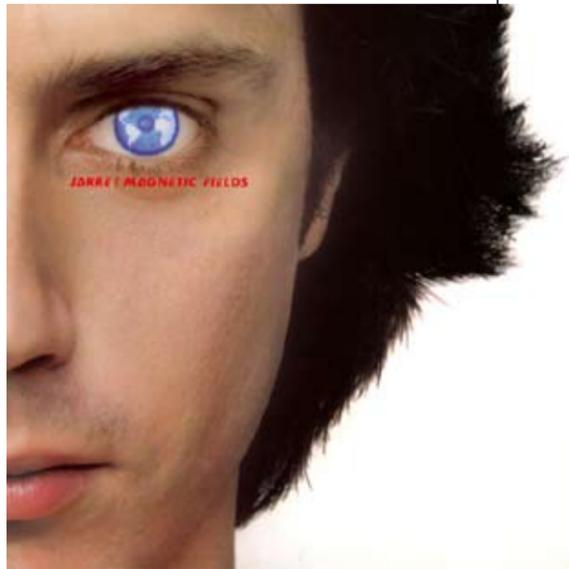
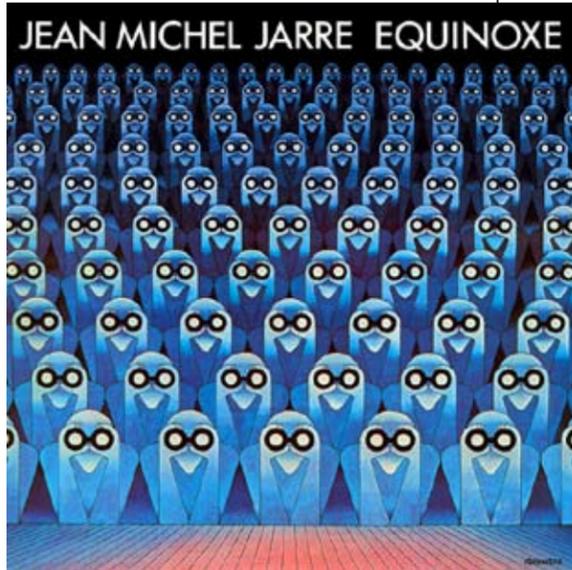
Enter Jarre and his new compilation, *Rarities*. Presented in an attractive gatefold package, the archival LP takes the listener from Jarre's leaving of Schaeffer's classroom to the verge of his breakthrough composition, *Oxygene*. There's never any doubt that he's a Schaeffer disciple. The technology might be more advanced, but the *musique concrète* style drenches the opening "Happiness Is A Sad Song." While unusual for Jarre, it's complete with a vocal track, albeit with unintelligible gibberish. An increasingly nightmarish composition, it gives way to the more melodic "Hypnose," which follows a krautrock arrangement.



Organic instruments add a completely unexpected pastoral vibe. The quality of both the mastering and pressing retains a 60s-style analog warmth.

Jarre's experimental melange continues as the LP progresses. Dabbling with aural flavors as diverse as the technology of the time allowed, he mixes the organic with early electronica. Tempos and mood vary, and it's not until 1970's "Windswept Canyon," the first track on Side B, that Jarre stumbles upon a settled form. Sweeping synth effects play around the bass percussion and arrive at a soft melodic center; the bones of his now-familiar style coming together. Despite various creative hiccups, Jarre is once again drawn back to this newfound approach on 1972's "Black Bird" and 1973's "The Burnt Barns." As the music moves through the 70s, the vinyl mastering maintains reproductive quality that, over such diverse sources, is equally consistent and appealing.

*Oxygene*, the first of three popular Jarre LPs remastered on vinyl for the first time since their original release, and mastered by the man himself, stands as the artist's commercial breakthrough. The 1977 release is deservedly viewed as a classic, but the reissue initially doesn't hit you between the ears. On the contrary, it sneaks up on you, and takes a few seconds to notice that the new mastering introduces a rich, silky smooth, deep chocolate flavor. Two minutes in, a deep bass sequence provides a more rounded low-frequency response than the original. It soon becomes obvious that the original recording is pregnant with silent distortion—the most insidious of varieties, and the type you only know is there only once it has been removed. (continued)



Dynamics are also enhanced, and the upper-midrange far superior, particularly given the newly uncovered synth elements. Sure, you could demand more—clarity, bass structure, pizzazz. But doing so would be a tad churlish. This LP takes its place as the best version of *Oxygene* on the market, leagues better than the original.

One year removed from *Oxygene*, *Equinoxe* continues the former's bubbling synth washes and complex electronic multi-layering. The original pressing doesn't sound right, especially in the upper mids and treble areas that, again, seem drenched in distortion—the same sort that hampers *Oxygene*. However, bass is solid, and for an early electronic piece, the soundstage commendable. On the reissue, bass plumbs new depths, and while the introductory synth work doesn't extend the soundstage, it certainly makes better use of it. Upper mids offer greater transparency, allowing for a greater flow of information. Attention is drawn to different areas of the mix, making the melodic aspects surprising, fresh, and rebalanced.

1981's *Magnetic Fields*, provides many magical moments. The recording is quite aggressive in its upper mids and treble attack, with a steady and persistent undulation that doesn't offer respite. The original suffers from a forwardness and stumbles due to blundering, bloomy-ridden bass levels.

The new pressing brings a sense of calm—not unlike a mother arriving home to a house full of chaotic children, taking over from a flailing father, to not only control wayward energy but direct and put it to good use. Here, the upper mids and treble are steered to provide often-startling high-frequency effects. Bass is largely mellow and structured. Still, like the other LPs, more work could have been done to tighten here and push the envelope there. Nitpicking aside, the reissued *Magnetic Fields* is a joy to hear, offering a highly immersive experience, especially at high volumes.

—Paul Rigby

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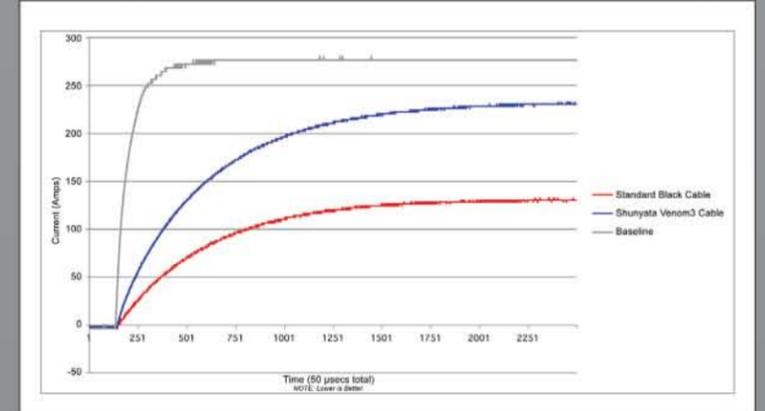


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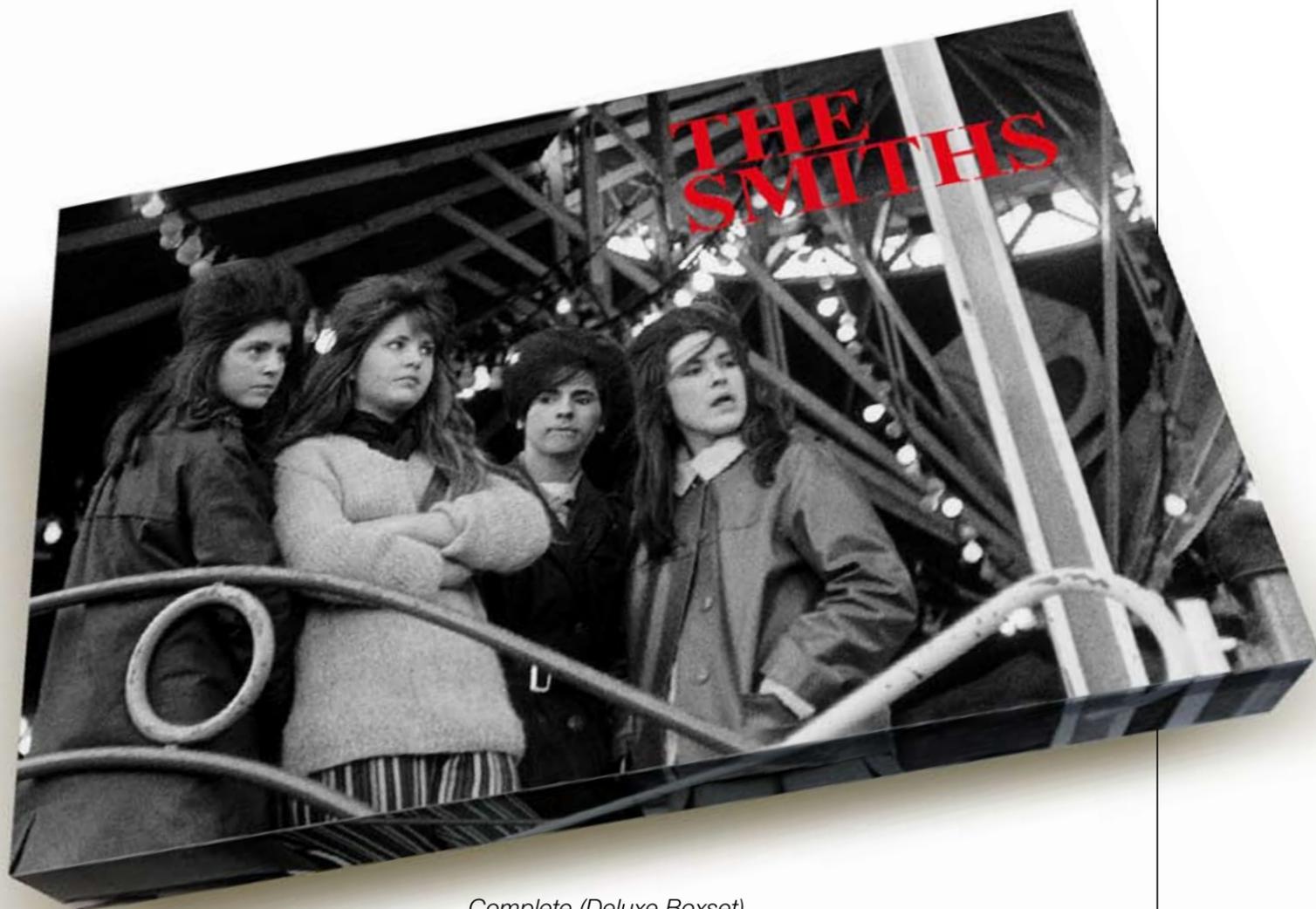
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*Complete (Deluxe Boxset)*  
Rhino UK, 180g 8LP, 25 x 7", 8CD, DVD Box Set

## The Smiths

“These things take time,” crooned Morrissey on the Smiths tune of the same name, the B-side to 1984’s “What Difference Does It Make.” How right he was. After more than a decade of pleas from fans eager to clutch the group’s drama as close to their hearts as possible, the Smiths—the iconic, 80s jangly indie-rock group that reigned supreme as the spotty, angst-ridden, back-bedroom touchstone of a generation—are finally the subject of a magnificent, career-spanning retrospective box set that’s among the most-sought-after collector pieces of the year.

Contained in a 20" x 13" x 2" box replete with a hinged opening and magnetically sealed lid, *Complete (Deluxe Boxset)* documents every professionally recorded note of the band’s tenure via eight vinyl LPs, eight CDs, and 25 7" singles. The CDs and the vinyl duplicate the content—four studio albums (*The Smiths* (1984), *Meat Is Murder* (1985), *The Queen Is Dead* (1986), *Strangeways, Here We Come* (1987)), the live *Rank* (1988), plus the compilations *Hatful Of Hollow* (1984), *The World Won’t Listen* (1987), and *Louder Than Bombs* (1987).

Visually, a bonus DVD presents all of the band’s official videos. A large poster of the box cover art, a 12"-square booklet detailing the albums, and batch of eight, 12"-square art prints of each album’s sleeve art round out this mammoth beauty that, for those lucky enough to find a copy, will probably tip the scales as the heaviest box set they’ll ever own. More importantly, the sonics justify the expense.

Compared to the original LP pressings, improvements abound. “Reel Around The Fountain,” from the band’s debut, shows enhancements in more expansive soundstaging. Bass is stronger and more forceful, giving the track added presence; upper mids are also more focused, giving the vocals extra impact.

Comparing the box set’s vinyl with Rhino’s 2009 LP reissues proves the most intriguing study. In 2009, the vinyl was remastered from the original master tapes with the help of guitarist and co-writer Johnny Marr and London’s Metropolis Studios mastering engineer, Frank Awkright. Reportedly, duplicate vinyl is included here. However, audiophiles should be aware that this is not the case. The pressings are wholly different in terms of both aesthetics (the center labels are changed) and sonics. They sound much more confident and transparent.

Hence, “The Headmaster Ritual,” from *Meat Is Murder*, exhibits stronger bass levels and an appreciable reduction in midrange compression, reducing distortion and making Morrissey’s lyrics easier to discern. In addition, the superior soundstage gives each instrument more room to maneuver.

The CDs are somewhat disappointing. “Girlfriend In A Coma,” from *Strangeways, Here We Come*, is mastered too loudly, with compression hardening the upper mids. Digital fans would do well to seek out the original mid-80s CD issues, mastered to lower volume levels that give the ear more clarity and transparency. No matter.

*(Complete) Deluxe Boxset* is about collectability and the vinyl. It’s not only to be desired, but is an absolutely essential purchase. Grab one now: Limited to 4,000 worldwide copies, it’s already out of print in several territories. —Paul Rigby



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## Rush

The Internet is ablaze with controversy over these recent Rush remasters. Fanatical collectors insist that major differences in mastering quality exist between the original analog masters and what's presented here—specifically, music remastered in 24/96 digital and then transferred to CD. Making everything more bizarre? Each of the three *Sector* sets includes just one album (out of a total of five studio records in each box) presented on DVD-A in full, high-resolution glory.

Considering Rush fans' loyalty, and that many already have every studio effort, it would have been nice to see (even at a higher price) the entire catalog produced in high resolution. Just how many listeners will shell out approximately \$150 to acquire the three DVD-As remains to be seen.

Nonetheless, a cursory comparison to original LPs and early CD releases reveals the *Sector* volumes as consistently good—certainly better than the CDs, but not as dynamic or full of low-level information as the vinyl. Sure, books could be written regarding the minute differences between the new discs and myriad earlier versions. And only you can decide if the three high-res discs are worth each set's \$50 cost. But

considering the high percentage of awful SHM-SACDs for which I've paid that exact amount, the *Sector* series' awesome packaging and inclusion of the Mercury-era Rush catalog seems like a bonus.

Indeed, for those simply wanting the band's discography in good-sounding standing, here's an excellent way to get your full fix, and neatly boxed at that.

—Jeff Dorgay

*Sector 1, 2, and 3*  
Mercury, 6CD + DVD (ea.)



# Miriam Makeba



*The World Of Miriam Makeba*  
Speakers Corner, 180g LP

**B**y bringing popular African sounds to massive western audiences during the 60s, Miriam Makeba became the most important female vocalist to emerge from South Africa. *The World Of Miriam Makeba*, her third album, features her soon-to-be husband, Hugh Masekela, as conductor of the orchestra.

When compared to the original pressing, Speakers Corner's newly remastered version stands out for its level of stark clarity. On "Forbidden Games," a Spanish guitar line sits alongside basic percussion with a quiet precision that exudes textural details absent on the original. Such concentration on informational extraction is enhanced, via this new stereo version, by a broad-brushed soundstage that allows instruments more room to breathe. When a drum solo comes to fore on "Pole Mze," for example, it resonates with a deep, throbbing sound notable not so much for its resident power but its physical potential. The drum skin's give is readily apparent.

Vocally, Makeba is clear and concise. A slight hardening within the upper-midrange regions makes itself known but seems more a facet of the original recording. That said, Makeba's fine vocal performance might challenge brighter hi-fi rigs. Even so, the singing is more enjoyable here than on the original. And on "Umhome," the new master reveals wide, dynamic improvements with sculpted ambience that reflects the backing instrumentalists' understated albeit perceptible preparation. You can hear their careful shuffling, breathing, and adjusting.

Featuring admirable reproduction of the original packaging, Speakers Corner's LP is both faithfully considered and wonderfully enthralling.—*Paul Rigby*

# Where Have all the Good Stereos Gone?



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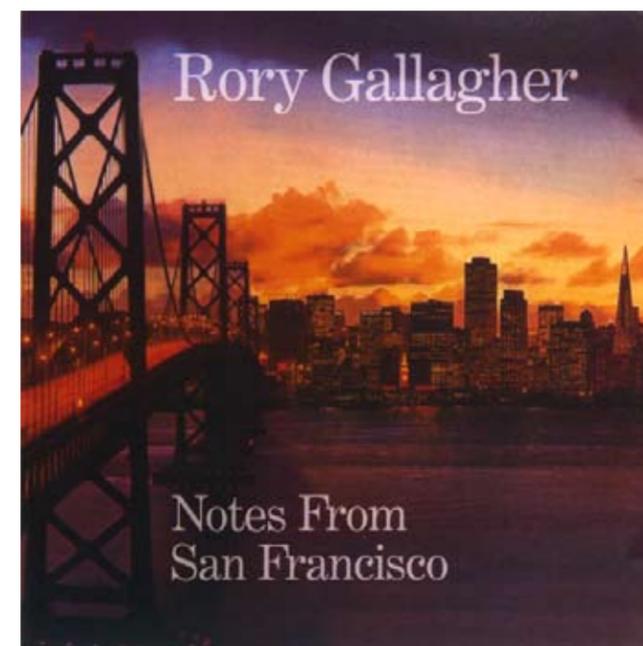
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# Rory Gallagher



*Notes From San Francisco*  
Music On Vinyl, 180g 3LP

**N**otes From San Francisco features a previously unreleased, decades-shelved 1978 studio album as well as a newly unearthed 1979 live set. Music On Vinyl's gatefold 3LP edition also features a 36-page booklet plus a download coupon for the Osaka Jam Sessions and bonus tracks.

How does it fare when compared to the digital editions?

The studio effort offers surprising bass strength and punch, competing well with the CD issue. On "Rue The Day," the LP's inherent analog filtering provides a more organic presentation, giving the drums that desirable "dead skin" tone. Soundstaging is also more alive on LP, yielding greater presence and depth. Dynamically, the album is not the most exciting on either format, as it lacks the impact that careful studio engineering can provide. Instead, you get more of an authentic live sound (and this is the studio album, mind you).

This collection's archival nature is made evident by the original master's unevenness, distinctly revealed on "B Girl," which sounds far dynamically superior to previous tracks on the same album—and also possesses an open, airy upper midrange. This stark difference, plainly heard on the vinyl version, is not as blatant on the digital edition, confirming the LP's extra transparency.

Recorded at a higher volume that doesn't help the dynamics, the live portion of the set showcases an intense sound that struggles to maintain its structure on CD format. Although the mic'ing is a touch eccentric, this is a live album that, on the vinyl version, teems with vibrant energy, passion, and gut-driven rock. Basically, a typically great Rory Gallagher gig, then.—**Paul Rigby**

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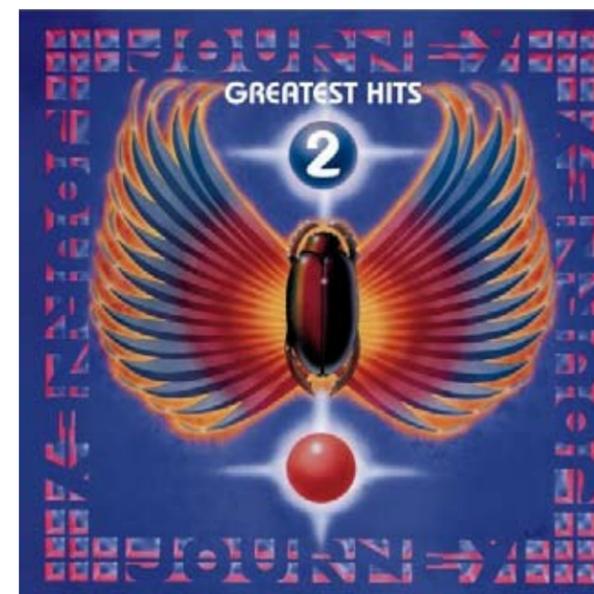


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# Journey



Greatest Hits, Vol. 1 and 2  
Sony/Legacy, 180g 2LP (each)

If Journey is at best a guilty pleasure, or perhaps a bit of reliving part of your youth during a time when you had just as much hair as these guys did (hopefully you left your shirt buttoned), and your favorite Journey albums are worn and weathered, you might consider this pair of greatest hits collections.

However, if you are a Journey fan looking for remastered treasure that sounds better than the band's original LPs, forget these newly issued editions. These LPs are terribly harsh and compressed. Using a Linn LP-12/ Shure V15 combo tends to forgive such sonic sins, but not enough to make these LPs palatable. It's too bad.

That said, the studio albums from which the songs on these two collections are taken can be picked up at used bins for between \$2-\$5 a shot. Go that route. Look for low-stamper copies first, and enjoy one of arena rock's most successful bands as originally captured. —**Jeff Dorgay**

# Going Global

## The Year in Jazz 2011

Oh, Montreal. We expanded our jazz coverage in 2011 by venturing to the Festival International de Jazz de Montreal and being blown away by the organization, options, and accommodations. And then there were records by the likes of Keith Jarrett, Bill Frisell, and other movers and shakers. Whew!



# Bon Spectacle

## Montreal International Jazz Festival 2011

By Bob Gendron Photos by Jeff Dorgay



**E**ncompassing nine days, 1000 performances, several city blocks, multiple stages, nearby local venues, and an offshoot guitar festival, the Montreal International Jazz Festival justifiably lays claim to its title as the world's biggest celebration of its kind. But with music and, especially, concerts, bigger isn't often better. Sprawl normally translates into concertgoers being disconnected from the artists. Substantial size doesn't guarantee high standards or discerning focus. And too often, large festivals devolve into social mixers—fetes at which people congregate more for the sake of drinking, meeting, and talking than for the music at hand.

Yet the 32nd annual Montreal affair subverted convention and functioned as a model that all other events should heed. Not only is it officially the biggest, but the Quebec-based jazz festival is the best of its sort—and, as far as large-scale music events go, might be the best festival, regardless of genre, in North America. The logistics, accessibility, spirit, diversity, and entertainment offered greatly surpassed those of their North American counterparts—and even outpaced Montreux, Montreal's closest jazz-based competitor. Having attended and reported on numerous destination festivals over the past decade, I've seldom seen so many aspects of an event handled so well.

### European-Style Atmosphere and Innovative Planning

Most festivals subscribe to one of two admission methods, free or pay. At Montreal, organizers follow a novel approach that combines the two tactics. Entrance to the festival grounds and upwards of 750 outdoor performances costs nothing. A handful of small-to-large stages hosts music that, on certain days, begins as early as noon. Two massive block parties bookended the kickoff and conclusion.

Of course, a lack of major talent has of late become synonymous with a majority of free festivals. Facing budget cuts and scaled-back resources, cities have pared both quality and duration. Chicago's proud Blues and Jazz Festivals are now each shorter by one day. Similarly, many of the city's other smaller weekend musical celebrations have been folded into single-day events. Absent the ability to charge fees, programmers are left with little choice other than to book lesser acts.

Montreal evaded these common problems. On any given evening, listeners could find at least one noteworthy band to hear without having to pay a dime. Weekday afternoon options were understandably more limited. Still, it's hard to complain about sitting and watching, before the workday technically ends, an international array of performers—artists such as L'Esprit de la Nouvelle-Orleans and the Edmonton-based Don Berner Sextet—that soared above the state-fair caliber of what's currently presented at so many US fests. Moreover, the welcoming atmosphere and smart layout encouraged relaxing, strolling, browsing, and yes, listening.

On the grounds, a miasma of makeshift bistros, shops, seating areas, bars, and tents were at one's disposal. Child-friendly diversions, ranging from sandboxes to inflatable obstacle courses, helped give the scene a truly all-inclusive vibe. The geographic location—it's built around Montreal's exceptional Place des Arts complex of performance theaters and rehearsal halls, an expanse that's also outfitted with a terraced esplanade and metro stop—could easily be reached by foot or public transportation.



Conveniently, a number of intimate clubs were adjacent to the premises. Such advantages allow for the existence of a ticket-based system for indoor shows.

Announced more than month in advance of the festival, concerts held in standalone venues such as L'Astral frequently featured the biggest names. Prices depend on the performer and venue. In theory, attendees can mix and match—watch free music during the afternoon and hit up the fee-structured shows in the evening. Visitors that don't have the luxury of staying for all nine days are likely to base their trip around their favorite headlining attractions, which this year included Dave Holland, Marc Ribot, Brad Mehldau, Dave Brubeck, Bela Fleck, Keren Ann, Milton Nascimento, and Diana Krall as well as several pop, rock, world, and hop-hop artists (Marianne Faithfull, the Roots) with strong jazz influences.

But New Orleans Jazz Fest this was not. Montreal takes the "Jazz" portion of its festival moniker seriously, and thankfully, leaves crowd-drawing albeit middling fare such as Bon Jovi to the Crescent City's increasingly non-jazz soiree. Such emphasis bestowed Montreal's event with a distinctive flavor and consistency that staved off the homogeneity present at other events sacrificing their core identity in the name of popular appeal. The latter strategy may prove commercially beneficial in the short term, yet over time, character and reputation erode, and what remains looks as if it could take place in any other city.

### Animation Musicale

Embodying the festival's diversity, guitarist Marc Ribot played three shows with three separate ensembles, each yielding entirely different flavors and programs. With the impressive Ceramic Dog, he paired with self-taught bassist Shahzad Ismaily and drummer Ches Smith—musicians who, akin to the trio's leader, are prized for their extreme versatility and collaborative ease. Between Ribot, Ismaily, and Smith, lines can be drawn to a truly astonishing array of movers and shakers: Tom Waits, Bonnie Prince Billy, Laurie Anderson, Elvis Costello, Mr. Bungle, Marianne Faithfull, Robert Plant, McCoy Tyner, and John Zorn among them. *(continued)*



Fittingly, New York underground pioneer Zorn's free-form spirit hovered over the threesome's set. Comfortably seated, with a balding patch on the back of his head indicating his seniority, Ribot began by channeling loose Spaghetti Western and country-and-western themes. Desert noir with a sense of humor, the opening sequences pounced and curved, bending into odd shapes when Ribot fired off animated notes that, akin to the doodles on a free-hand sketch, squiggled off the page. As much as any aspect, alinearity guided Ceramic Dog, eagerly embracing the liberty such risk-taking afforded.

Subscribing to a punk aesthetic that sonically manifested

via clattering feedback, amplifier hum, and mind-melting keyboard emissions, Ceramic Dog abandoned rules, establishing an unwritten credo that demanded that an artist should do what it wants independent of convention or opinion. Approaching its improvisational tasks with the utmost concentration and comfort, Ribot and Co. repeatedly challenged the audience, time-shifting signatures while diving in and out of sudden chaos, using only Ismaili's sturdy stand-up bass as its navigational compass. The trio beat funky grooves into malleable forms and filtered looped effects through percussive contours, occasionally conjuring the sensation of water bubbles emanating from the mouth of a fish.

Mood and style aside, if a piece's textures could be manipulated, Ceramic Dog jumped at the chance. Prickly surf-rock, strolling blues, aluminum-clad post-punk, provocative skronk, ghostly meditations, machine-gunned post-bop—even a radical interpretation of Dave Brubeck's "Take Five" and equally imaginative poke at Jimi Hendrix's "The Wind Cried Mary"—remained vulnerable to collapse, reassembly, and repurposing. Practicing an all-for-one, one-for-all strategy, each of the instrumentalists showed how sound poetry can be both noisy and quiet, and that, despite its century-old history, jazz has barely begun to explore what lies beneath its roots.

An impromptu street performance that occurred on the festival grounds, but which wasn't listed in any guide, shared Ceramic Dog's adventurous and youthful mindset. The participatory affair also extrapolated the event's communal atmosphere. Set up on a sidewalk in front of a church, and absent any signage or calls for money, a nameless D.I.Y. trio demonstrated that mechanical bicycle parts can make for an accessible albeit inventive homegrown presentation that the likes of Sonic Youth and Flaming Lips would admire.

With a bike wheel mounted to a tree branch, metal contraptions affixed to wooden percussive devices, and an assortment of bike chains, wheels, and spokes propped up on cinder blocks, the intrepid threesome mirrored the pitter-patter of a drum roll, drone of an effects pedal, and rattle of cymbals. Handed out to kids and adults in the crowd, shells, horns, and tambourines complemented the musicians' clarinet- and cello-driven fare. Ready for the big time? No, but the Suessian cacophony hinted at issues more important than commercial success and widespread fame. Namely, it captured the feeling of ingenuity, advanced the thrill of astonishment, and indirectly promoted an unhurried pace, factors too often squashed in conventional circles. *(continued)*



Unexpected treats also came courtesy of Group Doueh, a family-based Western Sahara band versed in Arabic prose, Muslim faith, and beautifully exotic trance that merged Western rock with traditional Saharoui rhythm, chant, and blues. Plugging a tinidit (a high-pitched three-string lute) through a Marshall amplifier, leader Doueh visually bridged the ancient and the modern while the band did the rest of the heavy lifting. Adorned in colorful garb and head wraps, the collective pushed songs forward with low-frequency waves, syncopated grooves, and call-and-response hollers.

The hybrid concoctions spanned Morocco to Mauritania, stopping at all points in between, and reflecting both Indian and American cadences. When Doueh switched over to the electric guitar, prompting the thrump of looped hand drums to increase in intensity, the band's modal phrasing turned into slow-build hypnotism of epic proportions—joyful declarations steeped in spirituality, psychedelics, and sincerity. As the most engaging world music often does, Group Doueh served as a reminder that, for all the (unfounded) hand wringing over the alleged lack of resourcefulness in modern rock and pop, the problem isn't that there's a shortage of enticing music—it's that there's not enough time to listen to all the intriguing global sounds most have yet to discover.



### Trois Continents, Trois Géants

Milton Nascimento's health and physique have seen better days. The 68-year-old Brazilian singer-songwriter moved extremely slowly, his head seemingly willing his body in the direction he wanted to travel, and his stiffness requiring an assistant to come out and strap a guitar on him or take one away. Despite having clearly regressed on the six-stringed instrument he once commanded, there was little wrong with his voice. Backed by a four-piece band and standing before a table holding glasses of wine and water, Nascimento charmed a capacity crowd with a calming range of Brazilian pop, tropicalia, and balladry despite announcing that he was battling throat problems.

Suited for the theater's formal confines and pin-drop acoustics, Nascimento exhausted a laidback arsenal in which pitch, control, volume, phrasing, polyrhythm, and timbre rendered arrangements almost meaningless. Wearing dark sunglasses, the vocalist converted breezy melodies and pensive hymns into romantic birdsongs. He scatted, emoted, whistled, and fluttered, but mostly, he crooned, teasing out syllables in his Portuguese tongue with the finesse that a sous chef would utilize to prepare a fine wine reduction sauce. Effortlessly natural and gracefully elegant, Nascimento offered grand gestures on a micro scale, with bossa nova patterns weaved within Latin-influenced folk tapestries stitched with rich acoustic textures. *(continued)*



If anything, Nascimento would've benefited from allowing the support quartet additional room to roam, and mixing in a few more uptempo salsa numbers alongside ballads such as "E a Gente Sonhando." But if the appearance constituted his farewell to the festival—he hadn't appeared since 1996—it left a definite imprint, one that has more to do with warm memories than newfound vitality.

Three years Nascimento's senior, Hugh Masekela could've passed for a man in his 50s—not one who is in his 70s. "Why are you so giddy?" he quizzed the crowd. As if he needed to ask. Swiveling his hips, crab-walking across the stage, and executing squat exercises that would make an NFL offensive lineman blush with jealousy, Masekela brimmed with contagious joy and charismatic enthusiasm. While the statement about music being a universal language is unavoidably cliché, it's nonetheless true, and for nobody more so than the South African native. While primarily delivered in African dialect, Masekela's words required no translation, as messages of overcoming sorrow, conflict, and repression exploded via a vivacious array of Afro-pop, mbaqanga, reggae, funk, and soul jazz.

Cowbells, handclaps, shakers, guiros, steel drums, and other noisemakers established dance-friendly percussive frameworks over which Masekela unfurled scurrying trumpet fills. The latter's ribbon-like construction allowed them to stream around (rather than through) the arrangements, as if bows wrapped around a package. When he didn't go toe-to-toe with one of the musicians in his band or strike bow-legged poses, *(continued)*





Masekela approached the microphone, filling the Club Soda's cozy environment with a distinctive vocal timbre etched with throaty grit and soaked in Caribbean rum. A man of seemingly 100 voices, the septuagenarian exuded tremendous poise, intimating sensuality on "Lady" and turning slinkier on material that demanded action.

Masekela's arresting rendition of "Stimela (The Coal Train)" found him filling in crevasses with wordless trilling, chanting, and intoning. He loudly inhaled and exhaled to replicate the chugging of a locomotive engine, whistled to mimic the shrill blast of a shrieking train horn, and duplicated the ominous clickety-clack of an approaching iron horse. A fiercely struck cowbell doubled as the scrape of a metal shovel hitting hard rocks in a mine. Simultaneously inspiring and haunting, his narrative of slavery and oppression gave way to salvation conjured by coiled horn solos. Akin to the frontman, the spiritually penitent passages balanced regrettable lament with eternal hope.

Sayyd Abdul Al-Khabyyr isn't a household name. But the saxophonist, who played with the likes of Dizzy Gillespie and Illinois Jacquet, is a cult hero in Canada. He's also father-in-law to Kenny Garrett and parent of drummer Nasyr Abdul Al-Khabyyr and trombonist Muhammad Abdul Al-Khabyyr, all three of which helped comprise Time Capsule, a sextet that paid tribute to the Montreal great with a set steeped in straight-ahead bebop and hard bop. At its peak, the collective sounded the way it feels to look through a prism, with notes entering the  $\frac{3}{4}$ -time fray as a whole before later emerging as twisted, stretched, or resized fractals.



Garrett played for slightly more than half of the show and, as expected, inspired the band to new heights whenever he stepped onstage. Adorned in a black skullcap and debonair suit, he attacked his saxophone with the pronounced motion of a bird sipping water from a feeder. His torso bobbed up and down as his aggressive flights conjoined with Muhammad Abdul Al-Khabyyr's muscular releases, forming a sonic diptych. Garrett alternated between violating and adhering to established

parameters, shading sonorous melodies and chasing darker-hued complexities amidst broad canvases.

Assertive without being overbearing, the leather-lunged Coltrane disciple established continuous dialogs with his mates, knowing when to pull back just before the moment that the spooling interplay threatened to lose sight of the main theme. Garrett's impeccable sense of exit—and his boomeranging retrieval of common motifs—caused fresh grooves

and spry pacing to bloom. Abdul Al-Khabyyr's sons held their own, yet Time Capsule became a lesser unit when deprived of Garrett's presence. For instance, a pensive reading on James Blunt's adult-contemporary hit "You're Beautiful" bettered the drippy original but appeared out of place and an unnecessarily schmaltzy excursion. The band should've also retired after the viewing of a tribute video to and touching appearance by the elder Sayyd Abdul Al-Khabyyr, in ailing health. *(continued)*

FESTIVAL



**No Ticket Required**

While the ticketed shows often touted the star factor, the public performances claimed a more colloquial accent. Hailing from France, Les Doigts de L'Homme made a convincing case for a revival of gypsy jazz. Tapping into the spirit and legacy of Django Reinhardt, the quartet unleashed a fervent geyser of swing-, shuffle-, and jig-based pieces, frequently performing at such a rapid tempo that the members' fingers became a peachy blur. The group's fluency, flair, and proficiency were as impressive as the

nimble details that emerged within the all-instrumental songs. Adroit touches abounded.

Low frequencies of a bowed bass contrasted the friskier, airier qualities of the woody guitars. Bluegrass twang and Spanish classical lines crept in amidst a surfeit of fleet-footed grooves. Natural harmonic stops allowed the music to catch its breath. And the group's chemistry imparted a narrative ability that, on sympathetic numbers, communicated a romantic sadness.

Soul Rebels Brass Band elicited no such melancholy. Simple yet effective, the New Orleans septet remained true to its name, throwing down funk, hard bop, and reggae-splashed rock centered around big, boldly flavored brass foundations. Spurring spontaneous dancing, the ensemble's irresistible sway, durable marches, and Louisiana-fired verve put a spin on Funkadelic's old mantra of free your mind and your ass will follow. The updated command? Move your limbs and your troubles will disappear. *(continued)*

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The most riveting example of the Crescent City's expansive reach and cross-cultural mélange arrived via Galactic. A jam band by trade, the collective never drifted into *ennuyeux* territories or pointlessly wandered off for the selfish sake of exhibiting any individualistic skill. Rather, the heat-searing organs, traded-off verses, wah-wah guitars, and creeping Rhodes pianos coalesced into a cohesive entity, the blend of hip-hop, funk, pop, and post-bop rolling, bouncing, and chortling to wondrous effect. Galactic also carried an ace up its ruffled

sleeve: Former Living Colour vocalist Corey Glover.

Sporting a sweater vest and pork-pie hat, Glover bore little resemblance to the singer that, in the late 1980s, rocked out bright Body Glove spandex and long dreadlocks. But his voice remains as potent as ever. Whether a temporary or permanent addition, Galactic has stumbled upon a performer that ideally complements its fluctuating sonic potpourri, the singer matching the high-energy state of its horn-driven fusion. Glover erupted during a jumpy, harmonica-drenched take on Led Zeppelin's "How

Many More Times" and inhabited a cover of Allen Toussaint's "Going Down Slowly" as the band freely indulged in brassy blowouts and sassy tangents.

Already armed with formidable Mardi Gras party-starting potential, the R&B gained a leading edge it heretofore lacked, as Glover's strong pipes and effervescent falsetto carried an interpretation of the Lee Dorsey/Toussaint gem "Night People" later into a weekday evening that, refreshingly, witnessed thousands of people ogling the proceedings as if it was Saturday night. What a bonus. *(continued)*



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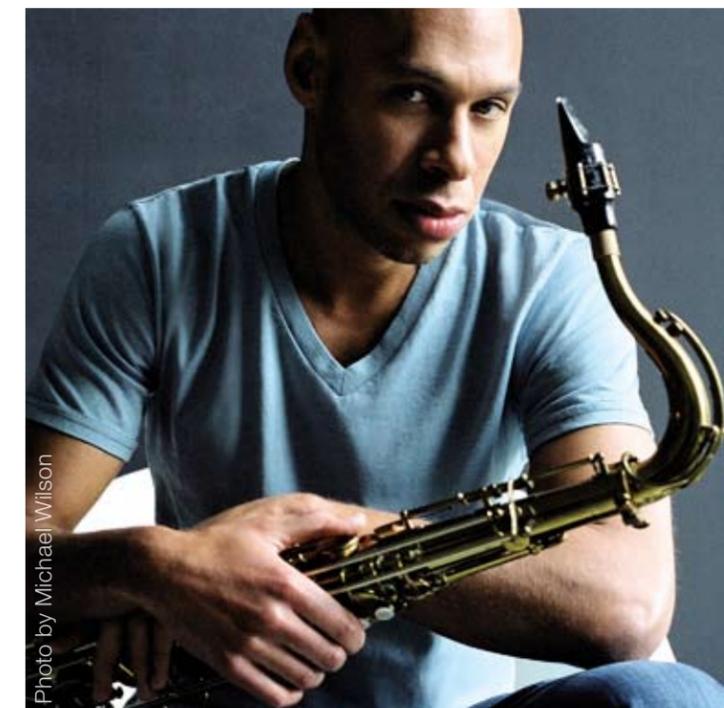


#### Lessons in Musicology

Brad Mehldau and Joshua Redman's artistic relationship stretches back nearly two decades and includes several recordings, and while an established history never guarantees against the possibility of an off-night or uninspired collaboration, the pairing of the pianist and saxophonist/clarinetist ranked among the festival's most highly anticipated shows. By the time the friends left their mark onstage, the sold-out event also rated as one of the soiree's finest moments.

Proving the ultimate accompanist, the photo-phobic Mehldau deftly slipped into the background when Redman sought to surface, altering keystrokes and the intensity of his finger movements as to delicately cleave chords in halves, thirds, and quarters. What transpired often resembled cigarette smoke, the music wafting into the air as puffs, wisps, clouds, and trails. Mehldau's hands conducted a private symphony—his left digits bolstering rhythms as his right roamed the grand's black-and-white nexus of keys, the angularity of his seated position a metaphor for the manner

in which the sonic contours visibly vibrated through his shoulders, wrists, neck, and elbows. There would be no ignoring the fine symmetry, or he and Redman's pointillism. No small features, miniature gestures, or microdynamics were overlooked. *(continued)*



On politely mannered, classically informed pieces, the duo's balladic agility and indefatigable elegance spoke of emotional drama and unseen fractures—regret and sorrow pouring from pindrop-quiet soliloquies and ornate sequences that settled like raindrops on a stained-glass window. A patient and sympathetic foil, Redman waited for his partner to develop a languid theme, then gracefully streaked woodwind entrails over the melody, the sweetened contrapuntal communication murmuring the language of an exotic tone poem. Not that the pair avoided tension.

Tandem work during a standing ovation-worthy rendition of Charlie Parker's "Cheryl" reminded fans that they were in the presence of greatness. Mehdau met Redman's rolling, bluesy, hip-checking saxophone flights with boogie-woogie and R&B inertia, the two musicians zig-zagging across an imaginary chess board, each chasing the other, each avoiding entrapment. The cat-and-mouse games appeared to unlock a youthful verve within each of the 40-something players. As the long-time colleagues toyed with friction, theory, and contrast, one got the sense that, in their minds, Mehdau and Redman were back in a rehearsal hall somewhere out east, where nobody was listening save for oblivious passersby strolling underneath an open window.

Prince abides by a similarly casual approach when staging impromptu club shows. And when the Purple One asked, just two weeks before the festival commenced, if he could zoom in for a few nights and play two nights at the 2000-capacity



Metropolis, the 2011 version of the Jazz Festival officially scored its coup. Fresh off a 21-night stand in Los Angeles, the enigmatic performer has of late experienced a live rebirth that's eluded him in the studio. Lasting more than three hours and until 3:30 in the morning, Prince's second Montreal concert added to his legend.

For the uninitiated, watching Prince hold court at one of his intimate affairs can lead to potential frustration. He's in no hurry, meaning that encores are multiple and buttressed by long breaks. And he still hasn't let go of trotting out his latest female "find" to handle several

songs—a practice that usually serves as a time filler. Both delay tactics occurred on this night. Yet the Minneapolis native's unrivaled showmanship and tireless gusto more than atoned for any inconveniences. As did the element of surprise.

Unlike his arena dates, Prince views the club gigs as gatherings at which to delve into rare material, unreleased songs, and covers. Save for "Pop Life," "Kiss," "Controversy," and the closing "Purple Rain," the entertaining multi-instrumentalist steered clear of Top 40 fare but not the braggadocio reputation it brought him. "We're going to party for three days—that's how many hits I've got.

You think I'm playin'?" he teased, a wry grin showering his face, the statement less an exaggeration and more of his way of telling everyone he was ready to meet every expectation and deliver on his genius-level talent.

Indeed, a flashy distortion-spiked solo guitar break during which he subtly quoted Motley Crue's "Dr. Feelgood" (no joke) surpassed nearly every vocal track he attempted. Throw in an atomic bass solo, complete with classic rock-star poses, percussive slap-string techniques, and acrobatic between-the-legs moves, and Prince owned Montreal. He damn well knew it. Maceo Parker

blowing hard and steady on a take of the JB's "Pass the Peas" and a sultry, breathtaking "Shhhh"? Gravy. Non-stop funk and uninhibited dance flourishes, repetitive challenges to keep up with his energy, and a Fender Telecaster guitar made to sound as if it came from another planet? Priceless.

Deviating from prearranged formulas, Prince viewed every song as an opportunity to top what had come before. You thought "Musicology" swaggered and caused hips to gyrate? Get a load of the synthesized "Freak Out." Dig the guitar sustain on "Take Me With You." Tell Janet Jackson she needs to reclaim

"What Have You Done for Me Lately?" as her own. When, after finishing tearing up Wild Cherry's "Play That Funky Music"—as fitting a theme as any for the epic concert—Prince casually tossed his Telecaster into the crowd and nonchalantly headed for stage right, it represented one of the most perfect and unflappably cool exits any artist could ever devise. Prince Rogers Nelson, your table is ready. ●



**Weasel Walter,  
Mary Halvorson, Peter Evans**  
*Electric Fruit*  
Thirsty Ear CD

Free improvisation can use a laugh now and again. Last time drummer Weasel Walter and guitarist Mary Halvorson recorded together, they called their duet disc *Opulence* and titled their squalls in a direction that celebrated the good life. “Faberge Eggs Filled With Caviar” and “A Diamond Encrusted Frisbee” were typical tracks, but by the time “Bald Eagle Tartar Washed Down With a Cup of Melted Gold” rolled around, the silliness at hand was revealed. Comprised of choppy string storms, chattering percussion tsunamis, and disorienting dissonance, the music wasn’t built for kings and queens. It did provide a nice jab in the eye for the occasional haughtiness of “art,” however.

One of the attractions of the pair’s follow-up (this time with trumpeter Peter Evans on board) is the unpretentious way it presents itself. Yes, the abstractions concocted on *Electric Fruit* have a rich atmosphere. Halvorson’s strings can be wonderfully gooey, Evans’ horn sprays can fill up plenty of space, and the Wease’s addled thumpery makes for a giddy environment. But there’s a disarming it-is-what-it-is tone to the music, and it attracts listeners to the sharp turns of the trio’s interplay. Whether whispering to each other or wailing together, these three walk the edge of a cliff so we can sit on the edge of our seats.

The landscape is always in flux. The drummer has a yen for death metal, so aggression is part of the pallet. The trumpeter is expert at post-bop filigree, so fanfare is in the mix as well.

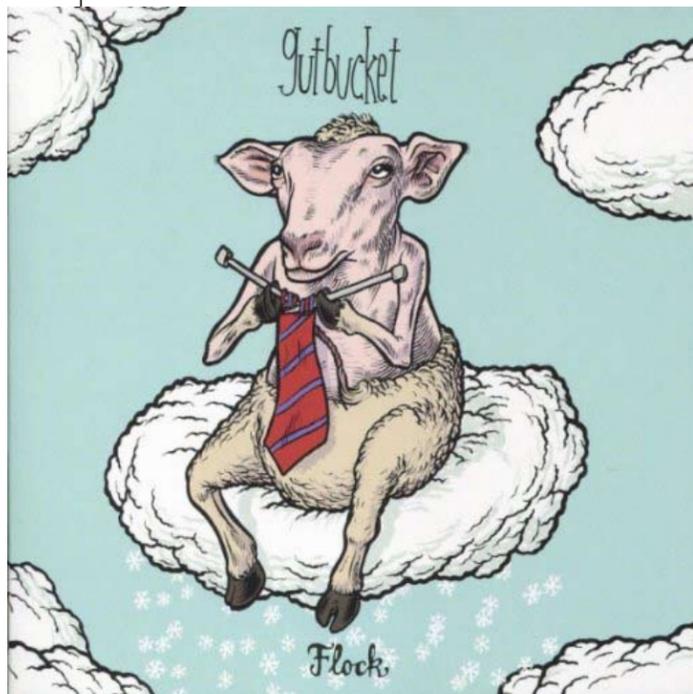
Halvorson, whose comparatively straight *Saturn Sings* was applauded by myriad jazz critics last year, roams her instrument’s neck, generating a parade of textures; psychedelic fuzz might be followed by the gentlest of plinks. “The Stench of Cyber-Durian” puts all of the above to use, and like “Scuppernong Malfunction,” it serves as a reminder that, in this progressive program, all the action takes place in the synapses. Let’s hear it for kinetics. —**Jim Macnie**

No one turns to prog or thrash in search of grace. When you enter such waters, sharp time signatures and fractured melodies look you dead in the eye, and those who find themselves splashing around without a clue are going to be very tired quite soon. From the thrust of Emerson, Lake & Palmer's *Tarkus* to the storm of Prong's "Who's Fist Is This, Anyway," the experience can often be wearying.

Gutbucket works the prog-jazz side of the tracks, and on its pointedly aggressive fifth album, a blend of intricacy and fierceness carries the day. The New York improvisational quartet puts Ken Thomson's reeds up front with Ty Citerman's guitar, their one-two punch offering a wildly clever blend of sounds that crafts a tune's personality. The choppy nature of the pieces, combined with the precision of the group's interplay, makes for a dizzying program. From the math-rock balderdash of "4 9 8" to the rat-a-tat exclamations of "Said The Trapeze to Gravity (Why Are You So Old)," Gutbucket may have mastered the art of overwhelming listeners.

There are dreamy moments on *Flock*, but even they have a vicious side. The droning lines of "Dog Help Us" offer a respite from the onslaught of jagged rhythms that begin the disc, yet an ominous tone persists. "Tryst 'n Shout" is more genial; a sideways groove is established, some Reichian repetition is nurtured, and keen propulsion is its own reward. Ultimately, these songs are well-positioned respites from the four-alarm blend of *Crimson & Curlew* at which this outfit has become quite expert.

—**Jim Macnie**



**Gutbucket**  
*Flock*  
Cuneiform CD

It takes a jazz improviser time to develop a personal sound on an instrument, so it's rather remarkable that Noah Preminger has made such quick advances in the singularity department. The 24-year-old tenor saxophonist is ubiquitous on the New York scene these days, and the plush lines that he pushes into action on his sophomore disc are filled with the kind of inviting tone that would seem to come from an old soul; 72-yr-old Charles Lloyd's current string of ECM titles offer something similar.

Utterly aerated, the initial horn sounds on *Before The Rain* arise as little puffs of smoke on the Rodgers & Hart nugget "Where Or When." As they glide by, they become more enticing. Which is to say: Preminger has quite a way with mood. To some degree, it stems from having the guts to leave plenty of negative space in a performance. That can be frightening for any horn player, as the particulars of all the foreground action become so crucial. But from pianist Frank Kimbrough's "November" to the leader's own "Jamie," a sense of daring enhances the bittersweet vibe floating through the program.

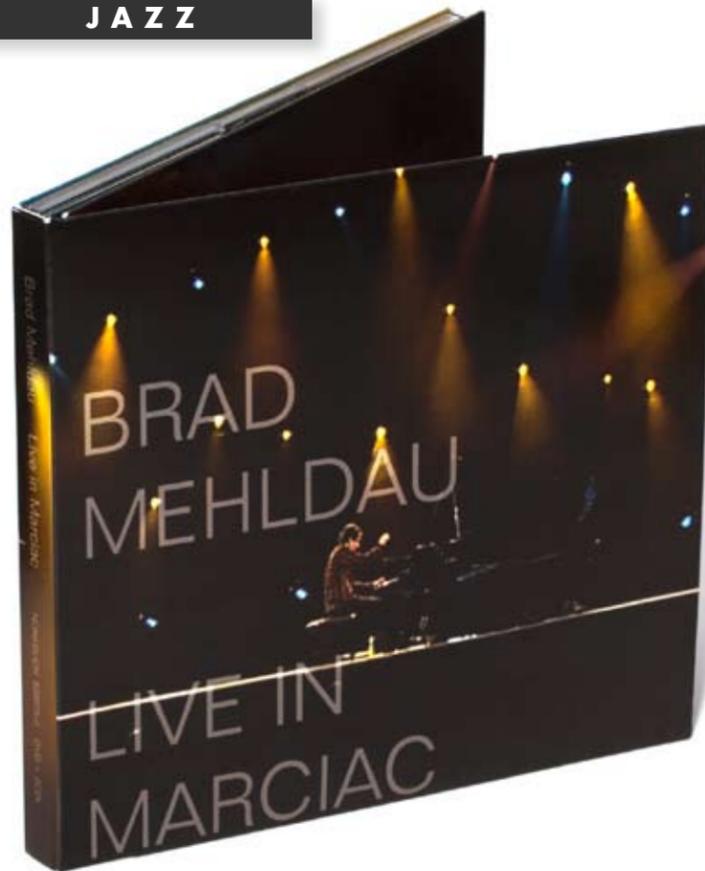
The stately attack stays in place even when things get a bit feisty. The quartet's romp through Ornette Coleman's "Toy Dance" bubbles over with playfulness,



**Noah Preminger**  
*Before The Rain*  
Palmetto CD

but Preminger keeps the squalls on the melodic side. Bassist John Hébert and drummer Matt Wilson know all about such decisions, so the turbulence has a keen balance. Something similar happens in the loopy contours of "Quickening," the best homage to Keith Jarrett's American Quartet I've ever heard. As Preminger flits around, the calm of his approach blends with Kimbrough's gnarled theme just enough to become one of the disc's most beguiling pieces. Ditto for the relaxed romance of "Until the Real Thing Comes Along," which feels like a confession of sorts. The real thing has arrived.

—**Jim Macnie**


**Brad Mehldau**

*Live In Marciac*  
Nonesuch, 2CD + DVD set

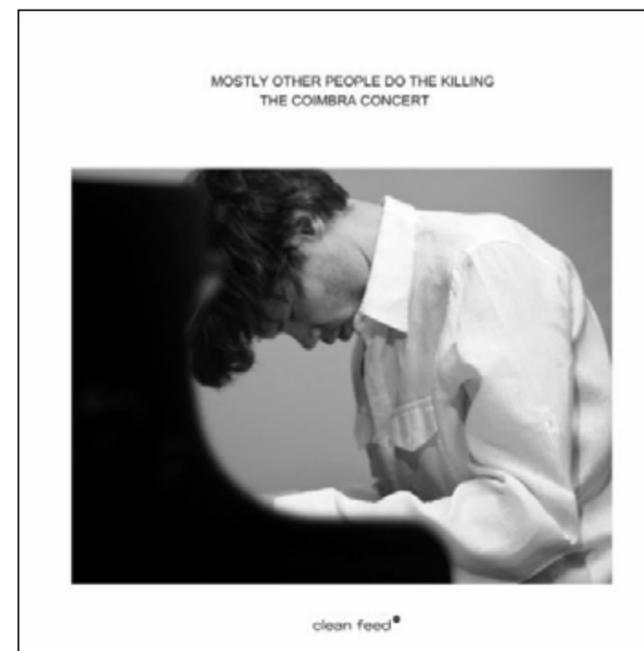
**B**rad Mehldau built his sizable rep on a series of trio records, each dedicated to revealing the depth of his imagination, and each enjoyable thanks to the deep interplay the pianist nurtures from his colleagues. But with the arrival of his third solo disc, Mehldau may be making a case for himself as a guy who can get the job done on his own.

The dramatic “interplay” between his hands on *Live In Marciac* is often gripping. This is a recital that steadily veers off to a number of intriguing destinations, from ancient romance tunes like “Secret Love” to modern pop trinkets like Nirvana’s “Lithium.” With each theme that ripples by, Mehldau proves extremely resourceful.

Better still on this double-disc set recorded live at the famed French jazz festival, the pianist captures a performance that gracefully crushes a longstanding stylistic bugaboo: his predilection for waxing melodramatic. Ruminations are expected in solo piano dates—the 40-year-old has brought lots of eloquence to ennui—but there have been times when he has milked its accompanying sentiment. *Live In Marciac* is more propulsive than his previous recitals. And that’s a good thing.

Radiohead’s “Exit Music (For A Film)” is driven by a nervous staccato pulse that almost sends it into Steve Reich territory. “Lithium” has a bouncy joy. Mehldau chooses such covers for their beauty, but he also enjoys transforming them. Blink and you might miss the moment “Martha, My Dear” becomes a jittery minuet. Such transitions are fascinating to behold while watching the accompanying DVD. The craft of his keyboard action is daunting; no wonder he’s celebrated as a young master. But it’s the extra aggression that serves this music best. A little feistiness in place of the angst goes a long way.

—**Jim Macnie**


**Mostly Other People Do The Killing**

*The Coimbra Concert*  
Clean Feed, 2CD

**N**o way around it. Emotional ardor and intellectual acuity often bring an earnest vibe to jazz, so those who offer a comparatively lighthearted stance have a good chance of standing out. From Louis Armstrong’s glee to Han Bennink’s shenanigans, a bit of levity has long had a way of wooing an audience.

Mostly Other People Do The Killing, a New York quartet of deeply skilled improvisers, likes to play the wiseacre card. The covers of the band’s first three discs are designed to meticulously ape a classic jazz album (my fave finds the ensemble saluting

Roy Haynes’ *Out Of The Afternoon*, fake mustaches and all), and its ram-bunctious freebop is built on a manic esprit that’s proud of its entertainment skills. The group’s fourth disc, a two-CD set recorded live in Brazil, teems with the kind of wit that enhances its signature experimentalism; the record is both cagey and cavalier.

Trumpeter Peter Evans, saxophonist Jon Irabagon, drummer Kevin Shea, and drummer-composer Moppa Elliott have been together long enough to let swagger represent their cohesion. *The Coimbra Concert*, which captures them at their high-flying best, conjures the eruptions of Charles Mingus, humor of Raymond Scott, and of boisterous beauty of the Art Ensemble, ably placing them in a deeply creative continuum. The exclamations of “Burning Well” and “Factoryville” are bound by a loose-limbed swing that willingly trades grace for groove, and “Round Bottom, Square Top” makes a case for frenzy being a crucial jazz element. On this album, every time the racket starts, it’s in the service of an irresistible ditty with a silly side.

*The Coimbra Concert* album cover sticks out its tongue at Keith Jarrett’s *The Koln Concert*—a wealth of deep thoughts that finds the pianist judiciously gauging each note. MOPDTK has a blast plopping a cream pie in the face of such sobriety, romping through its show with an agitated informality. At some points, you can almost hear the audience chuckling through the clamor.

—**Jim Macnie**



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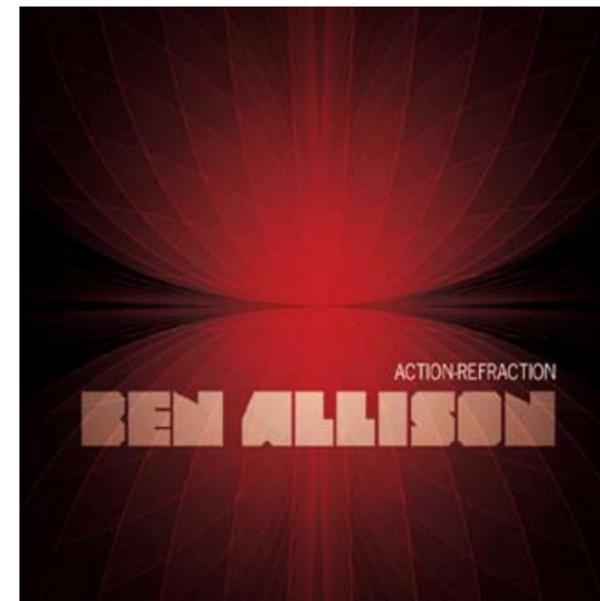
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From Bjork to Black Sabbath, an array of pop artists have had their tunes updated by clever jazz acts over the past few years. The strategy often provides a refreshing twist while occasionally tilting towards novelty. Except for a pair of John Lennon pieces, Ben Allison has dodged this tack. After eight albums of original tunesmithing, he’s known as much as a composer as he is a bassist. But his latest disc makes hay with six covers that ably illustrate the depth of his imagination.



**Ben Allison**  
*Action-Refraction*  
Palmetto, CD or LP

Leading a quintet he deems “an electro-acoustic orchestra,” Allison definitely fulfills the “refraction” part of the album title.

It’s not only pop that gets re-spun. The record begins with Thelonious Monk’s “Jackie-ing,” and includes Samuel Barber’s “St Ita’s Vision.” Both are bent to accommodate episodes of interplay. The former trades Monk’s esprit for something a tad more sober (you can thank Michael Blake’s bass clarinet), and the latter opens up to give Jason Lindner’s synth a chance to squiggle a bit. Each sets a reflective mood. By comparison, a rendition of PJ Harvey’s “Missed” sounds like a jukebox hit. A grinding guitar riff, a thud of drums, and the quintet finds itself snaking down a dark alleyway.

More impressionistic are Donny Hathaway’s “Some Day We’ll All Be Free,” which chugs through a sweet R&B groove and invites fractious background fuzz to the party, and Neil Young’s “Philadelphia,” which waxes forlorn yet finds guitarist Steve Cardenas plucking pretty. But perhaps it’s the Carpenters’ “We Only Just Begun” that boasts the most creative arrangement. An itchy pulse rubs up against a languid melody and *voilà!*, the schmaltz is now sophisticated—not unlike like what Cassandra Wilson did with “Last Train To Clarksville.” It’s this kind of ingenious magic that might make fans beg for *Action-Refraction, Vol 2.* —**Jim Macnie**

Seems like piano/sax duets offer lots of elbowroom. In the large, each participant has leeway when it comes to bending a melody or messing with a tempo. Indeed, it was an extended *pas de deux* from Cecil Taylor and Jimmy Lyons that helped cement my love of jazz decades ago, and from the Steve Lacy/Mal Waldron exchanges to the Archie Shepp/Horace Parlan outings, I've been a fan of the keys and reeds setting ever since. Two new titles present their participants in a similar environment.



**Darius Jones & Matthew Shipp**

*Cosmic Lieder*  
AUM Fidelity, CD



**Branford Marsalis & Joey Calderazzo**

*Songs of Mirth & Melancholy*  
Marsalis Music, CD

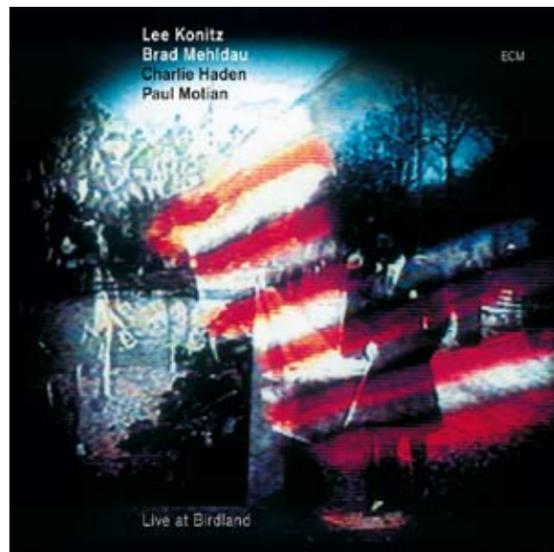


On *Cosmic Lieder*, Darius Jones and Matthew Shipp are responsible for an ominous beauty. The session slithers through mysterious waters and always leads somewhere powerful. Saxophonist Jones has a sweet 'n' sour tone that bends in surprising ways. A sense of foreboding marks "Zillo Valla," but the horn player's pliant pitch—on eerie long tones and jagged roars—is a siren song that can't be rebuffed. Shipp's dark lyricism, especially potent here, fits nicely into such forays. On "Overvoid" he makes a string of choppy passages seem like one continuous thought.

Branford Marsalis and Joey Calderazzo have no trouble with rapport, either. The pianist has been part of his pal's quartet for years, and their hook-up is deep. The title of this fresh outing describes the program's duality of moods, and compared to the Jones/Shipp date, it arrives with smile on its face. But a sober atmosphere wafts through the music as well.

Marsalis has been shedding on classical music for decades now, and the poise and grandeur associated with that realm shows up here. "The Bard Lachrymose" is a curiously intimate lament—oversized emotions wisely played small. "Bri's Dance" bounces gracefully, full of animation albeit guided by the responsibilities of partnership. Calderazzo's left hand is a fistful of forward motion and drives the romp with that key element of such duets: daring.

—*Jim Macnie*

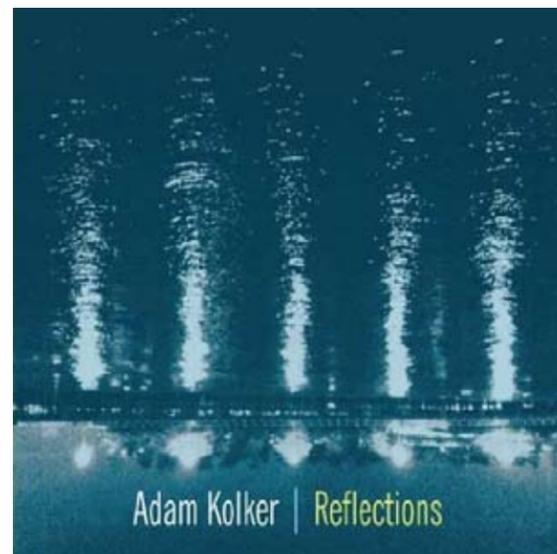

**Konitz/Mehldau/Haden/Motian**

*Live at Birdland*  
ECM, CD

Sometimes the measured approach is the exciting approach. When jazz elders Lee Konitz, Charlie Haden, and Paul Motian connected with 40-year-old pianist Brad Mehldau for several sets of clever improv at Manhattan's Birdland in the winter of 2009, no exclamation came from the bandstand. Rather, the collective's ardor was closer in temperament to the kind you'd find in a chess game. Like the Modern Jazz Quartet, the group's actions were refined, but its art gripping.

At least that's how it sounds on this new disc, which finds the quartet steadily mulling over its options before making deliberate moves that weave in and out of each member's spheres. A spray of cymbal taps by Motian triggers a rumble from the bottom of Mehldau's piano. The pulsed thumping of Haden's bass spurs a flurry of sideways notes from Konitz's horn. Thematic chestnuts like "Solar" and "Oleo" become secondary to the extrapolations that the unit steers collectively. On "Lullaby of Birdland," the melody barely gets a mention; the masters harvest its DNA for alternate purposes.

Indeed, a few moments prompt a head-scratch or two, with the listener asking: "I thought I knew what tune this is, but now I'm not so sure." For the most part, that's a good thing. The music is perpetually morphing, and its creators calmly in control of its destination. —**Jim Macnie**


**Adam Kolker**

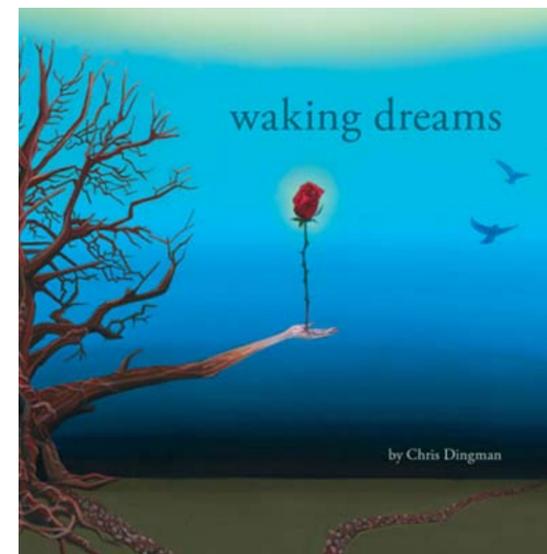
*Reflections*  
Sunnyside, CD

The field is thick, so it's not hard for strong players to be overlooked on the New York City jazz scene. But it's a crime when a terrific saxophonist like Adam Kolker doesn't get more dap than he does.

Three years ago, the 50-something woodwind player dropped the radiant *Flag Day*, which not only illustrates his deep ballad playing, but his wide scope. Neil Young's "Don't Let It Bring You Down" is contoured to fit within a set of cozy chestnuts and lithe originals. The program's arc—which accounted for tempos, eras, genres, textures, etc.—is designed to keep the listener actively engaged. Kolker becomes more than a sharp improviser; he's a thoughtful host as well.

*Reflections* assures that *Flag Day*'s inspired architecture is no fluke. It's a suite of sorts, with each track snuggling next to another with an implied connection. A multi-tracked flute salutation bleeds into a cozy duet with guitarist John Abercrombie. Thelonious Monk's "Let's Call This" is given a nuanced rumba feel. Judi Silvano scats athletically while the band feeds her all sorts of nourishing licks. The territory opens up for rumination between Kolker and bassist John Hebert, and a quick-paced free-bop tune gives way to a flute/voice rendering of "Nature Boy." A killer blues—ultra lyrical, ultra tight—serves as the formidable bookend. You can almost feel the logic of the continuity, and there's not a whiff of "same old thing" anywhere.

Along the way, Kolker reveals a lot about his take on the way modern jazz language works. There's passion, but no roars. There's refinement, but plenty of tension and release. It's all about subtlety, timing, and thinking your way through a thicket of sound. Gorgeous stuff. —**Jim Macnie**


**Chris Dingman**

*Waking Dreams*  
Artist Data, CD

Well-designed suites aren't standard currency in jazz these days. In a market where there are more strong improvisers than gifted composers, we should be thankful to get a clutch of engaging tunes from up-and-coming artists, never mind a viable through-line that binds an extended sound narrative. This makes the inspired architecture of Chris Dingman's *Waking Dreams* quite singular.

The lush parade of songs that comprise the vibraphonist's debut has an enticing flow. From hazy reflections to jumpy squalls, the music made by his sextet (plus the occasional guest) explains itself with an unmistakable grace.

The ringing tones of Dingman's instrument constitute the program's cornerstone. While there are strong contributions by trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire and saxophonist Loren Stillman, *Waking Dreams* is built on the rounded notes and pearly phrases generated by the leader's mallets. Like Walt Dickerson and Bobby Hutcherson before him, Dingman constructs pieces that suit his needs. The languid spill of "Indian Hill" and droning reverie of "Shift In the Wind" italicize the other-

worldly aspect of the album's title. Of course, there are agitated moments, too. "Jet Lag" finds the sextet delivering the kind of melodic jitters generated by Miles Davis on "Capricorn." Akinmusire, one of the most buzzed-about young improvisers working right now, provides a mix of aggression and aplomb, and Stillman demonstrates unique zigzag maneuvers on "Zaneta."

Uptempo pieces are in the minority, however. For the most part, this is an album that mines hazy ballad musings; gorgeous, not provocative. "For best results, listen from beginning to end without pause," writes Dingman on the CD's back cover. He's right: Submitting to the entire trip is worth it. —**Jim Macnie**

The jazz adventure through the rock canon continues, this time with the provocative songbook of a British prog icon being bent to fit the clever arrangements of an intrepid French tentet.

Robert Wyatt, the inventive singer-composer with the leftist stance and ghostly voice, has become one of art-rock's most fetching characters over the past four decades. (He began his career as the drummer for the groundbreaking 60s outfit the Soft Machine.) Having been applauded for past spins on Led Zepelin tunes, the Orchestre National de Jazz is a mini big band funded by France's Ministry of Culture. Together, they present a great pop eccentric's work as a postmodern nightclub act. Released in Europe more than a year ago, and just now getting domestic notice, *Around Robert Wyatt* is flecked with brushes swirling against snares, flutes fluttering, and reeds twisting themselves into a tizzy. Like a blend of John Zorn's refraction of Ennio Morricone and Joni Mitchell's personalization of Charles Mingus, it simultaneously charms and beguiles.



### Orchestre National De Jazz

*Around Robert Wyatt*  
Bee Jazz, CD

And it's all about arrangements. Orchestre boss and gifted conceptualist Daniel Yvinec put bassist/bandleader Vincent Artaud in charge of the redesigns, and from the minute-long prepared piano poem of "Line" to the eerie essay of "Del Mondo" (from Wyatt's overlooked *Comicoopera*), several choices amend the originals' tone without rupturing their essence. The various singers are novel. Rokia Traore's glide through "Alifib" is a forlorn nursery rhyme. Yael Naim has a good grip on the reed-soaked "Shipbuilding." And Wyatt himself shows up several times, decorating tracks with his spectral murmur. "Te Recuerdo Amanda" is a dreamy chant that sounds like a nuanced mbira interacting with a demure Mariachi horn section. Moreover, Wyatt's chanting (and whistling) on the Victor Jara ditty fits in nicely with the Lee Konitz-inspired alto sax wiggle by Atonin-Tri Hoang.

Can music go anywhere? Yes, I believe it can. —**Jim Macnie**



### Jeremy Udden's Plainville

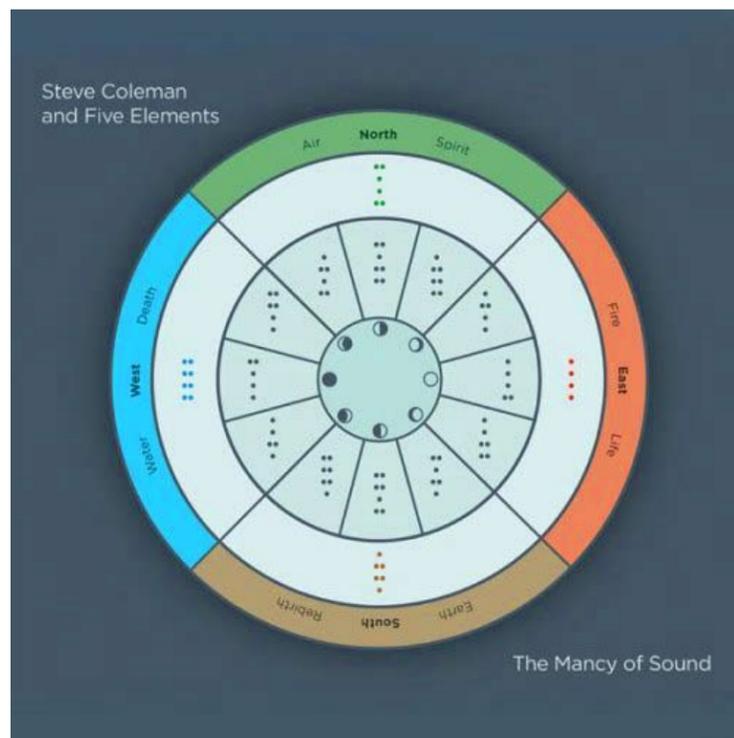
*If The Past Seems So Bright*  
Sunnyside, CD

Childhood reflections are common enough for those getting on in years, but it's not often that a youngish thirty-some-thing pines for days gone by, and probably even less often that the results of such wistfulness genuinely claim eloquence. Saxophonist Jeremy Udden, a New Englander by birth and Brooklynite by choice, finds ways to have that kind of sentiment wax persuasive, however. *If The Past Seems So Bright* is a meditation (Udden's word) on growing up in rural nowheresville between Providence and Boston.

And quite a bucolic childhood it must have been. Using banjo, 12-string guitar, pump organ, Wurlitzer, bass, and drums—as well as his soft-spoken alto—the bandleader comes up with a fetching program that employs just as many folk music motifs as it does jazz strategies.

Placing smart interplay in the service of quaint themes, Plainville gladly walks through doors previously opened by Pat Metheny and Bill Frisell. Melodic jousting; simple, repeated patterns; lots of gliding rhythms. This is music that invests in small moments, where a demure sax trill can convey a near cinematic event. "New Dress," marked by Brandon Seabrook's genteel banjo picking and Pete Rende's gurgling Rhodes, begins in a hush and only picks up the slightest momentum. Riding the placid groove is Udden's horn, full of West Coast cool's rounded corners, and enticing in its luminous lyricism. The minimalist "Bethel," with Nathan Blehar singing wordlessly in unison with the boss' soprano, is a hymn that Longfellow might find redemptive.

Happily, the band has a number of ways to explore its interests. The pensive crawl of "Sad Eyes" is designed differently than its mates, giving everyone, especially Seabrook and his momentarily squally guitar, a chance to entice. Courageous, it's a stark opus that captivates by stressing negative space. Udden must have very vivid memories of the wind whipping through the fields in those Massachusetts nature preserves. —**Jim Macnie**



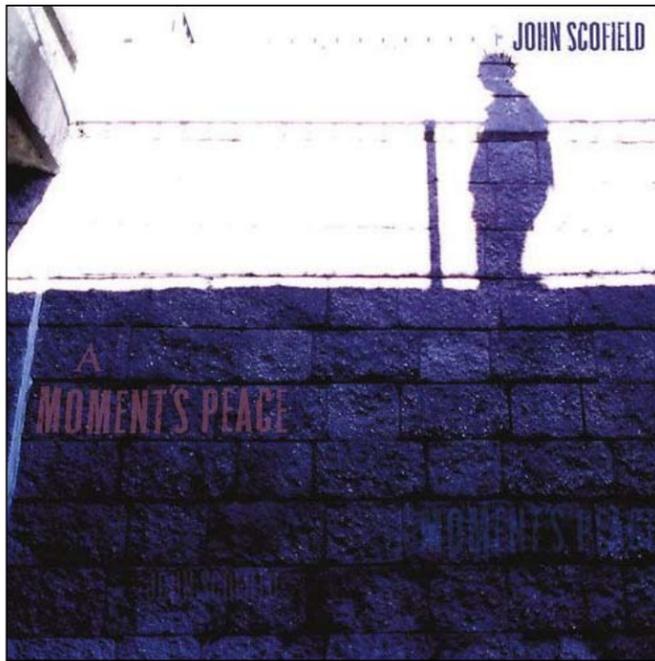
**Steve Coleman**  
*The Mancy of Sound*  
 Pi, CD

**P**recision is occasionally missing in the complex music of saxophonist Steve Coleman, but precision has forever got its back. Notable for its focus, polyphonic swirl marks the essence of the middle-aged saxophonist's strategies. Instruments often exclaim simultaneously, but rarely does their friction become messy. Counterpoint defines any Coleman ensemble, and on *The Mancy of Sound*, every member of the octet makes his or her own spark.

This rigorous process can sound like popcorn popping. Two of the era's most exacting and propulsive trap drummers, Tyshawn Sorey and Marcus Gilmore, interact with hand percussionist Ramon Garcia Perez to form a nexus of beats through which trumpet, trombone, bass, and voice intricately zigzag. Some of the grooves feel like they've been reflected in a funhouse mirror. Some sound like they've been concocted at a calculus seminar. Most are fascinating precisely because of this warped spin on trad precision. On "Water-Oyeku (Odu Ifa Suite)," the melody slips while the thrust slides. Coleman, who sometimes explains his work by alluding to lunar phases as well as I-Ching trigrams, has previously likened his soloing efforts to the movements of clouds in the sky.

A couple pieces—deemed "Formation 1" and "Formation 2"—operate without rhythm-section support yet lose little of the oomph that marks the album's other tracks. Ultimately, they have a fugue-like atmosphere, with lines darting in and out of the foreground. A few moments on *Mancy* (which alludes to the practice of foretelling future events) are disorienting, but in the large, it's quite engaging. And at its best—as on the "Noc-tiluca (Jan 11)"—this record is a whirlwind to which you'll likely want to submit again and again.

—**Jim Macnie**



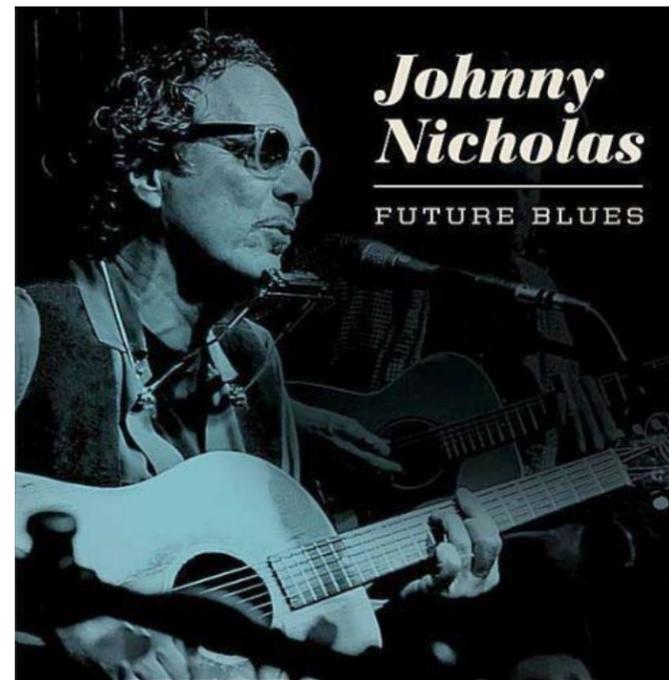
**John Scofield**  
*A Moment's Peace*  
 EmArcy, CD

Milking melody at every juncture, Team Sco—drummer Brian Blade, keyboardist Larry Goldings, and bassist Scott Colley—proves that its dedication to refinement doesn't mar its interest in tension.

**A**s soon as you hear that one of your favorite fiery improvisers has made a disc that spotlights the mellow side of things, the fretting begins. Will it be too soft? Are the tunes hokey? Where will the sparks come from? All those worries are rendered moot after a few spins through John Scofield's latest album, a quartet date that indulges in balladry but keeps the interplay taut. Milking melody at every juncture, Team Sco—drummer Brian Blade, keyboardist Larry Goldings, and bassist Scott Colley—proves that its dedication to refinement doesn't mar its interest in tension.

From a Carla Bley ode to suburbia to a Paul McCartney valentine, the song choices assist in selling the album's thesis. No massive reconstructions are included; *A Moment's Peace* teems with dulcet themes that the leader and his crew imbue with lithe solos. Perhaps the most tantalizing is Sco's own rumination on Abbey Lincoln's "Throw It Away." With Blade using mallets and Goldings designing sublime tinkles, the guitarist sashays along, turning his elastic notes into a pliable string of phrases that parallel the poignancy of Lincoln's philosophical lyrics.

Indeed, one of the disc's strong points is the way that Scofield renders myriad tones from his instrument. The whispered blues of "Gee Baby, Ain't I Good To You" has a sting, and it's an overtly different texture from the bright ringing on "Johan" or the phat plucking on "Plain Song." And, for sure, the gnarled electronics of "I Loves You, Porgy" are different from everything else. Closing the disc with Gershwin's jewel, the band lets us know that abstraction can be mellow, too. —**Jim Macnie**



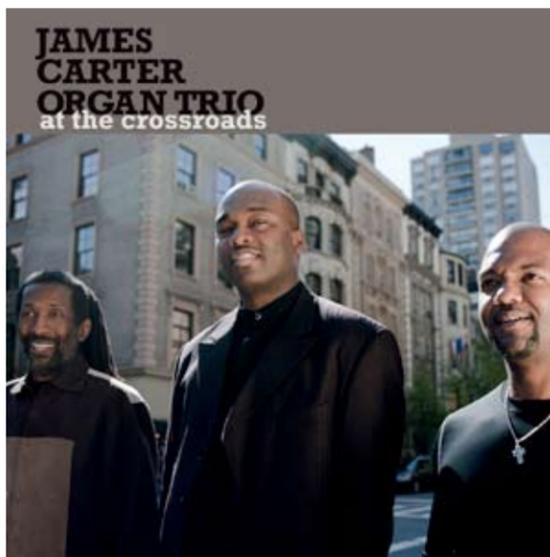
**Johnny Nicholas**  
*Future Blues*  
 The People's Label, CD

*Future Blues* is Nicholas' first proper release since a nice little buzz rose around the *Texas Sheiks* session he was part of two years ago. Sharing the vocals with Geoff Muldaur and Jim Kweskin, the sixty-something vet proved how rich his whispered growl actually was, and how deeply the blues resonated within him. That disc is loose and charismatic. The new record is arranged and charismatic, a blend you don't often find in blues, where over-thinking occasionally squelches vibe. Both of those elements find a way to thrive on these 12 tunes, and because each track proffers a discrete personality (tempo, groove, and style are all well-considered), it becomes the kind of savvy and entertaining date you might get from Delbert McClinton or John Hammond.

Some auras are eerie. "Graveyard Blues" is full of shadows, and "Roads On Fire" feels like a ghost town. Some are romantic. "Mister Moon" wears its heart on its sleeve, but wants to bump and grind, too. There's even a Dylan tune, usually a fatal error for also-rans like Nicholas. But somehow "Whatever it is you wish to keep/You better grab it fast" fits the overall mood of *Future Blues* quite nicely. Turns out there are very few things that an aw-shucks shuffle beat can't bolster.

—**Jim Macnie**

**J**ohnny Nicholas isn't a complete unknown, but these days he is something of a shadow figure. The lanky singer and skilled journeyman hung with Rhode Island's Duke Robillard during the hippie era, worked with Big Walter Horton in the Midwest a decade later, and ultimately wound up in Texas—recording intermittently, getting his twang on with *Asleep At The Wheel*, and occasionally waltzing towards Cajun country. For the last 20 years, he's been playing regional gigs and tending to a successful café that he and his wife own in the hill country above Austin.



### James Carter Organ Trio

*At The Crossroads*

Decca, CD

Some jazz is meant for the head, an array of cerebral gambits forming a thick web of action. But some is meant for the body, a clutch of deeply swinging episodes that keep everything in motion while prioritizing groove. Saxophonist James Carter, especially when fronting his much acclaimed and now decade-old organ trio, has a saucy eloquence regarding the latter. On this new date, he repeatedly proves this expertise, milking bedrock R&B motifs for all the ribald flavor possible.



© Photo by Ingrid Hertfelder

Tunes on *At the Crossroads* are simple enough. Uptempo shuffles, bluesy ballads, a gospel prayer—each feeds the fire in establishing an overarching mood. Vehemence makes them stand out. Whether he’s romping around on baritone, tenor, or soprano, Carter’s much-vaunted virtuosity remains in the foreground. Through storms and swirls, his horn populates—and in a few cases, overwhelms—pieces with the kind of animated solos that can instantly earn whoops from a live audience. Aggressively assisted by drummer Leonard King, Jr. and B-3 maestro Gerard Gibbs, he demonstrates that ardor is his go-to stance.

Several nice moments deflect the focus from the leader’s tsunami. Detroit singer Miche Braden works the sexy side of the street on “The Walking Blues” and “Ramblin’ Blues.” The latter also makes plenty of room for a bawdy horn section. Braden, meanwhile, brings Amen Corner passion to “That Old Ship of Zion.”

Still, the high note comes at the close. Carter once worked with World Saxophone Quartet kingpin Julius Hemphill; the album’s update of his former collaborator’s “The Hard Blues” is nasty, nasty, nasty. Teeming with swagger, it finds the leader trading lines with guitarist Brandon Ross while shredding through a scad of rip-snort textures. To some degree, it represents what Carter is all about. The joy he finds in the power of unabashed exclamation is unmistakable. —**Jim Macnie**

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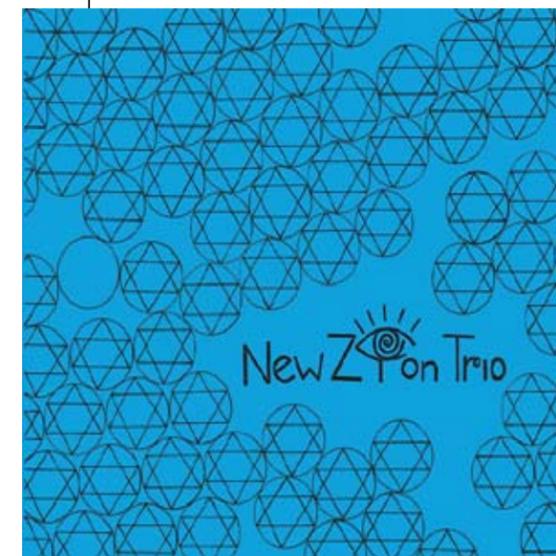
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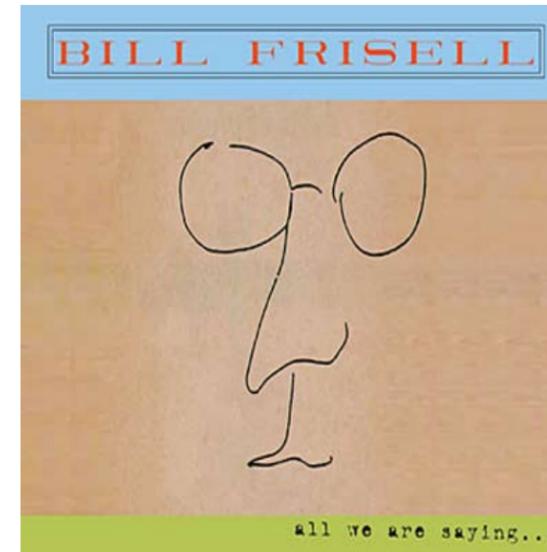
Take the eerie atmospherics of Scratch Perry and apply them to the realm of acoustic piano. Add a flair for insightful improvisation tempered by years of experimental derring-do, and voila: In a flash, you have one of the year's most bewitching small ensemble records. Pianist Jamie Saft, bolstered by the springy riddims of bassist Larry Grenadier and drummer Craig Santiago, comes up with a dub-influenced jazz program that reflects Jamaica's studio sorcery while harking back to Alice Coltrane's dreamy elaborations.

With several provocative titles on the Tzadik imprint, Saft works myriad arenas. But he's no dabbler. The resonance of New Zion Trio stems from the music's focus on getting the vibe right. As Santiago's high-hat clicks and Grenadier's bass lopes on "The Red Dies," an airy atmosphere takes over. Saft's right hand does lots of heavy lifting on this session. Trills are repeated, a mood is established, and as the groove insinuates itself in your head, a narcotic tone dominates. The threesome concocts something both engaging and ethereal.

On "Hear I Jah," Saft switches to a Rhodes and launches into a prayer with fervid conviction. The band may be genuflecting to Scientist and Augustus Pablo, but it's Lonnie Liston Smith who opens the Pearly Gates. Through warm clusters of keys, the pianist weaves a rich fabric of sound. "Lost Dub" allows things get sparse again, and the song's insistence becomes addictive. Ultimately, the groove supplies the leader with all the liftoff his reveries need. —*Jim Macnie*



**New Zion Trio**  
*Fight Against Babylon*  
Veal, CD



**Bill Frisell**

*All We Are Saying ...*  
Savoy, CD

A spacey echo here, a piercing shriek there: After a quarter century of recording, Bill Frisell has developed one of jazz's most keenly distinctive guitar sounds. So distinctive in fact, it occasionally steals the spotlight from his oft-inspired solos, which on the best of nights, contain some of jazz's sagest strategies. It really doesn't matter what trajectory his lines take; the music's sonic aura makes a potent artistic statement on its own.

And that's what happens here, on Frisell's romp through John Lennon's songbook. *All We Are Saying ...* doesn't revamp the structures of these nuggets in any kind of elaborate manner. It simply gives the guitarist and his associates—violinist Jenny Scheinman, steel player Greg Leisz, bassist Tony Scherr, and drummer Kenny Wollesen—ample room to personalize arrangements we've all come to love. Yep, there's an ornery swirl at the end of "Come Together" and a drifting reverie on "Julia," but they were there in the originals, right? Throughout the program, the group comes on like the most insightful bar band ever, reveling in the original designs and bringing its string-centric persona to bear on time-tested melodies.

The gallop of "Nowhere Man" and "Please Please Me," the parlor poise of "In My Life"; the quintet leaves the tunes intact while gussying them up around the corners. Some listeners might gripe that the pieces should be messed with a bit more. But when you hear "Love" trickle into "Beautiful Boy," you'll likely agree that the collective's rich personality is more than enough to broker a modern spin. At that point, it's all about panache. —**Jim Macnie**

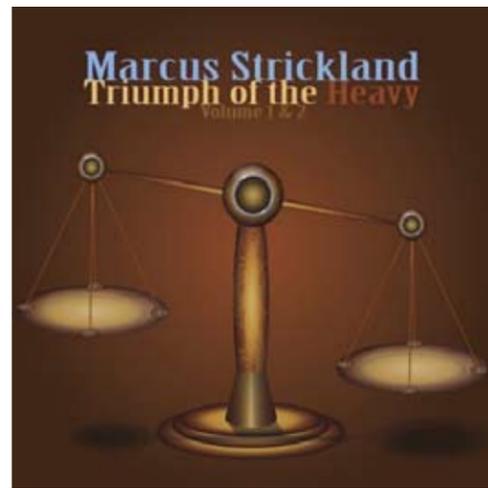
© Photo by Jimmy Katz



Photo by Jati Lindsay

Volume 1 of this set is more present tense, a 2011 studio recording of a new quartet that finds pianist David Bryant joining the aforementioned players. The music is a bit cleaner, a bit more refined, but no less provocative. Strickland is developing a personalized rhythmic concept that weds funk and swing, and many tracks here suggest he's close to nailing its idiosyncratic chemistry. The approach brings refreshing breadth to the performances.

"Lilt" finds everyone feeding the fire, but AJ blazes the hardest. The crafty grooves that supply the ever-shifting landscape of "Bolt Bus Jitter" are also due to the drummer's agility. Here, the leader introduces another horn—an alto—into the program. Heard on five of Volume 1's tracks, it gives the record a much wider tonal palette. Heard after the trio disc, it shows the kind of forward motion that's possible for artists to achieve, and fits snugly into the schema. What you hear on *Triumph of the Heavy* is a full-court press for elocution. It isn't long into "Shapes" that the leader's well-rounded chunks of melody push the band just as hard as it pushes him. The surge of advancement is almost palpable. —*Jim Macnie*



**Marcus Strickland**  
*Triumph of the Heavy*  
Strick Muzik, 2CDs

Here's an album—wait, make that *great* album—that illustrates how both improvisational advancement and an artist's career development are ongoing processes. The second disc of this two-CD set documents 32-year-old saxophonist Marcus Strickland's most recent working band, a bass-drums-horn trio that gives equal time to both finessed interplay and rock 'em, sock 'em physicality.

Strickland, a Miami native and New York resident for a decade or so, has turned lots of heads with swashbuckling maneuvers of late. Recorded live in New Haven last year, the music commands your attention. His tenor lines are feisty and inventive; his soprano work cunning and judicious. In cahoots with his twin brother AJ Strickland and bassist Ben Williams, the saxophonist proves just how simpatico the members of a working band can be. Whether gliding through the waves of "A Memory's Mourn" or negotiating the contours of Jaco Pastorius' "Portrait of Tracy," authority is in the air. A hot group on a hot night.

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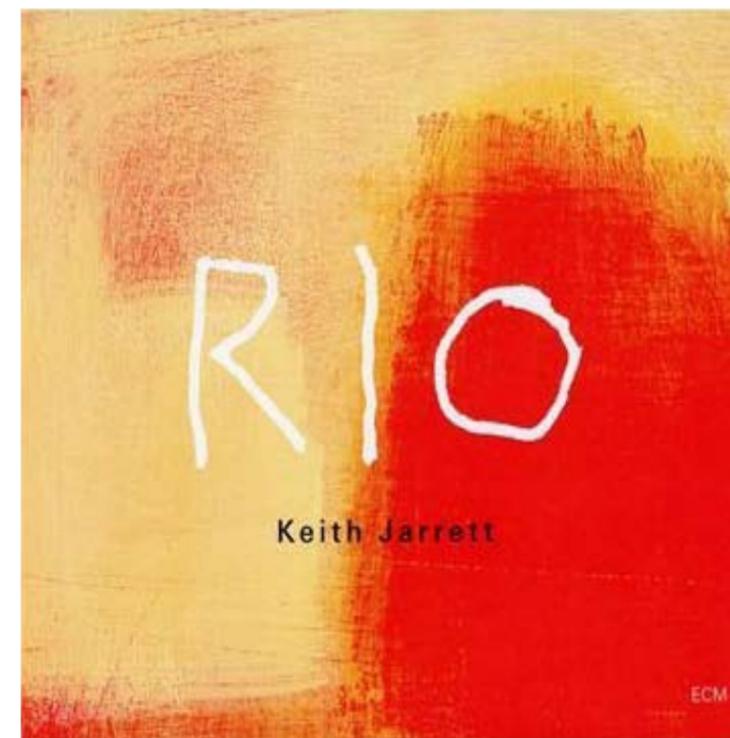
The old tightrope-walker cliché that often gets used in jazz reviews actually takes on an irrefutable resonance when applied to the way Keith Jarrett has approached his solo shows through the last four decades. There is something truly daring about sitting at the piano and holding forth for 120 minutes of unscripted improvisation.

Doing so amounts to a big ol' crapshoot: Will the resultant music be engaging enough to thoroughly entertain an audience? Of course, from *Bremen/Lausanne* to *Testament*, Jarrett's managed to blend rumination with ebullience with enough dynamic thrust to earn himself an audience that hangs on his every note.

*Rio* keeps the icon's streak intact. Indeed, it's one of Jarrett's most fetching solo discs. The pianist has long moved back and forth between non-stop, rapturous excursions to short pieces that stand by themselves. This spring 2011 Brazilian concert is geared toward the latter. While I'm a fan of the free-flowing approach, the focus in each of the discrete tracks here is downright seductive. "Part XII" is lilting yet resolved, one of Jarrett's prettiest gossamer moments. "Part X" is antsy yet determined, a modern smooch to Art Tatum.

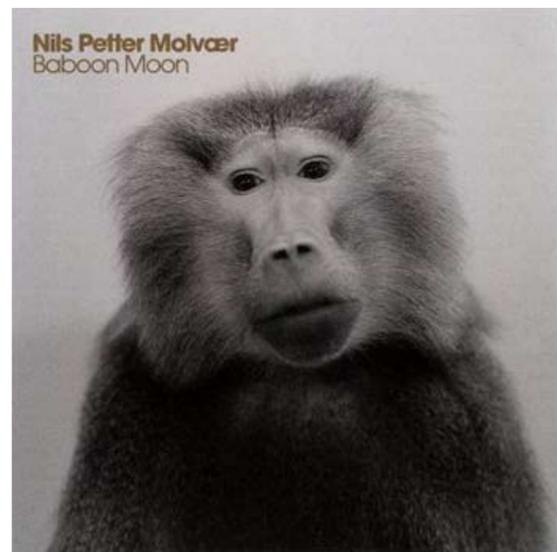
Most enchanting is the piece that begins the performance. Using tempo and tone, Jarrett turns a chattering stream of phrases into an essay on the alluring nature of dissonance. The left hand bounces bass patterns, the right hand responds with animated trills. The fact that the composition happens to be a spontaneous workout only adds to its rich mystique. Jarrett, like few others, has a way of making the extraordinary seem commonplace.

—*Jim Macnie*



**Keith Jarrett**

*Rio*  
ECM, 2CDs



**Nils Petter Molvaer**  
*Baboon Moon*  
 Thirsty Ear, CD

The bandleader's catalyst for having the twain meet? The digital know-how he brings to the table. The thunderous rumble of "Recoil" is made even more epic by filters that color the program's piercing horn work. Harmonizers help thicken the action, and the trumpeter occasionally sounds like he's leading a brass choir. But back to that thunder: Molvaer's new drummer Erland Dahlen could be considered a combination of Ginger Baker and Ronald Shannon Jackson. When it comes to bringing sensuality to a martial thud, he's well-prepared. Guitarist Stian Westerus helps thicken the landscape as well. On "Sleep With Echoes," he goes into strangulation mode, using an attack that conjures Robert Fripp more than it does John McLaughlin. He's also the producer of *Baboon Moon*, and one of his fortes is leading icy drones towards fevered piques.

Those drones could be Molvaer's strongest suit. Yes, when things erupt on this album, it's truly cinematic, but the suspended animation soundtracks that pass as the disc's ballads have a deeper impact. No wonder the most eloquent one is titled "Prince Of Calm." —**Jim Macnie**

**M**iles Davis created a brilliant juxtaposition when he crafted the music for *In a Silent Way* and *Jack Johnson* during a brief period that stretched from 1969-70. The first album is a tactile dreamscape, the second a muscular implosion. For the last decade or so, Norwegian trumpeter Nils Petter Molvaer has perused and personalized his mentor's accomplishments, creating fare that's a seductive blend of opposites—a sound that throws punches while drifting in a haze. It's an intricate chemistry to get right, and on *Baboon Moon*, Molvaer makes the ostensibly clashing elements wax pretty damned eloquent.

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