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No.61 January 2014

The Year In Music 2013



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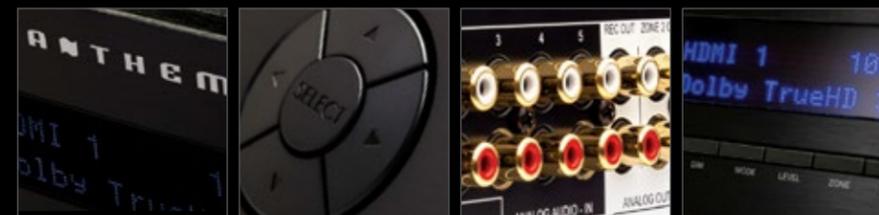
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PUBLISHER'S LETTER

Damn! It's a new year again. The Consumer Electronics Show has just ended, and it's time for our annual music roundup. The music lovers we know seem to fall into two major subcategories: the ones that need to buy new music the *second* it hits the shelves (or the virtual shelves, for those of you that do your shopping online), and those who shop at a more relaxed pace.

If you fall into the latter category, we hope our Music Annual will be an excellent resource that you can download and peruse, should you not want to go back to all of our back issues from the year, revisiting our record and music reviews to assist you in your music purchases.

This year's CES featured a lot of buzz centered around DSD files, another method of listening to music in high resolution. Don't know what DSD is? Don't care? You're not alone. I'm right there with you. As much as I eat, drink and breathe hifi, I don't think yet *another* format is the answer. Format wars have never been won and, ultimately, the consumer loses interest at best and is really pissed at the worst.

Do you really want to buy yet another copy of *Kind of Blue* or *Dark Side of the Moon*? I know I don't.

If you'd like a good argument, (*not* "getting hit on the head" lessons) zip on over to your favorite audio or music forum and try to start a civil discussion about DSD. I dare you. About ten posts in – if you're lucky – it will devolve into a series of childish rants, name-calling and death threats, especially if you don't pledge your undying support for this new format.

In the end, I think it comes back to fun. While some of the general geekiness that goes along with the hifi hobby can be fun, I still enjoy discovering new music just as much as I did when I was a teenager. Much more, in fact, than swapping speaker cables.

While today's newest music lovers listen to as much, if not more, music than their boomer counterparts, I think they just engage it differently. And as Jerry Seinfeld used to be fond of saying, it's "not that there's anything wrong with that." So to help guide us through that journey, I've enlisted the help of my 19-year-old daughter to enlighten us on what she and her friends are not only listening to, but *how* they consume music. Watch for her column next issue; I think it will be fun.

And again, we hope the Music Annual will help you spend some of that leftover holiday cash wisely. What could be better than a big stack of records? Enjoy.



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NEW MUSIC IN 2013

AN EXPLOSION OF RELEASES

2013 was the year risqué performances returned to the mainstream, a charge led by a former Disney princess, the son of a former TV dad, and the mother of a two-year old. Outside the waves created by Miley Cyrus, Robin Thicke, and Beyoncé, the year also witnessed exploding growth in digital and vinyl sales—two trends set in motion back during President Obama's first term. Indeed, good old-fashioned LPs continue to defy the downturn in physical media sales. Labels everywhere are taking notice. More and more, if you want a new release on LP, you'll be able to get a copy.

You'll also see such analog availability reflected in our record reviews. A great majority of the new pop and rock efforts we reviewed are attainable in analog. For all the hand-wringing over the state of the traditional music industry, the diverse wealth of releases keeps increasing. There's more new music to hear, more variety, and more ways to experience it. Indeed, in order to keep tabs on what we feel are standout (and, in some cases, avoid-at-all-cost) records, *TONE Audio* welcomed another music reviewer to the fold in the form of veteran journalist Chrissie Dickinson.

While we don't pretend to be able to review every worthwhile record in our pages, our critics steadfastly deliver the kind of authoritative, in-depth, passionate, and contextual writing that has nearly disappeared in age in which trendiness, quick hits, hipster pretension, and disposability take precedence. *TONE Audio* realizes it's easy to be overwhelmed in such a busy environment. It's why we focus on being a trustworthy, definitive, and consistent voice above the white noise.

In addition to the surfeit of remarkable albums that made 2013 all the better, multiple concerts we attended renewed our faith in live music's inimitable energy. For your convenience, we've included nearly all of our reviews of these shows and records in this issue that serves both as a buyer's guide and go-to resource.

So enjoy, and, in the words of the great Warren Zevon, turn those speakers up full blast and play it all night.



Ellie Goulding

©Photo by David Thai

David Byrne & St. Vincent

State Theatre

Sydney, Australia

January 18, 2013

By John Darko

David Byrne has always looked older. Now 60, he just looks old. The herky-jerky persona has been supplanted by an elegant shuffle whilst his little-boy-lost-at-the-zoo voice is the same as it ever was. At this stage, his receiving a sharp injection of youth via the presence of Annie Clark (aka St Vincent) constitutes a smart move. Their *Love This Giant* long-player is playful, witty, and fun. You can't say that about many Byrne solo records.

Taking the record on the road, Byrne and Clark chose support from a ten-piece band predominantly comprised of horn players. Alternating between lead and support roles, neither dominates the proceedings.



Photo by Catalina Kulczar

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CONCERT



Photo by Catalina Kulczar

Still, it's a joy to witness Clark's physical presence mainlining the Byrne of yesteryear. Picture the mechanical twitch of a malfunctioning marionette. As if on cue, team-played "Who" gives way to the Clark-led "Weekend In The Dust," which, in turn, naturalizes the transition to St. Vincent's "Save Me From What I Want."

"I made a record with Annie Clark and this may explain why things sound as they do," announced Byrne, tentatively explaining the absence of nostalgia. Of course, the latter is never far from reach. An elegant and beatific take on Talking Heads' "This Must Be The Place" draws a smattering of audience members out of their seats. A workaday take on Byrne's "Like Humans Do" is less successful. Ditto "Lazy". Stripped of its four-four kick and electronic pads, the tune doesn't translate.

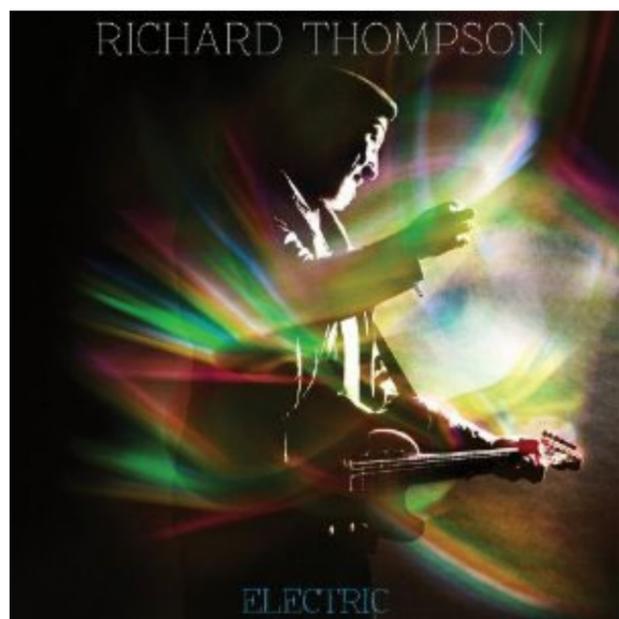
The neat choreography fares better. Accidents are a deliberate hallmark of Byrne's oeuvre, and the show's playfulness

with shadows and faux-spontaneity recalls *Stop Making Sense*. The Clark-led "Ice Age" sees the remainder of the band play while laying down, eventually rising to its feet as the song comes to a boil.

It's almost as if David Byrne is handing over the baton to his younger teammate; this is Clark's show to steal. She explains how she's truly humbled and excited to be playing alongside the former Talking Heads frontman. Yes, the declaration might be nothing more than tidy and polite showbiz management, but it's sincere.

About that nostalgia: No other Talking Heads numbers emerge until the first encore. "Burning Down The House" witnesses the horn section let fly with full bombast. Strange, but not a stranger. And the closing "Road To Nowhere" sounds utterly glorious. While keeping his wild-eyed stare of confusion facing forward, Byrne's ongoing self re-invention continually digs up fresh joy from old songs. ●

NEW RELEASES



Richard Thompson
Electric
 New West, 2LP or CD

During the course of a 45-year professional career that began with Fairport Convention, Richard Thompson logged several impressive creative stretches, not least of which is a mid-70s stint that yielded a trio of exceptional albums with former life partner Linda Thompson. While the English native's wry well never ran dry, he stumbled in the mid-80s and throughout a majority of the 90s, when his songwriting suffered from unevenness and his over-produced albums wallowed in mediocrity. Then irony struck.

In a turn of events the clever Thompson surely must appreciate, Capitol Records kick-started his muse by dropping him from its roster at the turn of the century. He responded by launching his own imprint and, building off of 1999's thematic *Mock Tudor*, returned to his stripped-down roots. Always more comfortable as a cult favorite than a major-label artist under pressure to log a hit, Thompson hasn't erred in the past decade. He's currently in the midst of a splendid resurgence punctuated by 2003's wondrous *The Old Kit Bag* and 2010's superb *Dream Attic*. The melodically astute *Electric*, his New West debut, extends the hitting streak.

Pairing with drummer Michael Jerome and bassist Taras Prodaniuk in a trio setting, and fielding select contributions from producer/guitarist Buddy Miller and fiddler Stuart Duncan—as well as harmony vocal assistance—Thompson keeps the tunes lean and elegant, adhering to an economy of scale that government agencies would do well to employ in these times of budget crises. While he maintains the ability to blow away most any other living guitarist via his tone, fluidness, control, expressiveness, and feel, Thompson doesn't waste a note or give a thought to showiness. Akin to an engrossing author that recognizes it's harder

albeit more rewarding to pen meaningful short passages than rambling long-form statements, he makes every word and phrase matter.

Understatement remains one of Thompson's greatest assets. Built on folk-rock foundations, *Electric* spans acoustic to amplified arrangements, vitriolic to sympathetic moods, and observational to reflective perspectives—all the while never calling attention to any single characteristic. Miller knows well enough to take a hands-off approach, preserving a live feel that reinforces Thompson's natural instrumentalism and lyrical contrasts. As is his trademark, the singer relays life's romantic follies, paradoxical conflicts, and sage revelations with periscope distance, minute detail, and uncanny accuracy.

Possessing an acerbic wit and double-edged esprit any savvy attorney would envy, Thompson sketches his protagonists with broad strokes and often eviscerates the line between hero and villain as to better allow his lacerating humor play tricks. He seemingly embraces and skewers a lust-filled old man on a stomping

“Stoney Ground” and simultaneously curses and thanks an adversary on the subtly gorgeous “My Enemy.” For the poignant “Another Small Thing In Her Favour,” a brilliantly insightful (and waggish) reading into emotional wreckage and lingering bitterness wrought by failed long-term relationships, he occupies neutral ground as a one-upped cuckold.

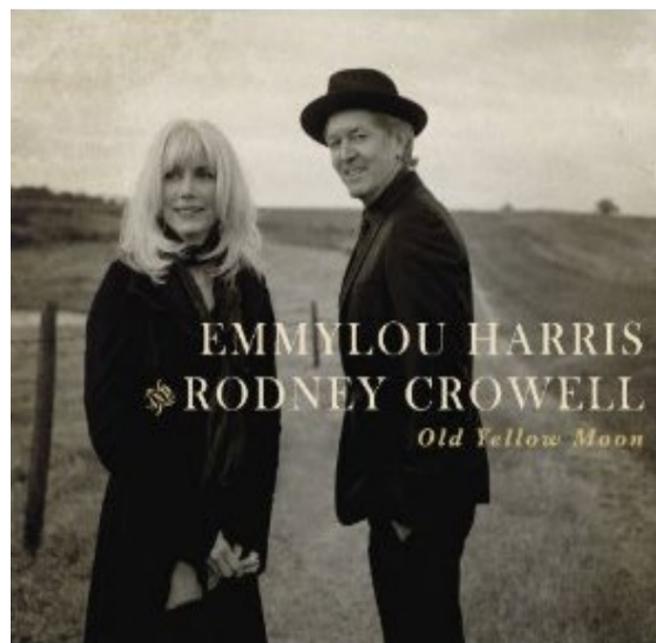
Indeed, while Thompson cuts rivals with a sharp blade (“Good Things Happen to Bad People,” “Sally B”) and pulls the knife out slowly, his tender moments indicate that, in spite of obviousness jadedness and cynicism, a flawed albeit sentimental humanism lies underneath the surface.

“I've had wives and I've treated them badly/ And maybe a lover or two,” Thompson sincerely confesses on a waltzing “Saving the Good Stuff for You,” sounding as surprised as anyone that somebody tamed his troublesome ways. Providing anyone has the fortitude to use it in such a role, the country-styled ballad is destined to be the most honest wedding song ever written.

—**Bob Gendron**



©Photo by Pamela Littky


Emmylou Harris and Rodney Crowell
Old Yellow Moon

Nonesuch Records, CD

O

Old Yellow Moon marks the first time Emmylou Harris and Rodney Crowell have officially collaborated on an entire album. But make no mistake: These two know each other courtesy of the wayback machine.

They first met in the 1970s, when Harris was launching out as a solo artist after the death of her mentor Gram Parsons. Crowell was an up-and-coming songsmith that eventually landed in Harris' legendary Hot Band. He went on to success as a solo artist and songwriter. She went on to a coronation as the queen of alternative country. Both are genuinely distinctive singers. His tenor is crackly and emotive. Her soprano is delicate at its core and ragged around the edges.



©Photo by David McClister

The bond between these artists feels familiar, intimate, casual, and second nature. As a whole, *Old Yellow Moon* sounds like a wonderfully rambling musical conversation between two old friends. Crowell wrote four tunes; the rest stem from other songwriters. The end result: A well-rounded musical mix that focuses on love (mostly lost) and youth (mostly gone).

Harris and Crowell go smartly uptempo on Kris Kristofferson's sly, snapping "Chase the Feeling." They get funky on the snaky blues "Black Caffeine." The gently swinging "Hanging Up My Heart" rides a loping beat and crying steel. These numbers are nestled beside more quietly lacerating material, including the rueful "Open Season" and rootsy chamber pop of Patty Scialfa's "Spanish Dancer."

"Back When We Were Beautiful," written by Matraca Berg, one of the finest modern country songwriters in Nashville, comes on as the *tour de force*. The song's protagonist is an older woman grappling with the realities of aging. For anyone dealing with the often surreal and painful aspects of growing older, this tune is startling in its raw vocalization of dark internal fears: "I hate it when they say/I'm aging gracefully/I fight it every day/I guess they never see/I don't like this at all/What's happening to me?"

Here, Harris' voice cracks with vulnerability, her delivery brave, bereft, forlorn. Crowell joins her, his vocals entwining with hers for a true cry of the heart. It's a haunting interpretation, the two singers alternately expressing anxiety and acceptance. Given that Harris and Crowell are aging themselves, it's one of the most fearless pop music performances in recent memory.

Not all the tracks on *Old Yellow Moon* rise to the heart-wrenching stature of "Back When We Were Beautiful." Then again, if they did, this album might be too wounding to bear.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**

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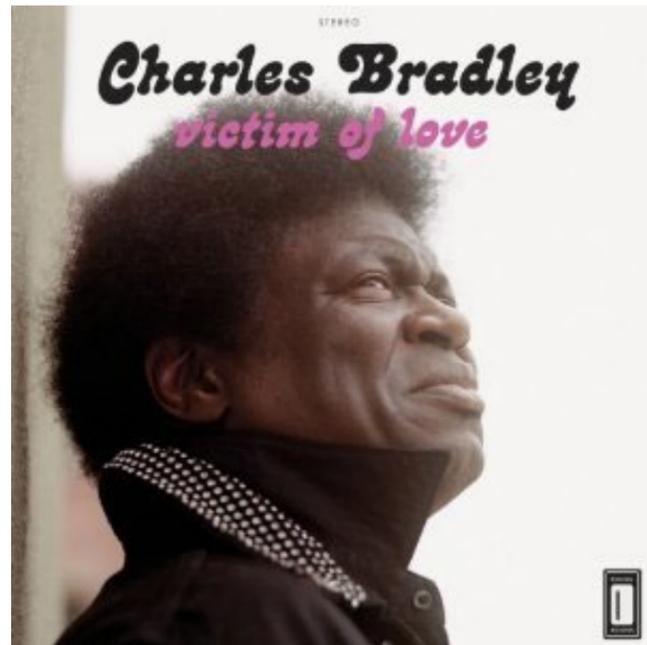
Dawn McCarthy & Bonnie "Prince" Billy
What the Brothers Sang
Drag City, LP or CD

Even today, a half a decade later, the songs of the Everly Brothers still sound like magic. Whether it's the unmistakable, sweep-you-off-your-feet harmonies or always-pristine production—even the group's saddest songs sound born not in the studio but in a candy shop—the Everly Brothers endure. And perhaps it could even be argued today that the collective is unjustly overlooked, arriving just before the more exciting British Invasion of the 60s and now forever tied to *Top Gun*.

Seeing the hypnotizing effect the Everly Brothers had on her children, West Coast folk-pop artist Dawn McCarthy has said she was inspired to more deeply revisit the act's catalog. The result, *What the Brothers Sang*, is her latest collaboration with Bonnie "Prince" Billy, otherwise known as Will Oldham, a long-cherished singer/songwriter voice of the independent community.

The 13 songs here aren't necessarily the obvious ones. "Omaha," a loving, homesick ode to the Midwest, is a particularly choice find, as is the torch ballad "What Am I Living For." A number of Everly songwriters are represented, including Felice and Boudleaux Bryant (the string-adorned lullaby "Devoted to You"), Tony Romeo (the nostalgic prance of "Milk Train"), and Gerry Goffin and Carole King (the swaying, mystical country ditty "You're Just What I Was Looking for Today").

McCarthy and Billy, by and large, distance themselves from the Everly arrangements by opting for an earthier, back-porch approach. Still, they stop short from completely reworking the songs. The one exception comes courtesy of the borderline psychedelic folk of "My Little Yellow Bird," which plays out like a twisted children's tune. Yet the emphasis here remains on simplifying rather than adorning. The orchestral rhythm & blues of the Everly's "Somebody Help Me," for instance, becomes a roots rocker at its most direct. This is reverence at its most casual. —**Todd Martens**



Charles Bradley

Victim of Love
Dunham Records, LP or CD

“been through so many changes,” sings Charles Bradley near the close of his sophomore album, *Victim of Love*. “But somehow I hold on.”

What the Florida-born soul man describes as “changes,” most people would term tragedies. Large swaths of his biography sound like they could have been culled from the pages of a Charles Dickens novel. As a teenager, Bradley spent years living on the streets of New York City, splitting his time between subway cars and various flophouses. Shortly thereafter, he joined Job Corps, a vocational program initiated by Lyndon Johnson, and traveled coast-to-coast working as a short-order cook. In his spare time, he took on gigs as a James Brown impersonator, only landing a deal with Daptone Records after label founder Gabriel Roth caught his routine at Brooklyn’s now-defunct Tar-Heel Lounge in the early 2000s.



©Photo by Darren Bastecky

Rather than celebrating, however, Bradley found himself coping with the brutal murder of his brother—a life-altering event he described to me in graphic detail in a 2012 interview, saying, “When they shot him, they shot him with a hollow point bullet... and his head exploded like a tomato.”

These hardships inform much of the 64-year-old singer’s long-in-the-works debut, *No Time For Dreaming*, a smoldering set that condenses a lifetime of hurt into a dozen tear-stained tracks. The personal nature of his breakthrough likely had many wondering what Bradley would do for an encore. Midway through *Victim of Love*, the soul man poses the very question to himself, singing,

“Where do we go from here?”

At its core, the singer’s sophomore effort is far more optimistic. True, Bradley remains plagued by the usual heartaches and pains, but this time around, his troubles seem more commonplace and far less debilitating. On the album-opening “Strictly Reserved For You,” for one, he moans about escaping the all-consuming crush of city life, sounding like a man who’s spent a little too much time packed like a sardine on a standing-room-only A train.

Indeed, even when those more monumental storms arise—Bradley bemoans society’s seemingly endless downward spiral on “Hurricane,” a vaguely psychedelic cut drenched in triumphant soul horns—they tend

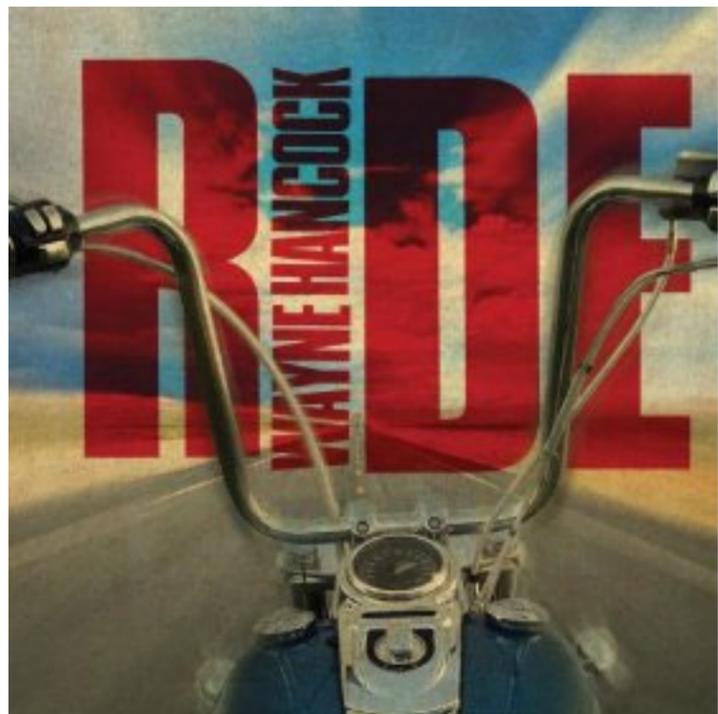
to be short lived. He follows the outburst with “Through the Storm,” a pleasant, morning-after-the-down-pour cut that doubles as a heartfelt thanks to those who stood by him in his times of need. “When the world gives you love,” he sings, “It frees your soul.” On the title track, a sighing ballad colored in gentle acoustic strumming, this love sounds closer than ever (“I woke up this morning, I felt your love beside me”).

But while the vocalist appears to have finally found some long-overdue peace in his own life, the music on *Victim of Love* remains restless and unsteady. Songs are dense with ecstatic horns, buzzing guitars (dig the psych-drenched solo that knifes through “Strictly Reserved For

You”), and echo-laden vocals. It’s a welcome change, to be sure, and the more muscular grooves pack a deeper wallop than almost anything on his debut.

Last time around, illumination only arrived in the form of great conflagrations (witness “The World (Is Going Up In Flames)”). Not so here. “My brothers, my sisters,” Bradley rasps like a would-be preacher on “Where Do We Go From Here,” a searing cut that could almost pass for the Temptations at their most psychedelic, “It’s time to make this world a brighter place for the generation to come.” Consider this stunning album Bradley’s first stride towards that more promising future.

—**Andy Downing**



Wayne Hancock

Ride

Bloodshot Records, LP or CD

There have always been ghosts in Wayne “The Train” Hancock’s music. Ever since his debut in 1995 as a rough-cut neo-traditionalist, the fiery Texan has channeled artists from country’s golden age. Those late kindred spirits have included western swing king Bob Wills, honky-tonk legend Ernest Tubb, and hillbilly boogie pioneers the Maddox Brothers and Rose.

But most of all, the great Hank Williams, Sr. hovers over Hancock’s music, a streak that extends to his latest release, *Ride*. Indeed, there are times when Hancock’s astringent twang bears a striking similarity to country’s most famous lovesick blues boy.

Ride is Hancock’s eighth record and fifth for Chicago’s insurgent country label, Bloodshot Records. It marks a welcome return for the road warrior that checked into rehab for substance addiction in 2011 and is now back on tour and working towards a life of sobriety.

He sounds refreshed and ready to rock, charging out of the gate on the title track, a raw and primitive piece of rock n’ roll. Hancock, a singer and rhythm guitarist, wrote all the tunes here but one. His crew is considerable, with long-time co-producer and Texas legend Lloyd Maines (also the father of Dixie Chick Natalie Maines) joining ace backing players Bob Stafford on electric guitar and trombone, Zack Sapunor on upright bass, Eddie Rivers on steel guitar, and Eddie Biebel and Tjarko Jeen on electric guitars. He is generous with his shout-outs on record, name-checking his players ala Bob Wills.

Over the years, he’s learned a lot in the club scene about what makes an audience dance. From the walking bass line on “Low Down Blues” to the chugging beat of the cheating epic “Deal Gone Down,” his songs are built to get everybody in the joint up on their feet. Even when the sentiments are sorrowful (“Tear Drops On the Table”) and his voice is drenched in the blue tones of a crying steel guitar (“Best To Be Alone”), toe-tapping beats remain a constant. Hancock also demonstrates a keen touch for country-jazz on “Gal From Kitchen’s Field,” his weather-beaten voice tucked inside the warm interplay of guitar and trombone.

Hancock’s music has always been a love letter to the past. In his world, there’s a honky-tonk on the edge of town where Hank Sr. is forever the headliner.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**

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Toro Y Moi
Anything In Return
 Carpark, LP or CD

Despite continually being lumped in with the chillwave movement—an amorphous genre that specializes in hazy, synth-drenched songs that essentially exist as the sonic equivalent of not giving a fuck—producer/singer Chaz Bundick of Toro Y Moi has always been the more ambitious type. While his murky 2010 debut *Causers of This* certainly flirted with the aforementioned form, subsequent albums found the musician stretching out into futuristic art-disco (*Underneath the Pine*) and bubbling avant-funk (the aptly titled *Freaking Out EP*).

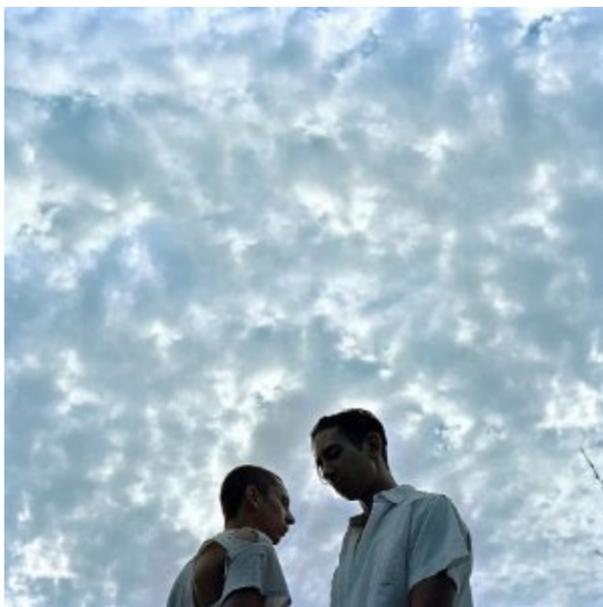
Anything In Return, Bundick's third full-length studio album, finds him offering up a shimmering slice of headphone R&B that exists somewhere between these poles. Songs here are largely down-tempo, but the production is polished and silky, making the record come across like a collection of bedroom jams for someone that clearly isn't getting any. "When you talk about how your room shakes at night," Bundick sings on one tune, "I wonder if you spend that time/Taking photos with a friend of mine."



Although the vocalist still sounds more comfortable in the role of an outsider, he's also at his most emotionally unguarded. "I will be her boy forever," he pledges with startling honesty on "Cake." He takes a similarly naked approach to his vocals, placing them front and center rather than burying them in all manner of sonic fuzz. At first blush, this almost seems a mistake. Unlike artists mining similar sonic territory—Miguel, the Weeknd's Abel Tesfaye, or even Tom Krell of *How to Dress Well*—Bundick doesn't have a knee-buckling set of pipes. His vocals can be described as workmanlike, even at their best. Fortunately, his unassuming voice turns out to be the perfect vehicle for the album's more earnest and sometimes clumsy declarations of love.

Bundick marries the words to a patchwork musical backdrop that doubles as something of an overview of his production career, flitting between radio-friendly R&B ("Cake"), iced-out funk (the slow-rolling "High Living"), and space-age disco (the pulsating "Rose Quartz," which sounds like digitized seduction). Unlike earlier albums, however, the musician places an increased effort on the low end, layering tracks with woofer-rattling bass lines that anchor the sound and temper his more ethereal urges.

On his oft-weightless debut, Bundick sounded more interested in stimulating the mind than the body, which might explain why the album plays like the soundtrack to a contact high. This time out, he clearly hopes to get hips shaking. Most tempos are ratcheted up, and the entire package is coated with a thick shellac of pop gloss. It's quite a transformation, and Bundick pulls it off with admirable aplomb, akin to a former A/V Club geek claiming the mantle of senior prom king. —**Andy Downing**



Inc.
No World
4AD, LP or CD

Cut to 1995, and the music literati would have no doubt been confident that the artists with the most to impart to the next generation of indie-rock acts would have such last names as Cobain, Vedder, Cornell, and Corgan. Yet there's mounting evidence that the listening habits of those who came of age in the 90s are vastly different than the listening habits of those who actually grew up in the 90s. For the latter, names such as Aaliyah, D'Angelo, and TLC appear to be among the generation's most influential artists.

L.A.'s Inc., a sibling act signed to 4AD, is the latest appropriator of the deep grooves and slowed-down electronic techno-babble that marked a significant portion of early-to-mid 90s R&B. These strands don't always show themselves obviously, but they're there in the singer/songwriter approach of James Blake, electronic loneliness of the xx, sexy effortlessness of *How to Dress Well*, and the pop of Haim, among many others.

Think of Inc., nominally, as a more fleshed-out version of the xx, an act signed 4AD sister label XL Recordings. That's oversimplifying things a bit, but it's a starting point. It's also helpful to know that Daniel and Andrew Aged spent a number of years recording and touring with the likes of Pharell Williams, Cee Lo Green, Robin Thicke, and Raphael Saadiq.

Perhaps that is why *No World* brims with near-perfect professionalism, be it the underwater feel of "Black Wings" or the synthesizers that sound smothered in a comforter on "Trust (Hell Below)." "Lifetime" feels built from a collection of effects meant for an old sci-fi TV show and "Desert Rose (War Prayer)" seems destined for a magical campfire. First and foremost, this is a seduction record, a mood piece with the lights dimmed low for the entirety of its 41-minute length. Whispers and wannabe-Prince falsettos dominate, as do spacious, surprisingly arty bass lines.

Ultimately, atmosphere is more important than melody to Inc., or at least that's the way *No World* comes across. For the most part, that's fine, as it's where the tension lies. Everything sounds in its right place, yet nothing sounds quite right at all.

—**Todd Martens**



FIDLAR
FIDLAR
Mom + Pop, LP or CD

Such subjects have long informed raucous rock and roll, and often, serve as conduits for frustration and rebellion. Yet these four Los Angeles burn-outs convey the chaos on their buzzed-about self-titled debut as if it's a life choice.

Save for the betrayal of a girlfriend, FIDLAR's youthful members revolt against nothing else than running out of dope or realizing they're broke. Several obvious punk-related reference points—early Replacements, Descendents, Black Flag, early Green Day—largely figure into their pawn-shop guitar distortion and out-of-tune cacophony. The slightly humorous juvenilia and apathetic attitude would soon be forgettable, but then, the band's combustible hooks and sawed-off melodies take over.

FIDLAR sounds aggressive and, on fare such as the defiant "Cheap Beer" and insubordinate "White on White," borderline angry. However, these skateboarders aren't mad about much; they have no reason to be. No wonder nearly every song comes off as the theme for a house party at which everything and everyone gets trashed, and nobody pays any mind. Who needs responsibility or a job? FIDLAR's only concerns relate to amusement, self-satisfaction, and scoring the next high. Usually, the three aims are interwoven.

DARE graduates FIDLAR are not. Cocaine, weed, smack, PCP, 8-ball: *FIDLAR* is littered with more drug references than Motley Crue's career. Just don't expect any hair-metal glamour. Aimlessness, homelessness,

Never mind that the two main parties in the U.S. government won't compromise for the common good, that unchecked global warming increasingly devastates food supplies and environmental balances, that debt-induced recession looms over the international marketplace, and that tensions in the Middle East continue to spiral beyond control. None of the issues matter. Hell, none even exists in FIDLAR's universe, a half-baked world in which surfing, sex, sleeping, smoking, drinking, and drugs comprise the totality of existence.

and dirtiness infiltrate swirling, hyperactive declarations ("Wake Bake Skate") and fuzz-encrusted screeds ("Blackout Stout") that beg to be shouted in a sloshed mental state, Styrofoam cup of beer in hand.

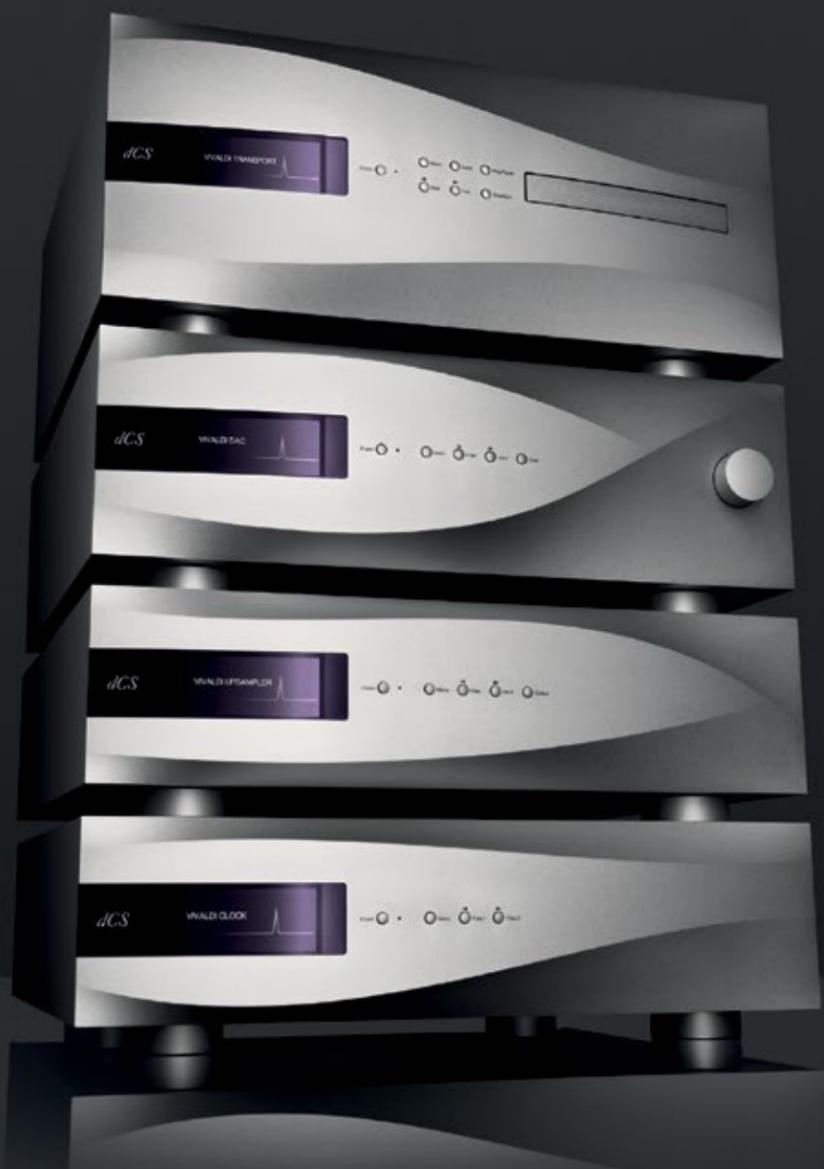
Is all a joke meant in good fun? Perhaps. The pharmaceutical-laden narratives are certainly a long way from the TV-watching, masturbation, and boredom chronicled in "Longview." Then again, every generation needs its own slacker heroes. And so it is with the entitlement crowd.

Drunken high-school revelers, class-ditching stoners, dead-end amateur dealers, and grown-ups refusing to confront reality (temporarily or permanently): FIDLAR welcomes you to your future. Now hand 'em your joint.

—**Bob Gendron**

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MUSIC



Jimi Hendrix
People, Hell & Angels
Legacy, 200g 2LP or CD

Another year, another posthumous Jimi Hendrix record cobbled together with unearthed rarities and miscellaneous outtakes. Right? Mostly. *People, Hell & Angels*, branded as the successor to 2010's *Valley of Neptune*, gathers material the guitarist recorded between 1968 and 1970 outside of the original Experience trio. Unlike that on previous Hendrix compilations, the fare here is advertised as complete even if several of the songs come across as works in progress. The other headline news relates to the sonics.

Quality Record Pressings oversaw the analog release and, even on CD, the dynamics, headroom, and tonalities shine. Audiophiles and Hendrix aficionados accustomed to the varying quality on collections such as *West Seattle Boy*—aural characteristics that, due to the nature of the source material, remain out of anybody's control—get an early Christmas present.

The songs aren't half-bad, either. Now for the reality check: All the hyperbole and grandstanding doesn't change the fact that, in spite of Hendrix's visionary skills and creative ambition, what's left in the vaults does not approach the compositions or arrangements found on the groundbreaking *Are You Experienced* and *Axis: Bold As Love*. The title may be coined by Hendrix, yet *People, Hell & Angels* plays and feels like a compendium—an intriguing one, but one

that nonetheless cannot disguise its identity as a patchwork array of ideas and themes that constantly remind listeners they're not hearing a finished product. Rather, they're experiencing several insiders' ideas of what they think Hendrix what have wanted.

Several tracks will instantly ring familiar to devotees. Drawn from Hendrix's first session with Band of Gypsies members Billy Cox and Buddy Miles, a searing version of the loose blues "Hear My Train A Comin'" rivals previous renditions. Debuted at Woodstock, "Izabella" is afforded a deeper R&B groove than other editions. And "Somewhere," captured in March 1968, differs in texture from its predecessors and also features Stephen Stills on bass. Historical nuggets, all, and each salt-and-peppered with the legend's still-unsurpassed six-string bending and soulful maneuvering.

Surprises, however, are few. An exception is the funk workout "Let Me Move You," on which Hendrix trades phrases with former collaborator and saxophonist Lonnie Youngblood. A reminder of Hendrix's chitlin' circuit roots, the performance hints at what the guitarist might have done had he more religiously followed a jazz and R&B muse. Ditto the horn-soaked "Mojo Man," on which psychedelic juju speaks with a Muscle Shoals accent.

As curiosity items go, *People, Hell & Angels* is akin to browsing at a flea market, spotting what might be a painting by a known master, taking it to a professional for an appraisal, and learning that it's a great forgery. The analogy isn't to suggest that anything on this twelve-track affair lacks authenticity, only that sketches do not make a masterpiece.
—Bob Gendron



Lady Lamb & the Beekeeper

Ripely Pine
Ba Da Bing, LP or CD

It's okay to feel uncomfortable while listening to Lady Lamb & the Beekeeper's proper, studio debut. Much of this 12-song record from 23-year-old Aly Spaltro will, in fact, feel strikingly familiar, both in sound (the soft-to-furiously-anxious acoustic strumming of angry open-mic singers everywhere), and topics, namely of the you-ripped-my-heart-out metaphor variety. First loves, lost loves, and misguided loves: All of it is jumbled up as if high school never ended in these dozen melodic warning signs to future suitors.

Ghost, limbs, and missing jewelry —thrown on the floor after heavy-petting sessions—pepper Lady Lamb's songs, which possess a lyrical worldview that doesn't draw a distinction between romance and torture. "You've gotta be starving, you gotta be starving for it," she sings on "Crane Your Neck." And that's one of the more lovely moments, in which you can hear every pluck of her acoustic strings and where she sings almost as if she likes you.

While this is her first collection of works that isn't recorded DIY-style on an eight-track, *Ripely Pine* doesn't much attempt to pretty up the songs. Often, the airiness makes it sound as if she's still singing in an empty bedroom, with drums and small horn sections occasionally popping in for a verse. "Hair to the Ferris Wheel" builds to a feedback-drenched midsection, channeling mid-'90s Juliana Hatfield-inspired alt-rock. Meanwhile, the upbeat trumpets of "Aubergine" give the tune the feel of an European café.

Still, you'll likely have to forgive her for the song's "make me into an egg without yolk" imagery, as you will the "naked as a newborn in the snow" (is that a thing somewhere?) phrase in "Bird Balloons," which otherwise stands as one of the more ambitious, surprising arrangements on the album. Ultimately, though, whether this LP makes a lasting impression will likely depend on what kind of lyrics you had written on your high-school folder, and whether or not you can still relate to them. —**Todd Martens**



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THE FIFTY



1961 - 2011



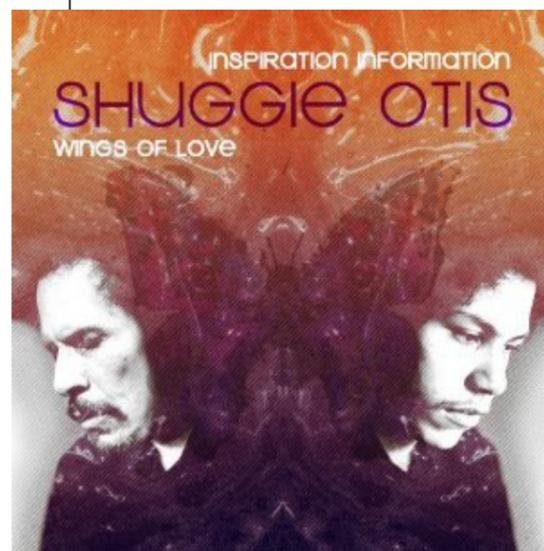
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Shuggie Otis has the kind of backstory that makes music obsessives swoon.

Over a five-year period beginning in 1969, Otis, the offspring of R&B legend Johnny Otis, issued a trio of albums for Epic Records. After the 1974 release of *Inspiration Information*, he was invited to join the Rolling Stones as a touring guitarist. He declined. Shortly thereafter, his recording contract with Epic was nullified. The next three decades were relatively quiet for the musician. Aside from some irregular session work for his father, Otis all but withdrew from the music industry, and his discography was relegated to the dustbin. (continued)



Shuggie Otis

Inspiration Information/Wings of Love
Epic/Legacy, 2CD

Then, in the 1990s, *Inspiration Information* unexpectedly gained a cult following, and the psychedelic soul album garnered praise from by musicians such as Prince to noted crate digger DJ Shadow. In April 2001, the record was reissued by David Byrne's boutique Luaka Bop imprint. Still, Otis continued to maintain a low profile, opting not to record and kept live appearances to a minimum.

Adding to the sense of intrigue is the fact that Otis is undoubtedly a virtuosic guitarist, having joined his father's band at age 12 before going on to perform alongside Frank Zappa, Etta James, and Bobby Bland, among countless others. He's also far from a one-trick pony. In addition to playing virtually every instrument on *Inspiration Information*, Otis assumed all of the

writing and arranging duties. Considering the circumstances, it's hard not to both romanticize Otis' early years and wonder what might have been. What, in fact, did this lost soul man have left to say to the world?

The latest reissue of *Inspiration Information*, packaged with four bonus tracks and the "lost" album *Wings of Love*—a collection of 14 songs recorded between 1975 and 2000—answers the question with a resounding "not much."

Despite containing material recorded over two-plus decades, *Wings of Love* comes on like a half-finished collection of oddities, demos, and dead ends. Songs like "Fawn" and the lumbering "Give Me a Chance" sound weirdly dated. The latter, with its twinkling synthesizers and programmed drums, could double as the soundtrack to every 1980s public service announcement. The glossy "Walkin' Down the Country," in turn, exists as a study in synthesized cheese, complete with new-age chimes and a syrupy sweet vocal chorus.

While Otis is a fine guitarist (his inspired soloing on the 11-minute-plus title track nearly makes up for the fact that he opens a song called "Wings of Love" by sampling a goddamned seagull), he's merely passable as a vocalist. As a lyricist, however, he's

downright horrendous, and *Wings of Love* is packed with more forced rhymes than an amateur poetry slam. In one 45-second stretch on "Doin' What's Right," he manages to rhyme "inspiration," "nation," "proclamation," and "observation." (A few suggestions for the eventual remix: "obfuscation," "segregation," "cardiopulmonary resuscitation.") He's also overly obsessed with the fairer sex, and nearly every tune exists as some play on the phrase "I want to get with you"—some more blatantly than others. "C'mon girl, let's go to bed," he commands on "Tryin' to Get Close to You."

That's not to say the album is completely without merit. Musical highlights are scattered throughout, like the scorched blues organ fueling "Fireball of Love," the snappy vocal melody that closes out "Tryin' to Get Close to You," and the bell-bottomed funk riffs pulsating through the disco-era remembrances of "Special" and "Give Me Something Good."

Unfortunately, modern-day Otis seems to specialize in these kinds of moments rather than, you know, actual songs. And while this might make his current output ideal for enterprising DJs/producers/beat makers on the hunt for fresh source material, it's a tough slog for the rest of us.
—Andy Downing

RICHARD THOMPSON EMMYLOU HARRIS & RODNEY CROWELL

Chicago Symphony Center

Chicago, Illinois

March 20, 2013

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Samantha Marble



From the moment he strolled onstage with his self-described “Celtic power trio,” Richard Thompson made dexterity, inventiveness, and poise look second nature. Tasked with opening a co-headlining bill with Emmylou Harris and Rodney Crowell at the Chicago Symphony Center in mid-March, the British guitarist impressed with subtlety and modesty during a 60-minute set that seemed at least an hour too short.

Never one to seek the spotlight, the beret-clad Thompson manipulated textures and tones with the same craftsmanship a master tailor utilizes to work a needle and thread. Eschewing showiness, waste, excess, and the slightest extravagance, the 64-year-old stood in stark contrast to the conventional guitar hero. His humility also shone during his tongue-in-cheek banter. Akin to the protagonists populating many of his character-driven songs, Thompson is a common bloke—or at least wants to be viewed as such in spite of virtuosic guitar skills and a cunning wit that could make an Ivy League prep student blush with envy.



Accompanied by drummer Michael Jerome and bassist Taras Prodaniuk, Thompson stripped tunes to their core, preferring lean arrangements in accordance with those on his excellent recent album, *Electric*. His mates weren't so much backing musicians but close associates—a threesome that operated as a democracy. Thompson assumed a leadership position, yet his cohorts joined in on the decision-making process. Jerome took liberty with jazzy percussive rolls and slinky rhythms. Prodaniuk added and subtracted weight, holding down grooves as Thompson did to guitar strings what

puppeteers do with marionettes.

Perusing rockabilly, blues, folk, funk, rock—and nearly every style outside and between—Thompson defied limitations. He exemplified grace, politesse, smoothness, cleanness, and finesse. Each fill and solo represented another opportunity for adventure, discovery, and risk-taking. And he wasn't about to miss a chance. Still, nothing appeared out of place, no note or passage inserted without reason. Expressing an innate knack for harmony, his fingers caressed the fretboard like those of a master pianist tinkling ivories.

Fittingly, Thompson and Co. produced sounds similarly grand, dynamic, and driving. His trio got more mileage out of three instruments than many groups do from six.

Thompson outfitted the blue-collar lament “Stuck on a Treadmill” with a shuffling pattern indicative of a workingman’s feet tired from repeating the same steps on a factory floor. Toughness and lightness merged on “Sally B,” the ensemble rolling and tumbling through a landscape of S-curves, hills, and underpasses. Sure-handed restraint and control emerged on the cautious “Keep Your Distance,” on which tension trumped explosiveness. Heavy artillery emerged during “If Love Whispers Your Name” and a searing “Can’t Win.” On the latter, Thompson sang through gritted teeth before channeling acidic bitterness through a winding guitar solo sparked with caustic emotion. Barely moving while going on the attack, he demonstrated the determination of a military general, striking and retreating, then returning and hitting twice as hard.

By comparison, sinewy lines on the clever “Good Things Happen to Bad People” smirked with all-knowing sensibility. Through it all, Thompson maintained the calmness and cool of Hall of Fame goalie Patrick Roy in a Game Seven Stanley Cup final. The composure added to the sincerity of the heartfelt “Saving the Good Stuff,” a ballad that waltzed with delicate ease, Thompson taking a breather as he contemplated his next tight-rope-walking feat.



Following their peer’s maneuvers, Harris and Crowell came across somewhat tame. Yet the tandem, supported by a competent quintet and able to conquer a few early technical problems, expressed equivalent charm and proficiency. The pair—whose history encompasses more than four decades and finally resulted in a recent collaborative album, *Old Yellow Moon*—approached songs as conversations between longtime friends. Their chemistry was evident simply from the way they interacted. “Emmylou has the soul of a poet, the voice of an angel, and the heart of a cowgirl,” explained Crowell. In return, Harris credited Crowell for writing songs that suited her style in the early 70s—a time when she still reeled from the death of her previous artistic partner, Gram Parsons.

Not surprisingly, Parsons’ echoes resonated during Harris and Crowell’s nearly two-hour performance, most obviously via his “Return of the Grievous Angel” and “Wheels.” Yet this was Harris and Crowell’s night to celebrate their musical bond and, by extension, the country and vocal pioneers that factored into their evolution. The veterans paid homage to Townes Van Zandt (“Pancho and Lefty”), the Everly Brothers (“Love Hurts”), and Roger Miller (“Invitation to the Blues”).

They probed heartache and sadness, extending outlaw traditions sweet (Waylon Jennings’ “Dreaming My Dreams With You”) and sobering (Kris Kristofferson’s “Chase the Feeling,” given a proper saloon atmosphere).

“Remember country music?” asked Harris. “They used to play it before it got taken over by the pod people.” For the silver-haired vocalist—her timbre still impeccable and phrasing as pure as a fresh blanket of snow—old-time storytelling, honky-tonk kicks, and expressive vulnerability remain paramount. She inhabited the mournful “Back When We Were Beautiful” as if she were issuing an autobiographical statement. On the accordion-accented “Hanging Up My Heart,” she transported the crowd to a rodeo dance.

Harris is all class, but she’s no shrinking violet. And Crowell needed little encouragement to break loose. Welcoming Thompson into the fray for a one-off jam, the collective injected early rock n’ roll energy into an extended version of Crowell’s “I Ain’t Living Long Like This,” Thompson firing off complementary riffs as the band of cowboys and lone cowgirl rode off in search of the nearest roadhouse. ●



Phoenix

Bankrupt!

Loyaute/Glassnote, 180g LP or CD



Simple rule: When a singer, in this case Thomas Mars from Phoenix, croons “why would I lie to you?” to a lover, and does so in a song entitled “Chloroform,” he’s probably not to be trusted. Don’t be fooled by the keyboards, even if they’re as sparkly clean as those countertops in the model home. And don’t be tricked by the big, dance-tent-at-a-festival beats.

With Phoenix, it’s easy to simply admire the surface prettiness—the aural equivalent of a model’s good looks—but there’s more to the ultra-shiny dance pop of this Parisian quartet than meets the eye.

Now on its fifth album, and the follow-up to 2009’s Grammy-winning breakthrough *Wolfgang Amadeus Phoenix*, the band has emerged into a rather reliable and tentatively experimental interpreter of pop trends. While the band is far from a household name, many are betting on 2013 to be massive for Phoenix. This summer, it will be among the top-billed at major events such as Southern California’s Coachella Valley Music & Arts

Festival and Chicago’s Lollapalooza. Few acts, after all, so easily navigate between guitars and EDM-friendly grooves, and *Bankrupt!* sees Phoenix further exploring its digital tendencies.

While label head Daniel Glass was probably being overly ambitious when he told *Billboard* that *Bankrupt!* could be “revolutionary,” there’s no reason to believe this album won’t be heard from start-to-finish at any hip summer party. Seemingly a collection of songs about the perils of fame and money (apparently Phoenix didn’t get the message that this is Drake’s territory), *Bankrupt!* captures a band writing about wanting to hide from it all even as it mimes a sound built for the masses.

“Entertainment” starts with synths that reference East Asia and sees Mars’ voice getting deeper and deeper into the mix. Only the line “I’d rather be alone” is clearly heard, while “SOS In Bel Air” begins with a video-game explosion and segues into the band’s still-fresh mix of club-worthy rhythms and disco accessories. All the while, Mars just wants to get the heck out of your fancy party. “Trying to Be Cool” is the most straight-ahead pop number, and the post-chorus ascending/descending guitar passage the tripiest Phoenix has ever managed. The album gets weirder still: The title track gets caught inside Daft Punk’s vision of *Tron* for about four minutes before Phoenix tells us how lonely it is to be a prop for the pretty people.

Of course, enjoying Phoenix is to lose oneself in the exuberant sound. Whether it’s the dreamy guitars of “Drakkar Noir,” the aggressive start-and-stop rush of rave beats in “Don’t,” or nostalgic vision of 60s pop that never was in “Bourgeois,” Phoenix knows its place in the world. As the 40-minute sugar rush comes to a close on “Oblique City”—a song that strips away the ping-pong melody and electronic layers until all that’s left is classic rock-styled guitar picking—*Bankrupt!* can question excess all it wants. It doesn’t change the fact that it revels in it.
—**Todd Martens**



Kurt Vile

Wakin on a Pretty Daze
Matador, 2LP or CD

Kurt Vile is growing up. The 30-something singer/guitarist, who broke through as a founding member of the War on Drugs before launching a solo career in 2008 with the endearingly lo-fi *Constant Hitmaker*, is now a married father of two. A promo video for his most recent single even features his eldest daughter bouncing around the family home in a zebra mask.

Fittingly, the Philadelphia native's music has matured as well, and his fifth full-length studio album, *Wakin on a Pretty Daze*, sounds like the work of a man who's embraced his role as a father, husband, and provider. "There comes a time in every man's life," he sings atop a rolling mist of guitar on "Too Hard," "when he's gotta take a hold of the hand that isn't his."

Elsewhere, Vile turns out surprisingly straightforward love tunes (the ethereal "Never Run Away"), meditative jams that linger like long-burning incense (the nine-minute-plus title track unfolds so casually it could have been directed by filmmaker Peter Jackson), and sun-kissed numbers like "Goldtone," an epic slacker ballad where Vile manages to distill his music down to its absolute essence. "Sometimes when I get in my zone you'd think I was stoned," he sings in his trademark drawl. "But I never, as they say, touch the stuff. I might be adrift, but I'm still alert. Concentrate my hurt into...golden tones."

In the past, Vile's songs were less "golden tones" than roughhewn cave paintings. The recording quality was generally sketchy at best, and the singer's words often unintelligible, their meaning masked by his Fred Fenster-like propensity for mumbling. The musician's 2011 album marked a distinct turning point, however, and he takes a similarly scrubbed-up approach here. Viewed as a whole, the songs are both pristine and expansive. Vile's maze-work of fingerpicked guitar often shimmers like galaxies of newborn stars.

The musical touchstones are varied, and tunes hint at everyone from John Fahey to Neil Young (dig the snarling intro to "KV Crimes"). "Air Bud," possibly the best song ever recorded to share a title with a movie about a basketball-playing dog, even incorporates shaggy Eastern influences. While Vile has undeniably matured, his lyrics haven't lost their sense of playfulness. He opens "Too Hard" by pledging to do his duty to both God and country (you know, for his daughters' sake) before slowly inching away from such grandiosity. "Hey, but I'm just human after all," he sings. "I will promise not to smoke too much. And I will promise not to party too hard." So, baby steps, anyway.

The percolating "Was All Talk," in turn, finds Vile tweaking his youthful impetuosity (dude did title his solo debut *Constant Hitmaker*, after all), singing, "There was a time in my life when they thought I was all talk."

These days, however, it seems he's content to shut up and let his guitar do the talking. "Making music is easy," he drawls as the song draws to a close. "Watch me." And with that he unwinds a slow-burning solo that trails across the tune like some grand comet's tail. Keep your eyes fixed on the skies. —**Andy Downing**



Iron & Wine

Ghost on Ghost
Nonesuch, LP or CD

Jazzy atmospheres dot much of *Ghost on Ghost*. They're as diverse as the sweet harmonies and brunch-time grooves of "Joy," bachelor-pad baroque of "New Mexico's No Breeze," and New Orleans noir of "Lovers' Revolution." Involving chamber pop musicians such as Rob Burger (Tin Hat), jazz act Sex Mob, and ace jazz drummer Brian Blade, the record's songs project an intimate, loose feel.

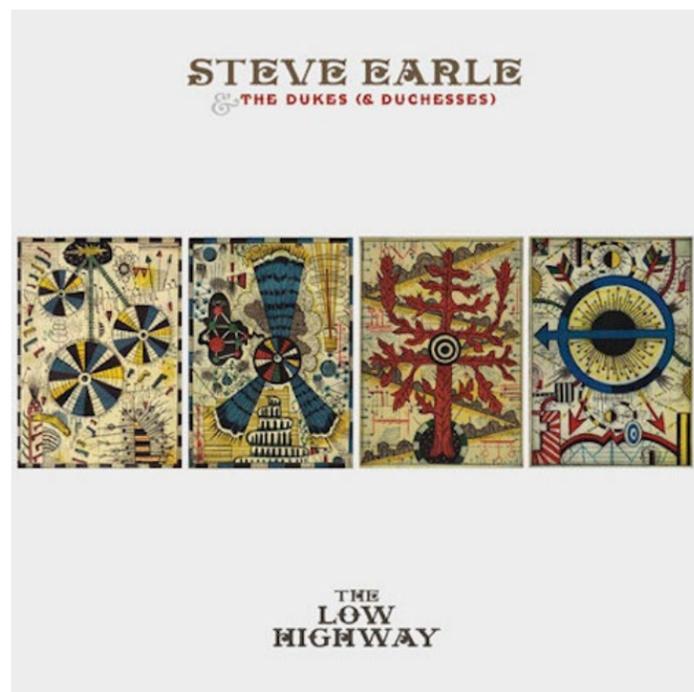
"Caught in the Briars" ends in a free-form breakdown that implies the tune materialized out

of a very brief moment of musical coherence. "Low Light Buddy of Mine" is all dark, plucky bass notes best heard well after last call. "Baby Center Stage" possesses such a relaxed feel that, in lesser hands, it would come across as a long-lost Elton John number. But Beam accessorizes minimally. Rather than dominate, a Western guitar, a nostalgic piano, and falsetto-driven harmonies come and go.

Comparisons to 70s giants such as John and Van Morrison are becoming increasingly

The latest project from artsy Southern softie Sam Beam, who heads up Iron & Wine, begins with a brief (22 seconds to be exact) overture of rhythmic noise. It could be the sound of a hellhound let loose in a tight kitchen, or some sort of struggle in an alley. But it's over and done with rather soon, and it's little more than a tease. There's no racket to be had on the dozen songs that follow. This isn't too surprising, as Beam—over the course of a career that now spans more than a decade—has gradually matured into one of indie rock's foremost crooners.

regular for Beam, and there's an ageless albeit not-quite-old-fashioned nature to everything he touches. At times, it's quite regal. If he wanted, Beam could be indie rock's answer to Michael Buble—a singer whose style he parallels on the holiday-referencing "The Desert Babbler." But like the album's title, Beam, for better or worse, prefers to let his melodies drift in and out, opting for musicality and anonymity over showmanship. —**Todd Martens**



Steve Earle & The Dukes (And Duchesses)

The Low Highway

New West Records, LP or CD

At 58, Steve Earle has built an enviable career. He's an acclaimed singer-songwriter, producer, author, and actor. An elder statesman of the roots music scene, Earle seems a far cry from the nervy young rebel who debuted in 1986 with the classic *Guitar Town*. You'd think by now he could just sit back and relax. But an undertow of restlessness pervades *The Low Highway*, Earle's 15th studio album. His trademark take on Americana has grown weightier with time, and evolved into haunting, circumspect, largely acoustic music.

Even when he travels well-worn ground, Earle does not come across as dated. He remains a hardcore, if mournful, troubadour on the title track, contemplating an America filled with folks that are hurting. "Saw empty houses on dead-end streets/People lining up for something to eat," he sings in a burnt, gravelly rasp of a voice.

Lyrical, this not a new revelation. Yet Earle maintains such a palpable conviction in his delivery that he makes old conceits sound fresh. As much as he has been influenced by the drunken romantic poetry of Hank Williams Sr. and Townes Van Zandt, Earle is deeply informed by the socialist spirit of Woody Guthrie.

On *The Low Highway*, Earle includes his band's name on the cover, the first time he has done so since 1987's *Exit O*. It's a righteous move given the exquisite contributions the musicians make to his songs. Earle also adds "The Duchesses" to the title to acknowledge his talented female players, including his wife, singer-songwriter Allison Moorer.

Good as Earle is, he's not infallible. "21st Century Blues," a country-rocker that sounds like a clumsy parody of Springsteen, is a clunker. Other than this misstep, Earle is on point throughout, whether hammering down on the old-timey outing "Warren Hellman's Banjo" or expressing heart-breaking memory on "Remember Me." Three songs here were originally written for the HBO's "Treme." Two are co-written with series co-star Lucia Micarelli: the fiddle-driven "Love's Gonna Blow My Way" and bittersweet "After Mardi Gras."

"Down the Road Pt. II" finds Earle taking to the highway. "Roll over Kerouac / Tell Woody Guthrie the news," he sings. All these years on, he remains an ever-searching spirit.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**

©Photo by Ted Barron





Low
The Invisible Way
Sub Pop, LP or CD

There's mood music, and then there's whatever it is Low is currently doing. Now on its tenth album, the Duluth, Minn., trio remains perhaps the only band around about which its fans could plausibly worry that the act's songs could disappear into nothingness. Not, of course, that the collective would call it quits—but simply that Low's grace with mining the quiet and perfecting the art of patience could lead Low down a path where its songs are barely a murmur.

Of course, there's plenty of beauty to be had in such precise restraint. Yet with Low, there's often just as much disquiet. "The truth can hide, sometimes right behind the sorrow," sing Alan Sparhawk and Mimi Parker on "Waiting," and then they go looking for it "behind the smile." Meanwhile, a melody is gradually revealed a by a loving, whispering guitar, as if there's someone it doesn't want to disturb.

Sparhawk and Parker's overlaying vocals have always conveyed unrest; they're working in concert, yes, but they harmonize blankly, singing in much the same way two pallbearers walk in unison. What's different here is the way each instrument is intimately isolated. Produced by Wilco's Jeff Tweedy, *The Invisible Way* doesn't sound stark so much as simply forlorn. For example, the few minor-key piano notes of "To Our Knees" that give way to delicately plucked guitar strings, the wood-board patter of "Mother," or the rhythmic, twilight brush strokes of "Amethyst."

It's not always comforting, but there is plenty of room—and space in the songs—for reflection. "Time, it pulls out your eyes," Sparhawk sings on "Amethyst," as much of *The Invisible Way* seems to steadily march toward one's later years in life. When there is an electric guitar, it's striking to the point of horrifying, such as the all-enveloping doom that leaves feedback skid marks all over the song's coda. "Happy birthday" is the message repeated throughout the song's final moments, but the sentiment isn't one of Hallmark variety.

Similarly, "Plastic Cup" starts as a mediation on aging—a narration that goes from partying with childhood friends to leaving urine samples for doctors—and that's just in the first verse of the first song on the album. With an acoustic guitar built for a hospice waiting room, the song follows the cup holding the urine sample until it's buried in a trash heap and discovered centuries later by historians. How's that for a wake-up call?

Yet Low makes such helplessness sound glorious. Parker takes the lead on "Just Make it Stop," where defeatism transitions into determination with each passing harmony. It may not all end up OK, but Low isn't ready to surrender to the calm, either.
—**Todd Martens**

Traditional forms of roots music are considered risky business in the mainstream country industry. This is why you'll find Luke Winslow-King's new release on Bloodshot Records, Chicago's so-called "insurgent country" label. The 29-year-old slide guitarist, singer, and songwriter lives largely inside a pre-war era of music, a place of unvarnished delta blues, jazz, and gospel.

A Michigan native, Winslow-King moved to New Orleans in 2001. Over the last decade he's made a name for himself in the NOLA music scene and paid his dues through continuous live gigging. At first blush, it might be easy to file Winslow-King as an inordinately talented imitator. He kicks off *The Coming Tide* with the title track, his bloozy guitar set against the syncopated thwacking of a stripped-down drum kit. There's no arguing he's terrific at replicating music as period piece.

Winslow-King is a low-key, convincing singer, yet it's vocalist and washboard player Esther Rose who emerges as a deceptively powerful weapon. Her sweet, sharp, sometimes ghostly voice seems to rise from the ether of a bygone era. Her vocals are a seductive instrument in their own right, whether she's harmonizing with Winslow-King or engaging with him during snappy call-and-response sequences.



Luke Winslow-King
The Coming Tide
Bloodshot Records, LP or CD

Singing and playing guitar against piano, trumpet, and fingerpicks scratching a washboard, Winslow-King brings loving authenticity to "I Know She'll Do Right By Me." He's equally engaging on the spooky blues-folk murder ballad "Ella Speed." It's clear this guy is far more than just a master of mimicking an old-school jukejoint sound. He's a revelation when he steps away from his too-polite homages to the past and gives free rein to the nastier side of his guitar-playing skills. "Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning" is a triumph of snarling restraint. The dirty gospel-blues number speaks of Sunday morning salvation in its lyrics but reeks of Saturday night sin via its wickedly insinuating music.

"I've Got My Mind Set On You" is another raw, distorted blues stunner that conjures the spirit of blues icon Son House. Winslow-King's guitar is filled with stinging, buzzing, insistent, repetitive power. The blues, like much country, has gotten very clean in the modern age. Winslow-King demonstrates just how potent it can sound when a player gets back to the soulful basics.
—**Chrissie Dickinson**



How to Destroy Angels

Welcome Oblivion
Columbia, 180g 2LP or CD

Any suggestion that Nine Inch Nails mastermind Trent Reznor has completely mellowed with age should be immediately put to rest.

In a recent “Ask Me Anything” segment on the popular Web site Reddit, the singer responded to one inquiry (“As millionaires, why did you sign up with a record label to promote your new album?”) in profanely hilarious fashion, writing, “Sorry, the wifi on our yacht is having issues, we can’t get your full question to load. Try sending me an email at gofuckyourself@youcunt.com.”

Still, at 47 years old, Reznor’s music has certainly started to reflect his advancing age. As such, his outbursts tend to take place outside the recording studio these days, and songs project something closer to existential dread rather than all-consuming rage. This is true of both late-era Nine Inch Nails albums like *Ghosts I-IV*, and his award-winning film-composition work for David Fincher movies *The Social Network* and *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*. Such haunted vibes carry over into his full-length debut with How to Destroy Angels, a group that includes his wife, Mariqueen Maandig, and longtime producer/creative partner Atticus Finch.

The band, which first surfaced shortly after Nine Inch Nails went on hiatus three years ago—a break that, to the surprise of nobody, ended last month—is

more collaborative than Reznor’s previous venture. Maandig, not Reznor, handles primary vocal duties. This, it turns out, is not exactly a good thing. As a singer, Maandig is pedestrian at best, and the tunes on which she’s pushed to the forefront (“How Long?”) are among the weakest. Conversely, the best work almost entirely dispatches of vocals. Witness the quietly simmering “The Loop Closes,” which piles on spiky synths and buzzing drums for three tension-filled minutes before Reznor and Maandig show up and start whispering cryptic asides (“The beginning is the end...”).

Fortunately, *Welcome Oblivion* is an album driven almost solely by texture and mood, and more often than not, Maandig’s voice is treated like another instrument in the mix. On “Too Late, All Gone,” a slinky number that sounds something

like robots copulating, her breathy vocals inject the song with an air of humanity. Likewise, the singer acts as a flesh-and-blood foil to the crackling, animatronic buzz of “And the Sky Began to Scream.”

As time goes by, it seems increasingly apt that Reznor titled Nine Inch Nails’ 1989 debut *Pretty Hate Machine*, and it seems as though he’s spent a bulk of his career crafting a sound that neatly fits that image. *Welcome Oblivion* rarely strays from this template (the lone exception being the fractured folk of “Ice Age”), Reznor and Finch working in tandem to create a bone-chilling landscape of whirring, mechanized noise. It’s nothing new, sure, but it still functions as a nifty little placeholder for fans waiting on the next, inevitable Nine Inch Nails album. —**Andy Downing**



Besnard Lakes

Until In Excess, Imperceptible UFO
Jagjaguwar, LP or CD

Few new sounds are as big as those crafted by the Besnard Lakes. It’s a reliable facet of this little-known Montreal quartet that continues to surprise, even as the band is now four full-length albums deep into a career that has spanned about a decade.

The cornerstones of the band’s sound remain in place on *Until In Excess, Imperceptible UFO*, but the key to understanding the Besnard Lakes is now coming into greater focus. The group’s songs, anchored by husband-and-wife tandem Jace Lasek and Olga Goreas, don’t build so much as unfold. Harmonies on “46 Satires” slow-dance around each other, guitars on “Al-amogordo” crest and then retreat and then crest again, as if in a constant tug-of-war with some unseen gravitational force.

Familiar instruments—a bass, an organ—bleed together on every track until they no longer seem familiar at all. Vocals are intimate, the guitars are built for an arena. And then there are moments, such as on “And Her Eyes Were Painted Gold,” that suddenly travel back in time, where the patient but forceful arrangement is taken over by 50s-inspired vocal “bops” and whistles.

The sonic miasma manages to fade in and out, as if the eight songs are part of one continuous time loop. The slow-bending “The Spectre” shape-shifts into a long-lost Beach Boys track. “Close your eyes,” Lasek sings in a falsetto, and the phrase feels more like an order into hypnotism than a lyric. “People of the Sticks” is carried by majestic rhythm and guitars that, seemingly, could move mountains. And yet everything feels a little weird, almost as if the guitars are strumming both forward and backward.

Somewhere within the lyrics resides a spy novel. The Besnard Lakes have designed each album and song to be connected, with each track telling a different facet of the story. Good luck decoding it; this is rock ‘n’ roll where mystery is paramount. —**Todd Martens**



LOW

Mississippi Studios

Portland, Oregon

April 5, 2013

Photos and text by
Jeff Dorgay

In a world that can be seen to lack tangible musical talent, given the proliferation of auto-tuning and lip-synching, it's refreshing to experience a band that distills its studio effort to an even higher level of craftsmanship on the stage. Not that this feat is anything new for Low, celebrating its 20th anniversary as a collective.

For the uninitiated, Low features a slow, sparse, albeit encompassing sound and consists of original members Alan Sparhawk (guitar, vocals) and wife Mimi Parker (drums, vocals). Bass player Steve Garrington freelances, providing additional keyboards and backing vocals. Long prized by critics and peers (Robert Plant has covered several of Low's songs), the Duluth-based ensemble nonetheless remains strangers to widespread commercial fame. However, judging from the fans that arrived from far-flung states to experience its show at Portland's Mississippi Studios in early April, Low's appeal is doing just fine, thank you.

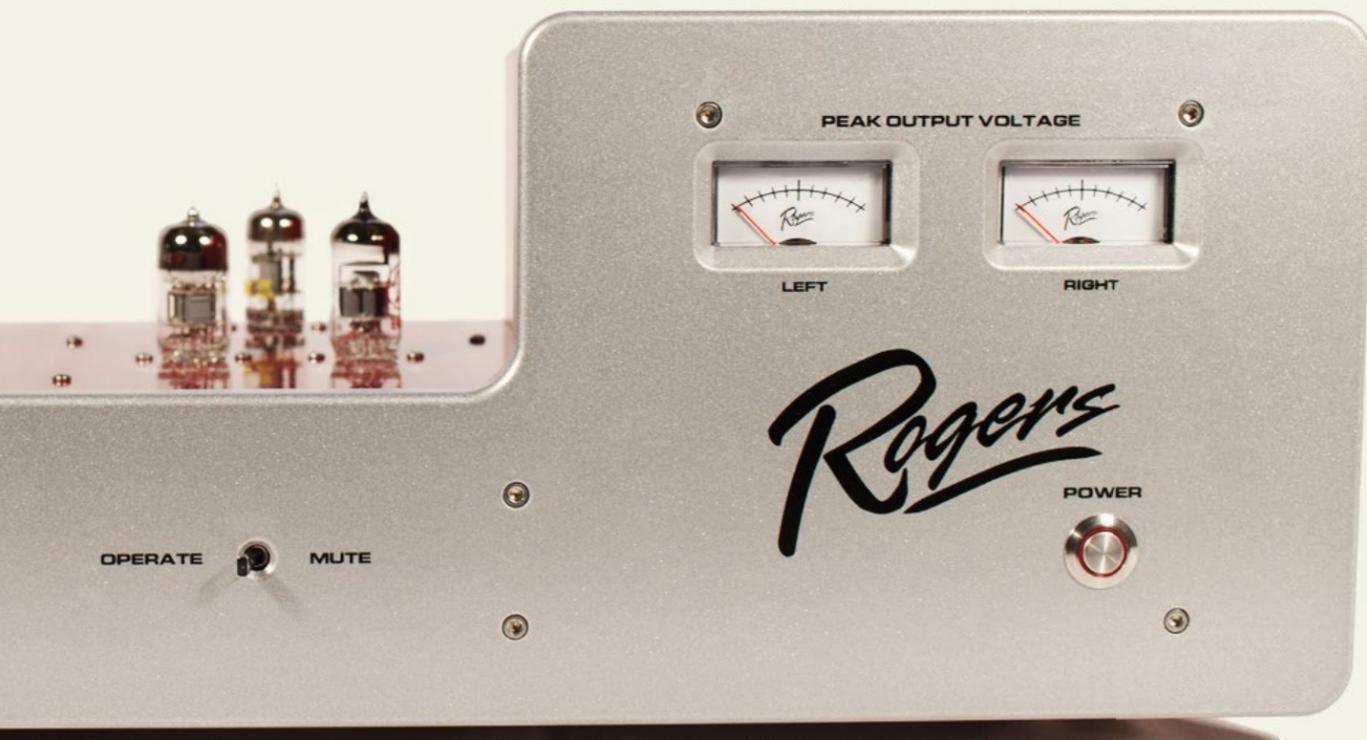
Live, Low doesn't operate in power trio mode. Unhurried and unbowed, the band built each arrangement on Parker's gentle drumming. She used only a snare drum, upright bass drum, and large cymbal, with a brush and wrapped mallet. *(continued)*



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CONCERT

The house mix sounded like a vintage 60s stereo record, with Sparhawk mixed hard right, Garrington hard left, and Parker dead center—reflecting the manner in which the musicians were spread out on stage. Choosing not to overpower the room with volume, the amplification mirrored that of an enormous audiophile stereo system, with bigger dynamics and extreme clarity further contributing to the ethereal mood.

Opening with the metaphorical “Plastic Cup,” the majority of the set drew from Low’s current album, *The Invisible Way*. Sprinkled amidst the gospel-tinged “Holy Ghost” and haunting “Just Make It Stop,” tunes culled from the band’s earlier Sub Pop and Kranky releases functioned as punctuation marks. A rendition of “Dinosaur Act” came across faster than on record, and worked wondrously, as Sparhawk took more license on guitar, stretching out in distance as well as tone. He created deep textures with just a couple of pedals and two modest amplifiers—a lesson many of today’s guitarists could heed.

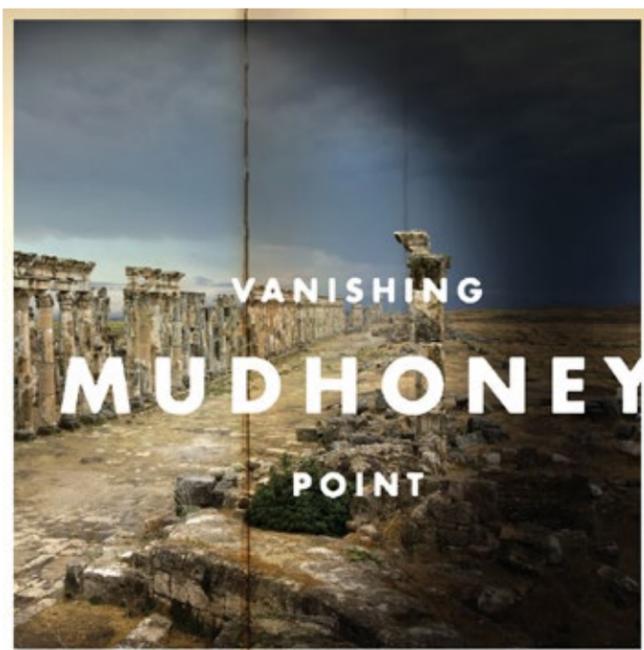
Following the format of *The Invisible Way*, Parker shared in an equal amount of lead vocals and, as a result, the band felt more well-rounded than on prior tours. And Sparhawk seemingly knew it. “I’ve been trying to say less tonight,” he said, wisely letting the occasional jolts of noise, unsettling delicacy, and contemplative narratives do the talking. ●



Who said losers always finish last? Mudhoney, the forever underappreciated albeit most crucial cog of Seattle's famed "grunge" era, is the scene's longest-running band still standing. The beloved underdogs celebrate their 25th anniversary this year with a brilliant new album that follows on the heels of *I'm Now*, a film documenting their career.

Only casually mentioned the same breath amidst their hometown city's bigger acts—Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Alice in Chains, Soundgarden, even the side project Temple of the Dog—the quartet took the entire musical explosion in stride despite releasing the record (1991's *Every Good Boy Deserves Fudge*) that saved Sub Pop by buying the label a few extra months on its then-failing lifeline and becoming one of the last underground artists to sign to a major label that, true to form, soon left the group to rot on a vine. Mudhoney accomplished it all with its humor and modesty in tact. No tabloid-fodder rehab stories. No internal controversies or reality-TV marriages. No breakups and ballyhooed reunions. Simply a legacy that claims nine-record discography with only one mediocre effort (*Under a Billion Suns*), countless shows, and thousands of empty beer cans.

To better put the group's 25-year stretch and excellent *Vanishing Point* in context, consider the history of 2013's most hyped anniversary-commemorating band, the Rolling Stones. By the time the self-proclaimed World's Greatest Rock and Roll Band marked its first quarter-century together in 1987, its creative impulses were essentially kaput. Forgettable albums were released as excuses to tour and stay in the limelight; the Stones issued their last great LP (*Tattoo You*) just shy of their 20th birthday,



Mudhoney
Vanishing Point
Sub Pop, LP or CD

a circumstance that remains true to this day. This isn't to suggest that, when their legacies are viewed through a wide-angle lens, Mudhoney is superior to the Stones. However, while the Stones gave little reason other than nostalgia (and expensive ticket prices) to care about their present once 1981 passed, Mudhoney offers plenty of incentive to listen on *Vanishing Point*. There's something to be said for relevancy and continuing to try, particularly after the blush of youthful abandon has long faded.

Weathered and wiser, Mudhoney isn't the same band it was in 1988. The quartet sticks to the heavier, tighter approach its pursued since Guy Maddison replaced original bassist Matt Lukin more than a decade ago. Psychedelic accents, absent from the group's initial era that cropped up at the turn of the century, also appear. Vocalist/guitarist Mark Arm and Co. is now more menacing, retaining its trademark flippancy but railing at targets with tangible urgency, spite, and acidity.



©Photo by Emily Reiman

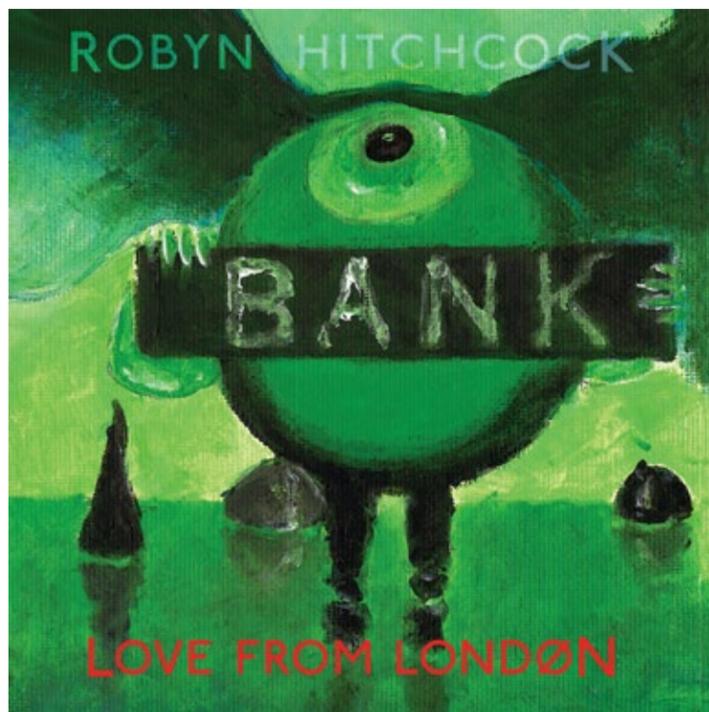
Mudhoney's return to shorter songs and horn-free arrangements—decisions enacted on 2008's excellent *The Lucky Ones*—continues here. Spunky and simple, tunes on *Vanishing Point* retaliate against dreaded targets, provide catharsis, and look for escapes. Fun is always just a fuzz-drenched guitar chord or sleazy organ fill away.

"I'm not on some grandiose trip/I'm fine with little sips," declares Arm on "I Like It Small," a catchy number about low-yield, limited-appeal existence that simultaneously functions as a shot at outsized personalities and witty mantra given the group's experiences. It's impossible to tell if Mudhoney skewers more toward the serious or sarcastic, yet the cheerleader-chanted coda and discernible merriment appear to indicate

an equal amount of both traits are in play. Such cleverness extends to the buzzing, quasi-philosophical "What To Do With the Neutral" and mystical "The Final Course," an amusing tale of death featuring Arm opting for arch vocals to accentuate the thespian narrative. Imagination reigns. Amidst waves of phase and decay during "In This Rubber Tomb," he's off exploring uncharted terrains, licking god particles, and getting lost in space as Mudhoney updates early Hawkwind and Amon Duul for a new generation.

Outsider adventures aside, *Vanishing Point* shines courtesy of Mudhoney's venomous reactions to celebrity, entitlement, sycophants, privilege, and phoniness. Unlike so many self-satisfied and mellow indie-rock contemporaries, here's a band at least paying attention to what's happening in the world.

"I don't care if you think I'm a prick," yowls a defiant Arm on the spring-loaded "I Don't Remember You," smirking undercurrents complementing his annoyed demeanor and resilience to conform, suck up, or pretend to gain a temporary advantage. The band roars with similar underdog purpose and tenacity on "The Only Son of the Widow From Nain" and bluesy "Sing This Song of Joy," a kiss-off ripper that revels in the death of an adversary, ala Bob Dylan's "Masters of War." Then again, Dylan never penned anything as hilarious and antagonistic as the set-closing "Douchebags on Parade," a should-be anthem that speaks for itself and begs to be blared anytime life's contemptible scum bring you down. Consider revenge and justice served. —**Bob Gendron**


Robyn Hitchcock

Love from London
Yep Roc Records, LP or CD

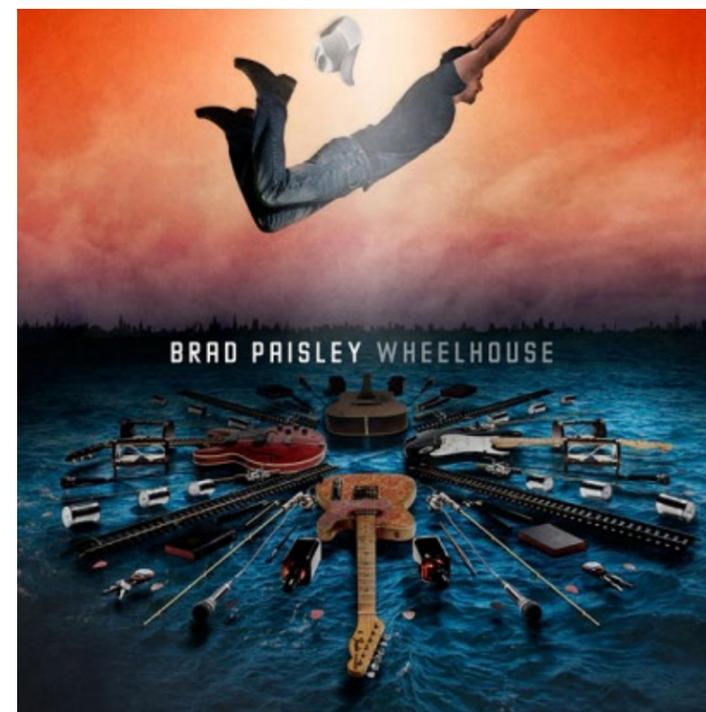
Prior to listening to Robyn Hitchcock's *Love From London*, the latest offering from the 60-year-old British cynic perhaps still best-known for his work in psychedelic-rock outfit the Soft Boys, a mistake was made. A link to an interview with Hitchcock on The Onion's AV Club was passed along—one where discussed the songs he hated most. He chose "Arthur's Theme" from Christopher Cross, the 1981 tune most of us know best from hearing at dentist offices. Of the soapy piano ballad—and it's okay if you don't remember it—Hitchcock said that it sounds as if you've "just become incontinent and soiled your clothing, but you've just been given an enormous amount of painkillers so it doesn't matter."

Two things: One, the music criticism here is not going to be as good as that remark. Two, reading that before listening to *Love from London* created unreasonable expectations as to the potential ferociousness of the album. So, before reading The Onion interview, listen to the *Love from London* track "Fix You," a fiery little defense of the working class. "They make you redundant and blame you for being a slacker," Hitchcock sings, all while a guitar rings like an ambulance siren in slow motion, the sound, perhaps, of waking up with a hang-over after drinking your wages.

Much of *Love from London* strikes a similar mood, one that's a little sad and a little angry. Yet, no other song makes reference to your failing kidneys and inability to pay for health insurance. "Harry's Song," which could be about Prince Harry, or a friend or a family member, or an answer to songs of the same name from Ringo Starr song or Barclay James Harvest, is especially disturbing. The spare piano melody could be lifted from a horror film. Meanwhile, Hitchcock sings of drifting apart from an acquaintance. "I don't know anything about you," his voice echoes. Then a long pause. Then the word "anymore."

There are moments of fun, too, but even "I Love You" seems to fade in and out of consciousness. Instruments are fuzzy, and so is Hitchcock's voice, as he sings of puppy-love clichés and late-in-life settling. "Nothing in the world's like you," Hitchcock intones. "Believe me, because I've looked."

The bottom line: You never quite knew when Hitchcock is screwing you or being honest, be it the upbeat "Devil On a String" with its images of gift wrap and champagne, or the blocky beats and forlorn strings of "End of Time," where Hitchcock may or may not be ready to call this life thing quits. Or maybe he's just looking for an out of a relationship. "Get some 60-second feelings for yourself," he snarls, before opening up his arms to the heavens. —**Todd Martens**


Brad Paisley

Wheelhouse
Arista Nashville, 2LP or CD

On *Wheelhouse*, his eighth studio album, Brad Paisley breaks with Music City protocol and produces himself for the first time. The country star and guitar-slinger extraordinaire even renovated an old farmhouse into a home studio to record his unique vision.

Wheelhouse is a highly ambitious 17-track effort filled with special effects, overdubs, samples, and myriad guest cameos (Monty Python's Eric Idle even shows up for a star turn). It's also a mixed bag. Paisley seemingly experimented to his heart's content in the studio. The release reflects the pros and cons of that unregulated freedom.

Let's start with the triumphs. "Runaway Train" finds Paisley at his full-tilt best and set against an explosive mix of fiddle, guitar, pedal steel, and drums. Equally appealing, "Southern Comfort Zone" is a smart ode to leaving the insularity of a small town and embracing the larger world. A bracing country rocker, "Pressing On a Bruise" mightily benefits from some solid vocals and an ace rap from singer-songwriter Mat Kearney. Paisley's risk-taking also results in a progressive country winner via the expansive "Outstanding In Our Field." The song features ghostly samples of the late legend Roger Miller, as well as guest appearances from contemporaries Bentley and Hunter Hayes.

Now for the outright weird. Paisley the producer seems like a kid in a candy store on several tracks. Excited by choices at his disposal, Paisley chooses them all. Sugar shock ensues. To wit: "Karate," a clanging female-empowerment anthem against domestic violence. The tune concerns an abused wife who secretly takes karate lessons, earns a black belt ("to match her eye"), and then pummels her offending husband in a violent fight. It features rocking guitar, big drums, hard-plucked banjo, a children's choir (!), and a redneck rap courtesy of Charlie Daniels. Whew. One question: Where's the kitchen sink?

"Karate" is upbeat to the point of clinical mania. I still can't decide if I love this song for its weirdness (ala an over-the-top Jerry Reed classic) or if I loathe it for its bizarre overkill. On a related note, Paisley may well deserve props for recording a plea for racial understanding in "Accidental Racist," featuring veteran rapper LL Cool J. Yet, while sentiment is admirable, the song is musically and lyrically awkward.

Such criticisms are quibbles in the big picture. *Wheelhouse* is Brad Paisley coloring far outside the lines. Although it features occasional excesses, the album continually surprises with chance-taking. How many mainstream country albums do that?

—**Chrissie Dickinson**


Justin Timberlake

The 20/20 Experience
RCA, 2LP or CD

Justin Timberlake undoubtedly has Hollywood ambitions. In the seven years since the onetime Mouseketeer released his last album, *FutureSex/LoveSounds*, he has focused primarily on his film career, turning up in movies both good (*The Social Network*) and, uh, not so much (*The Love Guru*). So perhaps it's not all that surprising Timberlake's long-in-the-works return to music, dubbed *The 20/20 Experience*, remains cinematic in its scope.

"Just like a movie shoot," he sings in his trademark falsetto on "Tunnel Vision," "I'm zoomin' in on you." Elsewhere, the singer sets tunes on the bottom of the sea (the gorgeously minimalist "Blue Ocean Floor") and in the far reaches of the cosmos ("Space-ship Coupe," a bizarre cut built around the ecstatic moans of a what could be an orgasming alien), essentially constructing his album as a blockbuster Hollywood epic with a bottomless budget.

Working with producer Timbaland, who helped shape the still revolutionary-sounding *FutureSex*, Timberlake crafts a soundscape worthy of these grand ambitions. Most songs stretch beyond the seven-minute mark and incorporate a variety of sounds and styles. "Pusher Love Girl," for one, drifts in on a haze of pot smoke and cinematic strings before the producer piles on a full gospel choir, strutting Motown horns, and funky electronic blips. "Let the Groove In" delivers on its title, building from a minimalist patter of African hand drums into a full-on dance-floor burner that comes on like a modernist take on Michael Jackson's "Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'." "Don't Hold the Wall" employs a veritable maze of Timbaland sonic trademarks (skittering synths, babyish vocal samples),

which Timberlake navigates as deftly as a punt returner slicing his way through the defense for a long touchdown.

Like most Hollywood films, however, there's rarely anything of substance beneath the pretty, polished surface. Lyrically, Timberlake focuses almost solely on sex, drugs, and his wardrobe. (The lead single "Suit & Tie" essentially doubles as an advert for pal/fashion designer Tom Ford.) In that sense, the songs on *20/20* often sound like they could have been penned by Sean Parker, the Internet capitalist Timberlake portrayed as a greedy sleazeball in *The Social Network* ("A million dollars isn't cool. You know what's cool? A billion dollars!").

It's a shame, too, because Timberlake's public persona is, in general, damned likeable. He's clearly got a well-honed sense of humor (check his near-flawless record as a *Saturday Night Live* host), and in interviews, he comes across as almost unbearably charming. Unfortunately, these character traits are largely whitewashed from *20/20*, an album nearly as self-involved and materialistic as the Jay-Z/Kanye West collaboration *Watch the Throne*. Witness "Mirrors," a creepily narcissistic ballad that could easily be interpreted as Timberlake's love letter to self.

(One can almost picture the singer adjusting his own tie as he croons, "Aren't you somethin' to admire?")

Only occasionally does Timberlake let his more playful side overtake this inner sartorial tastemaker. Such is the case on "Strawberry Bubblegum," an endearingly goofy slice of ear candy that includes a sly reference to "Pop," a song he belted out with his boy-band cohorts in 'N Sync way back in 2001.

In the pop spectrum, a dozen years can safely be considered a lifetime. So credit Timberlake with finding ways to maintain his leading-man status. Now, like any modern actor of note, he needs to remind us he's more than just a pretty face the next time around. —**Andy Downing**



Jason Isbell

Southeastern

Southeastern/Thirty Tigers, LP or CD

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Last year on Twitter, Jason Isbell accused country star Dierks Bentley of stealing his “In a Razor Town” song and co-opting it for “Home.” The fact that the latter single became a number-one hit isn’t important. What matters is that it’s performed by a bland singer whose pedestrian fare subscribes to Nashville’s commercial rules and who responded to Isbell’s claims by facetiously Tweeting, “THIS JUST IN: Nashville and LA songwriters running out of ideas... rushing to steal jason [sic] songs!”

Anyone that’s listened to so-called country radio in the past decade would likely take issue with Bentley’s statement. In Nashville, originality is anathema; formula is sacred. Bentley’s comment also rings with ironic truth: Isbell is indeed a fine songwriter.

Most tunesmiths would be lucky to crib from him. Since emerging in late 2001 as a member of the Drive-By Truckers, Isbell has made his mark as a distinguished guitarist and wordsmith, turning out bold, introspective tales steeped in the people, places, and habits of the Alabama Bible Belt where he grew up.

Yet, akin to many standout artists, Isbell has paid a considerable price for his craft. He endured a divorce to then-Drive-By Truckers bassist Shonna Tucker that factored into his departure from the group. The 34-year-old also spent a majority of the last 10 years drowning in liquor to the extent he cannot even remember much of his period with the Truckers. A full-blown alcoholic, Isbell would begin drinking early in the morning—provided he even got up.

“Wasn’t quite morning, I wasn’t quite breathing/My heart way up in my throat,” he sings on the life-on-the-road, garage-rocking chronicle “Super 8” from *Southeastern*. “Girl starts screaming and the maid starts screaming/And it looks like it’s all she wrote,” he continues, with a sly grin.

Isbell, of course, survived his death-tempting ordeals. He swore off booze in February 2012 amidst a concerted effort to stay clean. He toured with fellow recovering substance abuser Ryan Adams and gained support. He remarried, to another musician, Amanda Shires, whose fiddle joins with Isbell in harmonious union. And in the brilliant *Southeastern*, he molded the kind of album every musician yearns to

make once in his or her lifetime.

Honest, dignified, unguarded, and courageously personal, *Southeastern* is the repentant and sobering sound of a man’s coming to terms with his demons, mistakes, strengths, desires, and needs. It opens a window on the future by looking back at the past and offers an unflinching gut-check of human nature via narratives tied to tragedy, loss, vulnerability, maturation, healing, and responsibility. Throughout, Isbell never reaches for self-pity, weighs down the listener in sadness, or stands on a soapbox to preach. His balanced approach and unshakeable calm are as remarkable as the poetic detail and lyrical descriptiveness.

Billed as a solo album (Isbell’s second), *Southeastern* retains a stripped-down and organic country-rock feel, even when a handful of guests and backing musicians appear. On the gorgeous album-opening “Cover Me Up,” Isbell turns in the rawest vocal performance of his career. Framed by an acoustic guitar and minimalist pedal-steel fills, he reflects on hitting rock bottom before finding his once-shattered faith restored in the form of a new companion. The devotional ballad is more than an apt way to commence an intimate record imbued with austere contemplation. It’s an anchor, an attention-getting prelude to the sincerity and themes that follow. Falling in love and getting a fresh start at life are paramount among them.

Whether taking stock of how opening himself up to love altered his attitude (the golden-hued

“Stockholm,” a duet with Kim Richey), mulling moral obligations (the flinty “Yvette,” a hard-hitting allegory of familial abuse), or rummaging through the wreckage of failed romances (the crackling “Flying Over Water”), Isbell doesn’t sugarcoat sins or pretend he’s clear of vices that nearly destroyed him. He lugs his heavy emotional baggage with him while he wonders about right answers, searches for what really defines a man, and worries if past ghosts will continue to haunt him in the future. Occasionally, they do.

On the swaying “Songs That She Sang In the Shower,” a pensive Isbell recognizes that wonderful memories attached to a former partner will follow him forever. Outfitted with a tumbling chorus that rains down with damning certainty, the song seizes on the strong connections people have with music—and how melodies can trigger landscapes, feelings, and images more accurately than sight, touch, or smell. Similarly candid, Isbell admits lies, deficiencies, and addictions on the confessional “Different Days.” As he ruminates on transformation, muted finger-picked notes ballet about his voice like fireflies dancing in the pale moonlight. “My daddy told me, I believe he told me true that: ‘The right thing’s always the hardest thing to do,’” he sings.

Isbell keeps such advice close to the heart throughout *Southeastern*, which could be seen as his commitment to adhere to the principle no matter how steep the cost. For him, integrity comes first. During the heartbreaking “Elephant,”

the Alabama native paints a surgically accurate picture of a terminally ill cancer patient, the aural effigy playing like a film in the listener’s mind. Scenery, environments, and characters come to life as they do in a gripping novel. In under four minutes, he examines the spirit required to battle the disappearance of dignity, explores the spiral of life, underlines comfort wrought by lasting friendship and small distractions, and lays bare the pain of loneliness.

“Traveling Alone” unfolds with comparable poignancy. Its acoustic dust-broom sweep and sweet violin lines waltz hand-in-hand, each married to the singer’s calm recollections. A wake-up call and invitation, the song is one man’s steadfast promise to rebuild his soul and take a mate along for what’s left of the ride. Not that the journey is ever easy or without doubts.

“There is a man who walks beside me/He is who I used to be,” Isbell sings in a tobacco-stained acapella voice on the opening to the mighty “Live Oak.” “And I wonder if she sees him and confuses him with me.” Ostensibly, the frontier-style song tells the story of a reformed criminal pondering how his lover views him. But really, the tale serves as a transparent metaphor for Isbell’s own life—and for anyone that’s ever harbored the concerns, insecurities, and anxieties that coexist with relationships and transformation. By speaking for himself, Isbell speaks for us all.

—Bob Gendron



Daft Punk

Random Access Memories
Columbia Records, 2LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

O

n “Beyond,” a weightless number that arrives just past the midpoint of Daft Punk’s long-in-the-works new album, *Random Access Memories*, the French electronic duo lays out the blueprint for the perfect song. “(It) speaks of places never seen/It holds a promise long forgotten,” the tandem sings, sounding something like sleep-deprived androids. “It is the birthplace of your dreams.”

Fittingly, the pair spends much of its first studio album since 2005’s *Human After All*—excluding the soundtrack for *Tron: Legacy*—revisiting the various sounds and styles that informed its earliest musical excursions. It’s an unexpected move, to say the least. In recent years, Electronic Dance Music (or EDM, as it’s commonly referred to in the press) has seemingly taken over popular culture, with single-name DJs like Skrillex, Baauer, and Bassnectar dominating summer festival lineups and providing the soundtrack for countless film trailers, television advertisements, and Internet video memes. (Everyone from King James and the rest of the Miami Heat to local, mid-America high-school students recorded Versions of Baauer’s inescapable “Harlem Shake”).

Rather than surfing a cresting wave they helped form with influential albums like *Homework* and *Discovery*, however, Guy-Manuel de Homem-Christo and Thomas Bangalter—the humanoids collectively known as Daft Punk—have gone out of their way to bash the current EDM craze in interviews. “The problem with the way to make music today, these are turnkey systems; they come with preset banks and sounds,” they told *Billboard* magazine. “They’re not inviting you to challenge the systems themselves, or giving you the ability to showcase your personality, individuality.”

With *Random Access Memories*, the duo, which still dons robot masks for photo shoots and performances, actually attempt to place some distance between themselves and modern technology. The album is recorded in analog, and a small army of live musicians—including disco legends Giorgio Moroder and Nile Rodgers, producer/rapper/singer Pharrell Williams and indie rockers like Panda Bear of Animal Collective—supplant the usual array of samplers, synthesizers, and computers.

So while past efforts tended to sound vaguely futuristic, *RAM* is actually backward-looking, embracing a comparatively handmade aesthetic that aspires more to the bombastic, over-the-top feel of late 70s prog-rock, R&B, and disco. When the drums kick in on “Contact,” for example, there’s no doubting human hands are manning the kit, and

the results are glorious. Such ambition is evident everywhere from the album’s extensive runtime (at 75 minutes, the record occasionally feels a tad overstuffed) to its sumptuous sound, which flirts with everything from disco and house to Technicolor Broadway schmaltz.

Pharrell Williams and guitarist Nile Rodgers drive a trio of tunes, including lead single “Get Lucky,” which neatly replicates the disco-funk of Rodgers’ band Chic. “Lose Yourself to Dance,” a second cut featuring the pair, does exactly that, riding Rodgers’ impossibly fluid guitar line for six hypnotic minutes of dance-floor-bumping bliss.

Elsewhere, Daft Punk attempts to stimulate the brain as well as the body. “Giorgio by Moroder” might sound like the name of a high-end fragrance line, but it’s actually a nine-minute ode to 73-year-old synth pioneer Giorgio Moroder, who kicks off the track by chatting up his role in shaping what he refers to as “the sound of the future.” “Within” journeys into the mind rather than venturing off into the cosmos, coming on like a musical adaptation of *Being John Malkovich*. “There’s a world within me that I cannot explain,” sings the duo atop downcast piano. “Please tell me who I am.”

References to memory, time, emotion, transience, and love are scattered throughout the album, which shares at least some thematic elements in common with the 1986 film *Short Circuit*,

where experimental robot Number 5 is struck by lightning and gradually adopts a number of human traits. “Touch,” a hammy albeit oddly affecting number featuring a vocal assist from Paul Williams, the unashamedly cheesy songwriter behind tunes like the Carpenters’ “We’ve Only Just Begun,” opens with a voice intoning “I remember touch” like an android slowly regaining spatial awareness. “You’ve almost convinced me I’m real,” continues Williams as the track builds to a grandiose close that includes everything from orchestral strings to a full-on children’s choir. “I need something more.”

At times, the duo overreaches, and it can be difficult to slog through tracks like “The Game of Love,” a wispy soft-rock ballad that sounds as though it were composed by a heartbroken computer. The yacht-rocking “Fragments of Time,” in turn, could pass for a feather-haired Hall & Oates throwaway.

Nonetheless, *RAM* remains a fascinating and entertaining listen, balancing breezy party tracks with more high-concept moments that reveal endearing quirks more gradually. Indeed, by looking to past sounds, styles, and influences—the birthplace of their musical dreams, as it were—Daft Punk emerges with an album that sounds both familiar and entirely new, and it’ll be endlessly enjoyable to look on as the group’s EDM contemporaries struggle to keep pace in the coming months.

—Andy Downing



The National

Trouble Will Find Me
4AD, 2LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

“have only two emotions,” singer Matt Berninger observes early on the National’s sixth studio album. They are extremities, he warns: “careful fear and dead devotion.” He delivers the line with his detached, broken baritone in much the same way as he has over the Brooklyn-based band’s prior five albums—with bloodshot fragility that may or may not be on the brink of paranoia.

Unhealthy obsessions and oceanic levels of mistrust are where the National have emotionally resided for much of their recent efforts, and 2010’s *High Violet* fine-tuned the tension-packed guitar torment into an atmospheric formula. The hooks are buried in the tease, as the tortured, stretched chords never quite provided the release of an explosion.

The latter doesn’t come on *Trouble Will Find Me*, either. But what becomes apparent is that nearly an hour of Berninger teetering between highs and lows—his bandmates working overtime to explore all the colors and shades in the key of sulk —proves an alternately impressive and exhausting listen.

“When I walk into a room, I do not light it up,” Berninger sings on “Demons,” a rare moment of comedic understatement on an album where much of the relationship drama has the listener wanting to stop the music and scream “run!” “Remember,” Berninger says on “I Need My Girl,” “when you lost your shit and drove the car into the garden?” Or, his own red-flag declaration on “Slipped” that he “was a television version of a person with a broken heart.”

Trouble Will Find Me is musical theater that explores characters that are losing their minds. And Berninger’s stand-and-take-notice voice is gripping through each of these 13 carefully crafted songs, whose layers and dusky dimensions are rarely revealed on first listen. Be it acoustic laments (“I Should Live in Salt”) or crash-and-burn anthems (“Sea of Love”), these are deft pieces of songcraft that award close listening. Vide, the unexpected piano strikes on the former and ghostly backing vocals and reverberating guitars that arrive in the final act of the latter. Subtly abounds.

“Pink Rabbits” is a sort-of old-fashioned ballad that sees Berninger slipping into Leonard Cohen mode, but the anchor of the song (and album) is drummer Bryan Devendorf, who graces the anxiety with rhythmic heartbeats that eerily anticipate any changes in pace of the vocalist. A cauldron of strings and damning bass booms make “Fireproof” feel hellish. “Hard to Find” closes the album with a tearjerker, its higher-pitched guitar notes providing at long last a starry twinkle. Don’t mistake it for optimism. The album is a mood piece, one in which it’s reasonable to worry for those to which it brings comfort.

—Todd Martens



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Vampire Weekend

Modern Vampires of the City
XL Recordings, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

So while the crew breezed through past efforts, sipping horchata and frolicking on yachts anchored in posh locales like Cape Cod, here it adopts a more reflective pose, turning its attention to the fleeting nature of adolescence. “The gloves are off/The wisdom teeth are lost,” sings Koenig on the gilded “Step.” “I feel it in my bones.” References to time slipping away abound, and there are moments the frontman sounds as death-obsessed as the wickedly morbid character Bud Cort portrays in the 1971 film *Harold and Maude*. “There’s a headstone in front of you,” he sings on one tune, “and everyone I know.” Elsewhere, the band romanticizes the death of Henry

Hudson (“Hudson”), parts ways with an unfortunately named girl (“Diane Young,” an urgent tune where the name Diane Young and the phrase “dying young” could easily be interchanged), and stands helplessly by as the clock hands continue to spin (almost every song).

As with most humans whose focus drifts towards the final days, Koenig and Co. reveal a slightly more spiritual side this time around. The crew name-drops *Paradise Lost* and asks “who will guide us through the end?” on the galloping “Worship You,” sings of the biblical burning bush on the percolating “Ya Hey,” and adapts a 19th-century spiritual for “Everlasting Arms,” a gorgeous number that sounds like

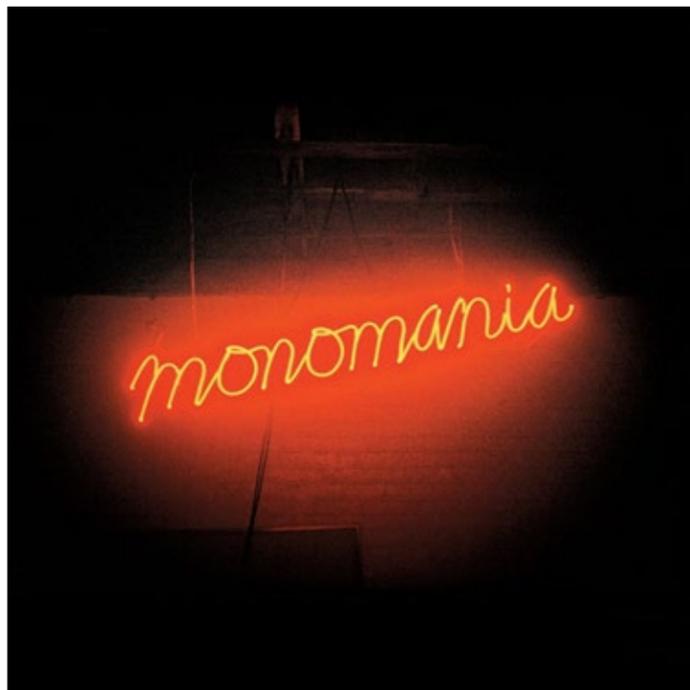
in the titular selection from author Karen Russell’s latest collection of short stories, *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*, two married bloodsuckers recount the many disappointments of their long-entwined lives, which one colorfully describes as “a commitment to starve together.”

A similarly bleak pall envelops the latest album from another crew of night dwellers: New York City quartet Vampire Weekend, which finally sheds its inherent United Colors of Benetton preppiness in favor of a darker and ultimately more fulfilling sound on *Modern Vampires of the City*.

The shift is foreshadowed early on. While the album opens with a chorus of angelic voices ushering in a new day (“Obvious Bicycle,” which ranks amongst the group’s prettiest songs), by the second track, frontman Ezra Koenig is singing about the sun going down and darkness settling in.

a natural evolution of the group’s long-vested Paul Simon obsession. Of course, there’s little need to fit the bandmates for those cassocks just yet. On the shuffling rocker “Unbelievers,” for one, Koenig envisions religious fundamentalists tying he and his gal down to the train tracks for their lack of faith, singing, “Is that the fate that half of the world has planned for me?”

Likely not. In fact, with this album, the percentage of the population that had (rightly) dismissed Vampire Weekend as too precious and preppy has new cause to revisit the band. It’s almost as though by looking to the end, the crew has finally given itself a much-needed fresh start. —**Andy Downing**



Deerhunter

Monomania
4AD, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

Halcyon *Digest*, the 2010 album from Atlanta rockers Deerhunter, is a beautiful-if-downcast effort packed with thoughtful tunes about confronting death and embracing life. In that regard, *Monomania* initially feels like a big step backwards.

The songs are rougher and unabashedly lo-fi, filled with crass one-liners, throwaway asides, and bad jokes. And there's some sense Bradford Cox, the main creative force within the band, constructed the album in an attempt to beat back fans and critics that have circled the group in increasingly large numbers since it released its breakthrough album, *Cryptograms*, in 2007.

But even if the songs were initially considered throwaways—a recent Pitchfork profile on Cox noted he wrote many of the tunes amidst personal turmoil and heavy drinking, and never had any intention of putting them to tape—there's something beautiful about the fearless way the band throws itself into the record's assortment of sleazy garage-rock cuts.

"Leather Jacket II" is nearly as rough-and-tumble as its title suggests, layering on distorted vocals, barbed stabs of guitar, and a rumbling drumbeat that sounds like it's being pounded out on a dinged aluminum trashcan. "Dream Captain" could pass for a time-corroded David Bowie demo, combining space-oddity lyrical shout-outs ("Dream captain, send me your ship!") with a shuffling glam guitar melody. Raunchy rocker "Pensacola," in turn, could sit in as one of the tales from the @_FloridaMan Twitter account, detailing the comings and goings of a balding panhandle native that gives his woman the boot before hopping a bus out of town.

The Deerhunter of old makes an occasional appearance. "Sleepwalking," for one, is nearly as majestic as anything on *Halcyon Digest*. "I've been looking for some harmonies," sings Cox atop guitars that flutter and dive like nectar-drunk butterflies, "Some words to sing that could really breathe." But these moments of peace are rare on an album that consistently finds the band embracing its rowdier side. Witness the chaotic title track, a scuzzy, barnacle-caked rocker that slowly devolves into five minutes of blissful white noise.

Musically, *Monomania* can be, for the most part, easy to embrace. Lyrically, however, the material can be a tougher slog. Just try not to wince when Cox sneers, "I'm a boy, man/And you're a man, man" on "Dream Captain"—a line singers far more charismatic than he would struggle to pull off convincingly. Then there are those forced passages that sound engineered to court controversy. "For a year I was queer," Cox sings on "Punk (La Vie Anterieure)," "but I found it such a bore."

Fortunately, the frontman's words tend to take a backseat to the glorious crunch of guitar noise. "If you ever need to talk I won't be around," sings Cox, tellingly, on "Blue Agent," stepping aside to let his guitar finish the thought. —**Andy Downing**

One of the more unforgettable rock n' roll scenes in film comes during the 1980s sci-fi romance *Back to the Future*. In the final act, Michael J. Fox's Marty McFly grabs a guitar at a 1955 high-school dance and anchors a capable rhythm & blues band through the scorcher "Johnny B. Goode" and doo-wop slow-dance "Earth Angel (Will You Be Mine)." One of the messages, intentional or not, is that it's better to define the best songs of another era as timeless rather than classics. Another message: Boy, wouldn't it have been fun to have played rock 'n' roll during its innocent beginnings?

She & Him, the moniker for the vintage musical plaything of indie-rock guitar wiz M. Ward and happy-go-lucky geek idol Zoëy Deschanel, seems to permanently exist in that *Back to the Future* scene. They are modern-day artists with good taste and a best-of-intentions desire to bask in the past.

The duo's formula is well in place here on the duo's fourth proper album (three volumes plus a Christmas collection), and not too much has changed on this stroll down pop's memory lane. Deschanel's lyrical trifles are on the level of profound poolside gossip ("I never wanted your love but I needed it," she ever-so-lightly sings early on). Styles aren't so much as explored as pleasantly alluded to. "I've Got Your Number, Son" has flashes of grand, Beach Boys-inspired overtures and harmonies, while the Motown-inflected "Together" sports a plucky guitar groove and lively sax.

Since the release of 2008's *Volume One*, Deschanel has—thanks to Fox sitcom "New Girl"—become someone whose personal life is debated in the TMZ comment section. But whether in her acting or singing, she remains an understated star. A squint of her eyes stands in for emotion on television, and on record, she's



She & Him

Volume 3
Merge Records, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

mastered an increasingly rare art of tender shading and conversational crooning. She's a jazzy ingénue on the blue piano ballad "London" and a girl-group cheerleader on the upbeat and goopy "Somebody Sweet to Talk To."

While Deschanel has grown as vocalist, she remains a patient singer who finds comfort in the melodies rather than taking charge of them. Rather than attempting to craft a pure facsimile, she approaches varying styles as if she's trying on different hats on a movie set. She and Ward have fun with the flirty, tempo-shifting, showtune-ready suite of "Snow Queen," the goofy Elvis-in-Hawaii-feel of "Shadow of Love," the Bacharachian "Something's Haunting You," and the swift, unadorned, top-down cruise of a cover of Blondie's "Sunday Girl." It may not be as fun as a trip back in time via a DeLorean, but for She & Him, toying with the past hasn't yet gotten old. —**Todd Martens**

DESERT DRIFTER

A Conversation With Tuareg Guitarist Bombino
By Andy Downing

Nomad (Nonesuch) is a fitting name for the third full-length album from Tuareg guitarist Bombino for myriad reasons. Traditionally, the Tuareg people live a nomadic lifestyle, drifting across national borders in the Saharan interior or North Africa, and Bombino, born Omara Moctar 33 years ago, has spent much of his adult life on the move. Sometimes this was by choice—he has maintained an active tour schedule in recent years—while other times, outside elements forced him into exile.

Adding to the appropriateness of the title, Bombino opted to record the album some 5,600 miles from his home in Niamey, Niger when he decamped to Nashville with Black Keys frontman and Grammy-winning producer Dan Auerbach. At the time, the musician had little familiarity with Auerbach, writing via email, “I did not know Dan’s music until he invited us to work with him.

“My manager played me some of his music with the Black Keys,” continued the guitarist. “I could tell listening to those songs that we would make a very powerful record together. He had a strong sense of the blues in his music, so I knew we would have a basis to communicate, musically speaking. Luckily this turned out to be the case.”



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INTERVIEW



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This chemistry drives much of *Nomad*, a staggering album that bridges the divide between the more traditional sounds of Tuareg collective Tinariwen (lead guitarist Ibrahim Abaraybone was a strong early influence on Moctar's playing) and the modern era. Bombino rips into songs like "Amidinine" with an almost punk-rock urgency.

The bright, spacious recording is saturated with guitars, and the musician's fretwork revelatory. Bombino coils his notes, hammers out rhythmic leads, and unfurls finger-cramping passages before pulling back for the acoustic "Imidiwan," which stretches out like a weary desert traveler at the end of a long day's journey.

Communicating by email, Bombino opened up about life in exile, the lure of the desert, and the places he feels most at home these days.

Have you spent much time in the States?

I have spent quite a bit of time in the United States, actually. I first came to the United States with a group called Tidawt. We were in California for about one month in 2009. Then I came back to work on *Agadez*, my first real solo album, and I was in Boston and New York at that time. Since 2011, I have been touring quite often in the USA—about three tours per year. So I am starting to become familiar with the American mentality and way of life. There are some great places in America. It's really fun to visit.

Did you have any preconceived notion of what life in the U.S. would be like prior to your first visit?

To be honest, I did not spend very much time thinking about what life would be like in America. In Niger we grew up more connected to France and Europe, so I was not thinking about America. It was too far away, like a distant dream. I would imagine sometimes being in France or somewhere in Europe, but even that was not something I would think about very much. I was much more focused on my environment and culture where I was at the moment. I really was never thinking that I would travel outside of Africa. *(continued)*

Was the language barrier ever an issue working with Dan Auerbach?

In the end, I can say no, the difference in language was not an impediment for us in the studio. My manager is from New York, but he speaks French. He was there to help with the language but he did not need to do very much, especially after the first two days or so. Once we found a rhythm of how to work in the studio, there was not very much that needed to be communicated through words. We could just give each other nods and other gestures and everyone could understand perfectly what was happening.

Do you think Dan drew anything different out in you as a player?

I think Dan gave me a new confidence with recording. It's true that this was my first time in a real studio! Before, my albums were recorded just putting a microphone in front of a live performance. So this was a big experience for me and the band. Dan made us feel very relaxed in the studio and very confident. We felt like, "We have come all this way, from the Sahara to Nashville, because this big star wants us to come and work with him. So there is value in what we are doing here." This gave me a lot of confidence to just relax and play my music the way I like it.



Why do you find yourself drawn to the desert? What does it bring to your sound?

The desert is the best place in the world to play music and to listen to music. It is the most peaceful place in the world. For me, it is like my heart opens up wide whenever I am in the desert. I will feel a great sense of peace and of freedom. It is the inspiration I try to use to make my music. I write songs in the desert, and I work on new things there because I feel very open to experiment with new ideas when I am in the desert.

How much of your sound is a product of your environment? Do you think your music would sound different if you lived somewhere like London or New York City?

Wow, I don't know. It is really so hard for me to imagine living anywhere but in Africa. I don't think I could be an artist if I lived somewhere else. My life would be too uncomfortable for me.

You've lived in exile a number of times in your life. How would you describe the experience to someone who has never had to live under such hardship?

Wow, that is a good question. I would say it is like being in prison, maybe, but I think it is worse than that. In prison you know what is happening. When you will become free again. You know that your family and friends are safe without you. In exile, you don't know anything about the people you care about or when you will be able to return home. So maybe it is like being on a desert island waiting for someone

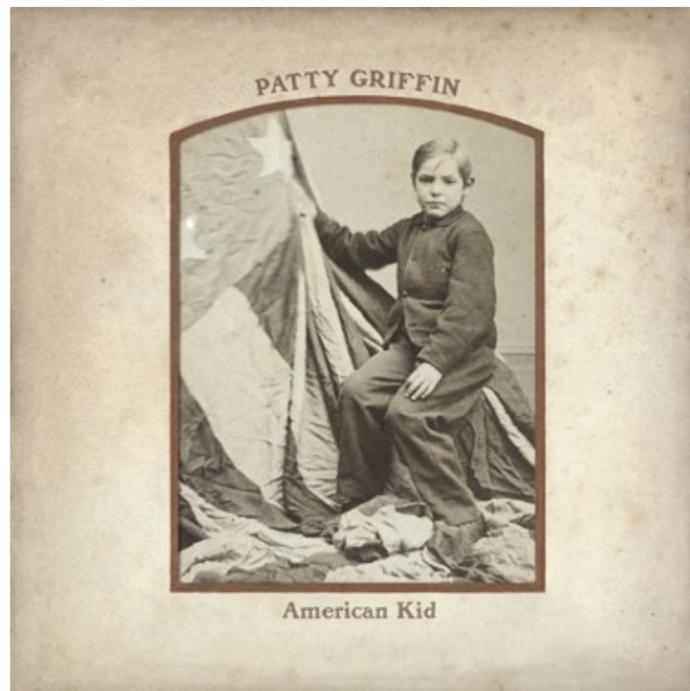
to come and save you. You feel very powerless and frustrated. It feels like someone has robbed you of your basic humanity. For me, the feeling of being free and knowing that your family is free and safe, these are basic things for a human being to feel like a human being.

What role did these various exiles play in terms of shaping your music?

Well, I think the best art in the world comes from a feeling of struggle. It comes from pain, from regret, from loneliness, from broken hearts. All of this I have felt in my life. So I think it was like my university of being an artist that has a purpose and something important to say to the world.

How have those experiences changed your concept of the word "home"? Where do you feel most at home these days?

I feel most at home in Niamey with my wife and my daughter, and also in Agadez with my grandmother and my cousins. I have good friends in Niamey and in Agadez. I am a very lucky man. I know the pain and suffering of not having one home, so now to have two homes! It is like I have been given a second life. A very lucky one. ●



Patty Griffin

American Kid
New West Records, 2LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

Since her 1996 debut, Patty Griffin has earned a rep as a singer-songwriter's singer-songwriter. While not quite scaling the singular artistic heights of a Lucinda Williams, the flame-haired Griffin rightly earned critical kudos as an emotionally resonant tunesmith.

She's also a member of Robert Plant's Band of Joy. And the Led Zeppelin frontman-cum-Americana convert joins Griffin on several tracks on her seventh release, *American Kid*. Plant and Griffin have both denied marriage rumors, but the two are an item and reportedly live together.

Although they haven't tied the legal knot, there's a committed vocal relationship going on in Griffin's "Ohio," a beguiling piece of rustic psychedelia and one of the standout tracks here. Blending in an arresting union, their voices are set against haunting drone notes and the sound of fingers sliding across the steel strings of a guitar.

Griffin co-produced *American Kid* with multi-instrumentalist Craig Ross. The two deserve high marks for achieving such an organic sound. This time around, Griffin skipped her usual recording destinations of Nashville and Austin and headed to Memphis, where she enlisted such musicians as North Mississippi Allstars Luther and Cody Dickinson. Such influences reach full flower on the raw, gutbucket blues "Don't Let Me Die in Florida."

Throughout, Griffin bears a vocal resemblance to one of her great champions, Emmylou Harris. Her voice cuts high but has a grainy undertow. The bittersweet sound colors many songs with a piercing sense of melancholy, even when the music strikes a jaunty tone (the loping "Go Wherever You Wanna Go").

According to Griffin, *American Kid* is inspired by the approaching death of her father. Certain songs cast a poetic and frequently abstract look back at his life. The heart-wrenching "Irish Boy" sets Griffin's vocals against a spare piano. A cover of the Lefty Frizzell classic "Mom and Dad's Waltz" shows off her ability to authentically express homespun sentimentality.

Not everything fits into a cohesive whole. Several tracks, including "Wild Old Dog" and "Not a Bad Man," feel more like moody works-in-progress than fully realized songs. But Griffin is a class act, and her occasional missteps are mostly apparent because she sets the bar high.

"Every strand has come unwound/
Every heart is all worn down," she sings on the mournful "That Kind of Lonely." Like many of the songs here, it resonates with a quiet yet deceptive power long after it ends. —**Chrissie Dickinson**



Kacey Musgraves

Same Trailer Different Park
Mercury Nashville, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

Musgraves' twangy soprano is equal parts fragility and resilience. Her voice is so entrancing, it could almost trick you into missing the pointed lyrics. "Tiny little boxes in a row/Ain't what you wanted/It's what you know," she sings. Those lines bring to mind Malvina Reynolds' classic evisceration of suburban conformity, "Little Boxes." Like that '60s hit, "Merry Go 'Round" couches its stinging criticisms in a pretty, sing-songy melody. Both songs are as irresistible as they are arguably reductive.

Musgraves deserves a lot of credit for not singing a predictable paean to pickup trucks, beer, and American pride. But neither does

she come close to the gutting gravitas of Jamey Johnson's "High Cost of Living," or even Tim McGraw's conflicted reading of "Drugs or Jesus," harrowing songs that empathetically address contemporary small-town lives gone wrong. In comparison, "Merry Go 'Round" traffics in expertly polished rhymes packed with stock characters.

A subtle 1960s musical vibe dapples a number of her other songs. With its tambourine, rich acoustic guitar, and harmonica, "My House" evokes the folk-pop salad days of the Newport Folk Festival. In "Silver Lining," she could be a contemplative Petula

Twenty-something Kacey Musgraves is rightly being hailed as a fresh voice on the country scene. Indeed, there's a lot to love about her major label debut *Same Trailer Different Park*. It's a promising release, but not without a few flaws.

Co-written by Musgraves, Josh Osborne and Shane McAnally, "Merry Go 'Round" is the hit that put her on the map. The music is lovely, low-key country-pop anchored by a warm, percolating banjo. Set in a hillbilly Peyton Place, the song explores the dark shadows beneath the romanticized exterior of small town life: "Mama's hooked on Mary Kay/Brother's hooked on mary jane/And daddy's hooked on Mary two doors down."

Clark standing at that imaginary corner where Carnaby Street and Music Row intersect. The playful "Follow Your Arrow" is an unapologetic call for people to shake off the shackles of moral judgment and live life to the fullest. Tucked into this sunny sound is a shout-out in support of same-sex relationships: "Make lots of noise/Kiss lots of boys/Or kiss lots of girls/If that's something you're into."

Yes, Musgraves has, talent, brio, and enormous promise. Her challenge going forward is to avoid the seductive pitfall of choosing the merely clever over the profound.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**



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Pistol Annies

Annie Up
RCA Nashville, LP or CD

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In the grand scheme of country protest songs, "Being Pretty Ain't Pretty" may not at first appear to pertain to the most noble of causes. It's clever enough—a three-minute Western waltz lamenting the time and money it takes to stay fashionable—but it's somewhat rebellious when it's considered that the tune is a product of mainstream Nashville in 2013. Traditional in instrumentation and intimate in production, the bitter, modern-day gripe emphasizes harmonies rather than big hooks, and it places one of the genre's stars, Miranda Lambert, in a supporting role. The Pistol Annies, a side-project Lambert shares with singer/songwriters Ashley Monroe and Angaleena Presley, once again shows a more modest approach can outdo all the glitz of the Nashville machine.

And *Annie Up* has a blast while doing so. "Unhappily Married" is more in line with the country spunk of indie labels such as Bloodshot Records than anything on Lambert's 2011 hit *Four the Record*, and "Hush Hush" carries a Loretta Lynn swagger. The former boasts a wonderfully sardonic opening line ("Must be mistaking me for the maid we don't have") and the latter could be a long-lost radio hit from the 50s, at least if weren't for characters who were ruining Christmas by talking up Rapture propaganda.

It's not all so devilish. "Loved By A Workin' Man" falls prey to some blue-collar mythmaking and the cheerleading "Girls Like Us" is borderline hokey. Yet two missteps are forgivable when ballads such as the AA-no-longer-works dirge "Dear Sobriety" and divorce stinger "Trading One Heartbreak for Another" paint such vivid pictures. "This is gonna hurt even more," sings Presley on the second of the two as she awakens to reality that her child misses his father. Plights of normal folk prominently figure in the lyrics.

"Don't Talk About Him, Tina" is an exasperated, two-stepping ditty on which the protagonist pleads with a friend to just shut the heck up about her ex. "Damn Thing" is a borderline bluegrass attack that rails against the daily grind. All 12 tracks are written entirely by the trio. No need for the hired guns that litter with duds Lambert's most recent effort or Monroe's new *Like a Rose*.

Yep, come to think of it, *Annie Up* is quite rebellious after all.

—Todd Martens

**Tricky***False Idols*

False Idols, 2LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

During a stretch in the mid-90s, few artists were as compelling and, at times, as outright terrifying as Tricky. In concert, the British musician, born Adrian Thaws, tended to perform with his back to the audience, reciting his mysterious incantations in a smoky, Golem-esque rasp. Early albums like *Maxinquaye* and *Pre-Millennium Tension* were equally unsettling, capturing the paranoia and sickness of a planet he deemed to be in imminent peril. “I tell you everything/I tell you lies,” he spit on “Tricky Kid.” “Look deep into my mongrel eyes.”



At the time, even the musician’s most gorgeous tracks sounded somehow sinister. Witness “Makes Me Want to Die,” a hushed spiritual where Tricky whispers his demonic words from the shadows, adding a dark counterpoint to Martina Topley-Bird’s angelic lead turn. Unfortunately, even evil can grow complacent, and by the time his limp 2010 album *Mixed Race* rolled around, Tricky sounded as bored and distracted as an aged, declawed house cat.

With that in mind, it was somewhat disconcerting when the singer opens “Nothing’s Changed,” the lead single from his latest salvo, *False Idols*, by hissing, “Nothing’s changed/I still feel the same.” Fortunately for all, most everything has changed. Gone is the bland gangster posing of *Mixed Race*, replaced by the bleak, foreboding sonic landscape he pioneered on early efforts.

“My last two albums, I thought they were good, but I realize now they weren’t,” he wrote in a press release accompanying the new record. “This album is about me finding myself again.”

Tracks here, in turn, are universally downtempo, scored by minor-key melodies, haunting vocal turns (FiFi Rong successfully adopts the Topley-Bird role on “If I Only Knew”), and Tricky’s coded ruminations on everything from religion (“Jesus died for somebody’s sins, but not mine,” he sings on one tune, echoing Patti Smith) to the precise moment the soul exits the body upon death (“We Don’t Die”).

Things only grow more hopeless from there. “Nothing Matters” could pass for the musings of a kidnap victim experiencing an intense case of Stockholm Syndrome. “You use me, abuse me, control me,” sings Nneka-Lucia Egbuna atop gently throbbing electronics. “As long as you love me.” Elsewhere, Tricky envisions society’s inevitable collapse (“Does It”), details a doomed romance ending in a hail of gunfire (“Bonnie & Clyde”), and beckons Jesus to return to Earth to wipe the slate clean once and for all (“Passion of the Christ”).

At its core, however, *False Idols* serves to document a once-adrift artist’s attempts to rediscover his creative mooring. There are countless references to being displaced (“Can’t seem to find my way home,” sings Francesca Belmonte on “Tribal Drums”) and outside forces stripping you to the bone (“Take what you need,” sings Belmonte on “Is That Your Life”). It might have taken some time, but, much like Moses leading his people to the Promised Land after 40 years spent lost in the wilderness, Tricky finally appears to have rediscovered his footing.

As he puts it near the close of “Tribal Drums”: “I’m lost, and found.”

—**Andy Downing**

Aragon Ballroom

Chicago, Illinois

June 29, 2013

By Bob Gendron

Photos by David Thai



she & him

During the encore of She and Him's 85-minute concert on a late June evening at Aragon Ballroom, the band kicked up the tempo and launched into a note-perfect version of Chuck Berry's "Roll Over Beethoven." In guitarist/vocalist M. Ward's hands, the rollicking albeit polite version could've been used at a dance party for any ages—be it awkward junior-high kids slogging through their first co-ed get-together or a mixer at a retirement home.

Such is the nostalgic innocence, charm, and respect the duo of Ward and creative partner Zoey Deschanel invest in every song they perform. Live, the line discerning the duo's covers from originals becomes even thinner than on album. On wax and onstage, She & Him play 50s- and 60s-oriented pop that counters that of the modern era's self-effacing irony, artificial effects, and self-aware celebrity. In the age where "Mad Men" receives raves for its recreation of a bygone period's fashions, behavior, and settings, She & Him thrive in a similar light. Ward and Deschanel's perky, sun-splashed fare relates

more to the glory days of the seven-inch single and hula hoop than it does the 21st century's digital downloads and of-the-minute trends.

Wearing a summer dress and spending a majority of her time standing still behind a microphone stand, Deschanel effectively deflected the "it girl" status currently bestowing her character—she's the object of nearly every hipster male's affection, and her starring role on the hit comedy series "New Girl" turned her into the rare media figure accepted by both indie and mainstream cultures—and remained deaf to the audience's perpetual swooning attempts. Doing so meant refraining from small talk and distracting banter. All the better to showcase simple songs notable for concise structures, call-and-response refrains, and sugary choruses. For Deschanel at least, the strict attention to singing, playing piano, or banging a tambourine seemed to illustrate a serious point to anyone that still believed her group a whimsical side project. *(continued)*

Backed by a four-piece band and two female support singers, She & Him ooh'ed, aah'ed, and la-la-la'ed their way through tunes steeped in doo-wop, street-corner harmonizing, and girl-group soul. Songs like the carefree "Together" and tender "Baby" conjured handholding vibes, malt-shop backdrops, and poodle-skirt cuteness. Instrumental touches—delicate violins, chirping keyboards, keyboard swells, pedal-steel guitars, occasional cowbell—added faint country, orchestral, and rock cues. Yet the heaviest lifting came via Ward, a minimalist guitarist that never overplayed or sought the spotlight.

If he'd been born 30 years earlier, he'd probably have landed a job at Stax, Hi, Motown, or the Nashville arm of Columbia as a session musician. Ward coaxed surf, Western, and R&B fills from his instrument at will, seemingly standing in the shadows as Deschanel enchanted with a direct, clear timbre. On the surface, her swoon-worthy crooning conveyed anxiousness and optimism, but She & Him weren't all lollipops and daisies. Subtle pangs of hurt and longing clung to songs such as the jazzy "Take It Back," which placed the vocalist at the solitary end of a bar. Similarly, an understated rendition of "You Really Got a Hold on Me" indicated initial reluctance before Deschanel bowed to her emotions.



Patient and tender, She & Him specialized in what it feels like to be smitten, unable to think clearly or fully control desires when transfixed on another human being. Deschanel approached most songs as private confessionals, thoughts a girl might scribble in her diary. Her breathy insouciance during a clock-stopping take of "Hold Me, Thrill Me, Kiss Me" and naked vulnerability on a gorgeous, stripped-down, high-and-lonesome arrangement of the Righteous Brothers' "Unchained Melody" with her two female contemporaries could've fulfilled the romantic wishes of most red-blooded males. Pure, compassionate, and heartfelt, she belonged to the same time warp as Ward. And while Deschanel lacks the vocal reach and steady highs of the pop greats—be it Ella Fitzgerald, Dusty Springfield, even Linda Ronstadt in her prime—her expressiveness summoned the sweaty palms and nervous optimism of a first date.

Then, of course, most of her predecessors never could convert what at first came across as a spring-loaded pop ditty into a throwback to French ye-ye. Delivering an entire verse of "Sunday Girl" *en francais*, Deschanel turned crushes into heartaches, dulcet accents into exotic persuasions, all the while acting as if what transpired was completely natural, the everyday manners of a woman strong enough to refuse to settle and warm enough to still believe in teddy bears, boardwalk strolls, and ice-cream cones on a hot summer afternoon. ●


Mavis Staples

One True Vine
Anti, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

If you're looking for some good news this year, take solace in this: Mavis Staples, Chicago's legendary gospel-blues voice, marches on. Now in her early 70s, the singer sees a finish line on *One True Vine*. At times, she's wondering what her lost friends are doing up in heaven, and on the album opener "Holy Ghost"—a vulnerable, ballad-by-candlelight—she's hanging onto an indefinable but powerful force that is her faith in a higher power. Make no mistake. No pall hovers over these songs. As exemplified by "Every Step," this is the sound of a fighter and a survivor, as Staples' finely aged voice of soulful grit polishes with a spit-shine.

©Photo by Chris Strong



"Every Step," one of three original tracks penned by Wilco anchor Jeff Tweedy, collaborating with Staples for the second consecutive album, surrounds her with a deep-down guitar that echoes as if recorded in an empty well and a rhythm forebodingly punctuated by the rattling of chains. Yet Staples doesn't waver, her intensely sweet rasp building in strength until a backing gospel choir sheds some light on the tune. Fellow Chicagoan Kelly Hogan, who sings with a blue-collar balm herself, leads the assisting vocalists. The choir graces many of the songs with a presence that recalls the band leader's definitive work with the Staples Singers. As does Tweedy's guitar playing.

Tweedy splits the difference between folk, blues, and funk on fare such as "Jesus Wept," a heartache of a strummer to those who have passed, and "I Like the Things About Me," which comes across akin to an ol' Staples Singers tune recast into a defiant statement of late-in-life acceptance, complete with a guitar that howls like a groovy trumpet. Throughout, however, the star, as it should be, is Staples. An anything-goes looseness perfumes some of the arrangements—note the trippy acoustics, galloping beats, and give-and-take vocals on "Can You Get to That"—but nothing ever pulls out in front of the headliner. She quivers to a whisper on "Holy Ghost," leads a back-porch revival on "Woke Up This Morning with Jesus On My Mind," and delivers an I've-seen-it-all-before, no-nonsense toughness on "Sow Good Seeds"

This is an album on which pessimism takes a permanent holiday. Such a joy is the sound of Staples singing that even a potential tearjerker as the title track—"Life had ceased/I was lost and tired," she confesses, a serenade brimming with passion—is handled with clear-eyed force. This is a woman who's always looking ahead to better days yet to come. —**Todd Martens**

**Dessa**

Parts of Speech
Doomtree, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

Dessa's *Parts of Speech* is likely the only hip-hop record this year to cover one of the deep cuts from Bruce Springsteen's *Born in the U.S.A.* The tune in question, "I'm Goin' Down," is in its original form is a rock 'n' roll trifle with a big beat, a repetitive chorus, and some vague, easily misinterpreted lyrics about a relationship gone south. It's now rarely even performed by Springsteen. So what does Dessa want with it?

The Minneapolis artist places it in the center of *Parts of Speech*, her second proper album, and turns it into gripping relationship drama, making it an atmospheric acoustic strummer more about what isn't said than what is. At times an earnest and smartly wordy coffeehouse rapper, Dessa can turn it down and let her vocals ache like the best of balladeers, flipping a perfectly manicured garage rocker into a slow, awkward tale of two lovers that can no longer speak to one another during a car ride.

But that hardly covers Dessa's range. "Dear Maria" is slow-burning R&B, anchored by a barely-there piano and chopstick rhythm, and then there's the opposite end of the spectrum. "Warsaw" is a cold, synth-rap stomper with breaks into noisy nothingness; "Fighting Fish" is a gloves-off, hard-knocks rap track about swimming with the male sharks. "Women, children, let me tell you, I've been both, and it's a myth, we all swim for the lifeboat," she raps.

"The Beekeeper" reframes Dessa as a potential jazz vocalist. Here, she slips into a higher register and is accompanied by a string arrangement and digital effects that scurry like rodents. Dessa's tough-but-wounded songwriting holds it all together. "Call Off Your Ghost" comes on as a moody, blow-by-blow account of two exes introducing each other to their new significant others, but it's "The Lamb" that makes clear Dessa's tense storytelling abilities.

"I don't believe that you're reformed," she raps, her cloudy voice buried in the beat-driven menace as she confronts a former lover—a "monster"—now sick and powerless in the hospital. "Do I scare you?" she asks. She definitely has our attention. —**Todd Martens**

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go to sleep with a nightlight,” Kanye West confesses late onto *Yeezus*. If he doesn’t, his demons come out to play. If that’s the case, *Yeezus* was no doubt recorded with the lights definitely off. The demons are not only out; they populate songs like a club that’s well over capacity.

Even for West, an artist known to rant and regret (half-regret, sometimes), *Yeezus* is a brutally abrasive lesson in mouthing-off and worrying about it never. Sexually aggressive, racially blunt, and at times borderline abhorrent, the record’s 10 songs are littered with moments that dare the listener not to turn the record off. And yet *Yeezus* is an album that twists and turns until it throws questions back at the listener. “Soon as they like you, make ‘em unlike you,” West raps in “I Am a God,” a line that serves as a sarcastic mission statement for the album.

Weapons-grade synths quiver like they’re leveling the middle-class, horror soundtrack screams appear out of nowhere, and West prattles off with the free pass unparalleled fame has brought him. Uttering a line that will forever define *Yeezus* on Twitter, West hassles the wait staff for his “damn croissants” and then pretends to talk to Jesus, all of it continuing at least “until the day I get struck by lightning.” On *Watch the Throne*, West’s 2011 collaboration with pal Jay-Z, the Chicago native celebrated the good life. Here, he absorbs all its temptations, contradictions, and money-driven deceit, and shoves it back in the listener’s face like a combination superstar/supervillain. West’s transformation from a middle-class kid on 2004’s *College Dropout*, on which he told tales of his gig at the Gap, to a TMZ target on *Yeezus*, on which he sings of needing lawyers to end a relationship, is complete.

Don’t like it? Well you made me, West may as well be saying.

What he sees on *Yeezus* is not a 64-carat playground filled with riches and rap-star posing, although he uses plenty of the latter to get his point across. Rather, this is a world where sex is currency and racism is disguised but no less rampant. “They see a black man with a white woman,” West raps on “Black Skinhead,” and “they gone come to kill King Kong.” The song plays out like a panic attack, all huffs and puffs and steel-coated tribal rhythms as West goes on a fists-up terror through mainstream America. *Yeezus* is bracing in its imagery and striking in its sound. Throughout, primal beats frame the most potent lines and synthesizers are equally cacophonous and minimal, creating an argumentative mix that references old industrial, pre-EDM dance, and the distort-it-all adventurousness of 80s hip-hop.

Yeezus once again proves West’s musical risk-taking is as outsized as his personality, as he has the gall to shred Nina Simone’s “Strange Fruit,” the good sense to call on R&B vocalist Charlie Wilson for a sobering assist, and the vocabulary to sample Hungarian rock and old Chicago acid house. It may not be as revolutionary as 2008’s *808s & Heartbreak*—on which melancholic robotics paved the way for everyone from Drake to Frank Ocean—but *Yeezus*, with Daft Punk and Rick Rubin among the producers, is out for blood.

That’s obvious from the lyrics. They’re set to offend, and no doubt they will. Perhaps it’s the moment

West makes light of Parkinson’s disease, or perhaps it’s the moment he graphically describes where in a woman he’s going to stick his fist. Or maybe it’s the downright unjustifiable line about “sweet and sour” sauce in regards to bedding an Asian woman. The West on *Yeezus* is maniacal, his dark humor never more twisted, his disregard for political correctness never more brazen.

IF GREAT ART CONFRONTS, THEN WEST HAS PUT UP A MASTERPIECE OF A CHALLENGE.

What saves West, barely, from succumbing to the violent, misogynist amateur hour of Odd Future and Chief Keef (the latter a guest on *Yeezus*) is the sense (the hope?) that while he may be an unconscionable braggart, at least he’s one with something to say. “New Slaves,” for instance, is an explosive gift to those who think his antics with Taylor Swift and paparazzi can pass as controversial. The song aims to shine a light on less-gossipy aspects of fame. In it, West jousts around popcorn-popping synths as he slams corporate America, seduces your preferably white wife, and references prison overcrowding. A shock tactic? Hardly, as West wonders why he’s treated differently now that he has cash and paints those richer than him as modern slave owners—puppeteers that are using West’s antics to distract from anything real affecting inner-city America.

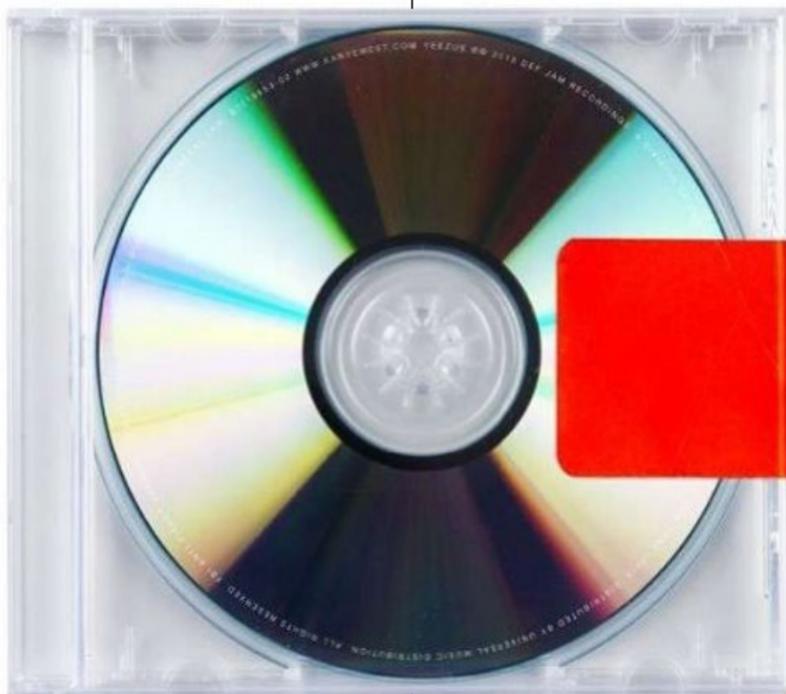
“I’m in It” and “Blood On the Leaves” go even further in using

Civil Rights-era imagery, although West’s revenge fantasies involve little more than acting the sexual aggressor. The former, his voice manipulated like some sort of anonymous night stalker, is a test of patience. And while “Blood on the Leaves” is a rather gripping drama about upper-crust adultery and abortion, its connection to the harrowing tale of racism that is “Strange Fruit” proves more

puzzling than eye opening. “Hold My Liquor” provides a counterbalance, as West and Chief Keef drop machismo for vulnerability and West can’t stop himself from hunting for a lover who knew him before he became “hopeless,” “soulless.” Desperation and one-night stands rarely sound as urgent—the rhythms buzzing, the synths a chainsaw—while all the enticements around West keep sending him into a spiral.

“Bound 2” closes the album by slowing things down and giving West some soul samples to catch his breath. “I’m tired, you tired,” West raps at song’s end, but not before asking for all sorts of unsavory Christmas gifts and discarding a thousand other women. It may bring the album to a close, but the arguments over what West presented have just begun. If great art confronts, then West has put up a masterpiece of a challenge.

—Todd Martens



Kanye West

Yeezus

Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam, CD



Queens of the Stone Age

...Like Clockwork

Matador, 180g 45RPM 2LP, 45RPM 2LP, or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

Following a tour in support of Queens of the Stone Age's 2007 album *Era Vulgaris* and a short stretch playing alongside Dave Grohl and John Paul Jones in Them Crooked Vultures, Josh Homme retired to his home in the California desert to enjoy some much-deserved time off with his wife and two children. He also died, according to an interview with British music magazine *NME*.

"I had surgery on my leg [in 2010] and there were complications," he told the publication. "And I died on the [operating] table."

The incident clearly left a mark on Homme, the lone constant in Queens' ever-rotating lineup. It serves a focal point of the crew's long-in-the-works comeback, *...Like Clockwork*, surfacing in everything from the album artwork (a stark red-and-black image of a woman in Death's embrace) to the frontman's clawed-free-of-the-grave words.

"I survived/I speak/I breathe," he sings on the haunted piano ballad "The Vampyre of Time and Memory," "I'm alive, hooray." Then, on the surprisingly vulnerable "I Appear Missing," Homme appears to address the experience even more directly, singing, "Shock me awake, tear me apart/Pinned like a note in a hospital gown/A prison of sleep, deeper down/The rabbit hole never to be found."

Such admissions would have been inconceivable early on in Queens' career. The band's 2000 breakout, *Rated R*, opened with a song, "Feel Good Hit of the Summer," that doubled as a checklist of recreational drugs ("Nicotine, valium, vicodin, marijuana, ecstasy, and alcohol!"). The music is equally raucous, speeding up the elephantine stomp Homme explored with his previous group, the now-revered stoner rockers Kyuss. The hedonistic approach reached its potent peak in 2002 with *Songs for the Deaf* before things, predictably, started falling apart. In 2004, the band fired bassist Nick Oliveri, and subsequent albums (*Lullabies to Paralyze* and *Era Vulgaris*) are at best mixed bags. (continued)

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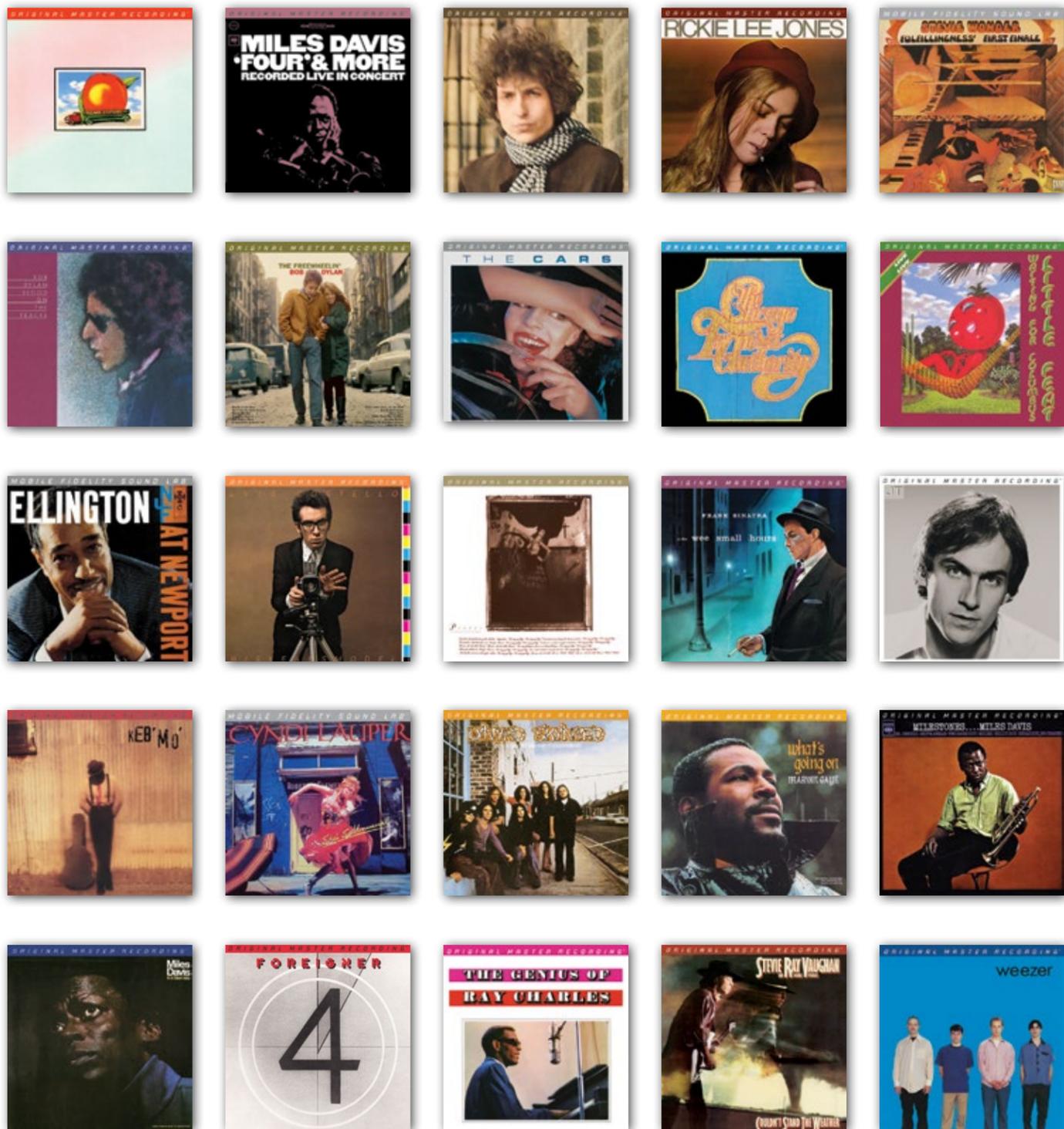
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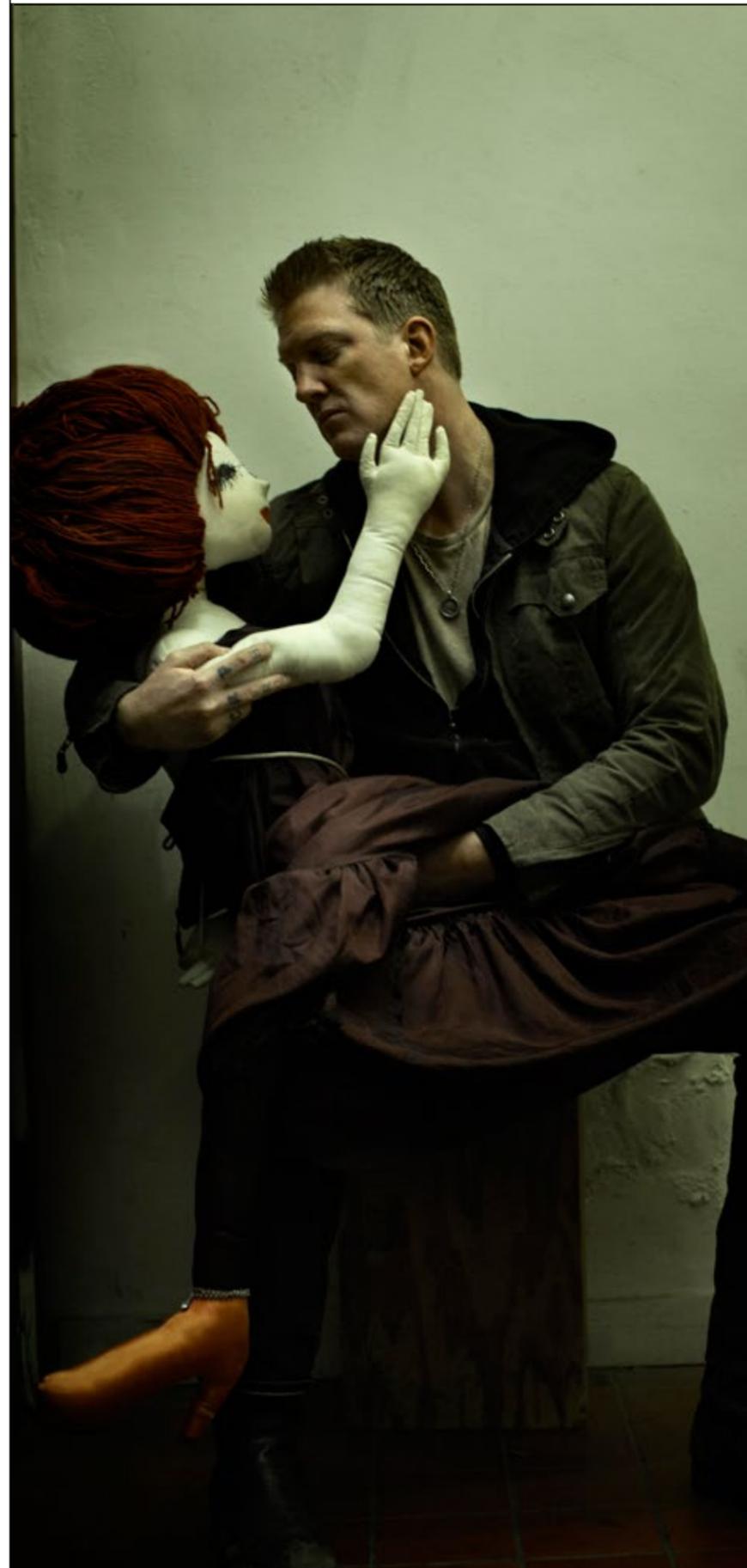
MUSIC

Many lazily chalked up the group's wandering focus to the loss of the notoriously intense Oliveri (a personality trait that revealed itself in a much less positive light when he was arrested for suspicion of felony domestic violence after a four-hour standoff with a police SWAT team in 2011), and much has been made of his return to the group for *...Like Clockwork*. But, like a bulk of the album's numerous contributors—Elton John, Trent Reznor, Scissor Sisters' Jake Shears, Alex Turner of Arctic Monkeys, and so on—Oliveri's guest spot is limited to a brief cameo, and even the most ardent fan would find it difficult to pinpoint his precise contribution. (He's one of several singers providing backing vocals on "If I Had a Tail," for the record.)

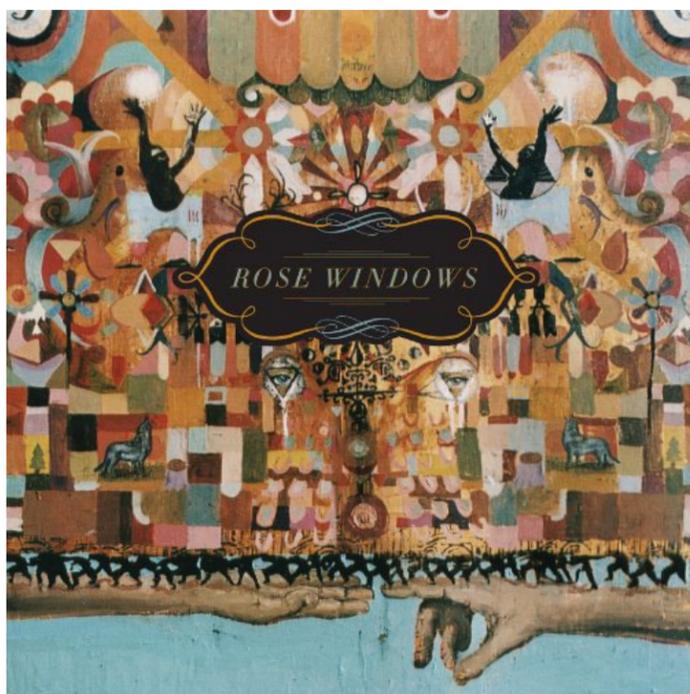
Not so drummer Dave Grohl (Nirvana, Foo Fighters), who mans the drum kit for roughly half the songs and brings a palpable sense of urgency to tunes like the stampeding, psychedelic "My God Is the Sun" and "Fairweather Friends," an operatic gem that nods to the over-the-top grandiosity of 70s arena rock.

Despite the impressive guest list, however, there's never any doubt this is Homme's show. This is true whether the frontman is exploring his mortality (the album-closing title track plays like an acceptance of death's inevitability, Homme singing, "Not everything that goes around comes back around") or expressing his still very-much-alive sexuality. "Fairweather Friends," for one, comes on like the prelude to a one-night stand ("What's it gonna take to get you back in bed?" asks the singer), while the wonderfully perverse "If I Had a Tail" casts Prince as a desert stoner, Homme singing, "I wanna suck/I wanna lick/I wanna grind/I wanna spit."

Indeed, the song could easily be interpreted as an embrace of earthly pleasures, and it wouldn't be surprising had the frontman shouted "I wanna live" at the climax. After all, who wouldn't want to feel the ecstatic warmth of human flesh after so closely holding Death's cold hand? —**Andy Downing**



©Photo by Chapman Baehler



Rose Windows

Sun Dogs

Sub Pop, LP or CD

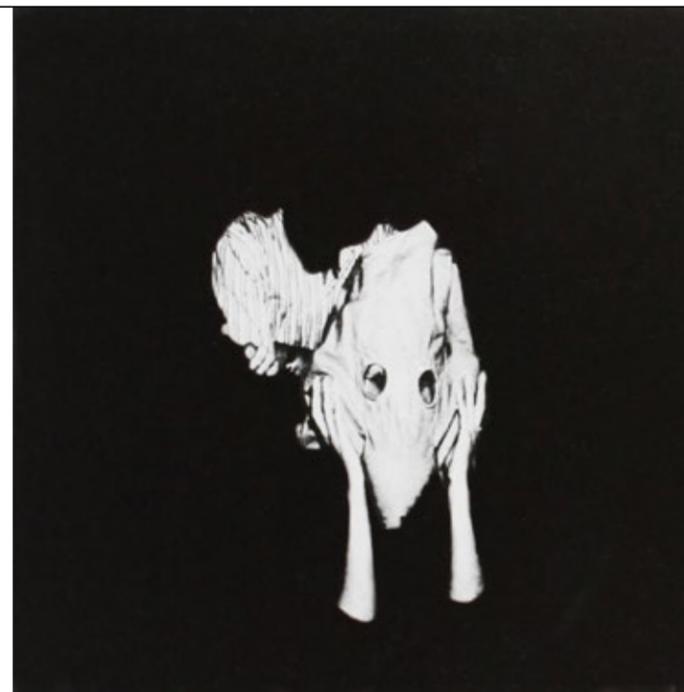
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In 1981 animator Gerald Potterton released his film *Heavy Metal*, a sort of *Fantasia* for the longhaired hard-rock set. The film's tag line promised viewers a universe of "mystery," "magic," and "sexual fantasies," all explored through images of science fiction and fantasy. It was all completed long before the time of Seattle's Rose Windows, which this summer are releasing a debut album for Sub Pop. But the band seems to live by a similar mantra. *Sun Dogs*, as any album bearing its name should be, is filled end-to-end with guitar mysticism, howling, cut-through-the-fog vocals, and the kind of casual zest for the sounds of the Middle East and India usually possessed by a young, barefooted backpacker.

On a song such as the nearly 10-minute "This Shroud," the seven-piece band leads the listener into a landscape colored with fanciful Eastern flourishes, snake-dance chants, hippy flutes, and a two-and-a-half minute guitar soloing finale that sets it all aflame. It's downright reassuring. Styles may change and digital tools may provide new musical playgrounds, but somewhere, someone still abides by the rules laid down by Led Zeppelin: make it loud, make it trippy, and disregard international borders.

The Rose Windows aren't the only modern indie band kneeling before the altar of rock (see the Besnard Lakes, Black Mountain), but *Sun Dogs* holds the listener's attention because at times it seems in danger of becoming a folk record. Vocalist Rabia Shabeen Qazi could no doubt do a killer version of Robert Plant, but neither she nor the band has an easily recognizable style. A sunburned keyboard guides "Indian Summer" while "Native Dream" is a slow march into volcanic, reverb-drenched noise.

Qazi approaches "Walkin' With A Woman" like it's a ghost story, although Monkish backing vocals and devil-obsessed lyrics contribute to the mood. "Wartime Lovers" has the feel of long-lost 60s nugget, when biting social commentary (the "old misers" preying on the desert so they can "cash out") at least felt more commonplace in pop. Despite the occasional dips into the topical, Rose Windows emphasize mystery. How else to explain an album that declares this a "season of serpents"? —**Todd Martens**



SIGUR RÓS

Kveikur

XL Recordings, 2LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

As often as critics equate Sigur Rós' sound to the natural elements, one could be forgiven for mistaking the Reykjavik crew for a weather system rather than, you know, an actual band.

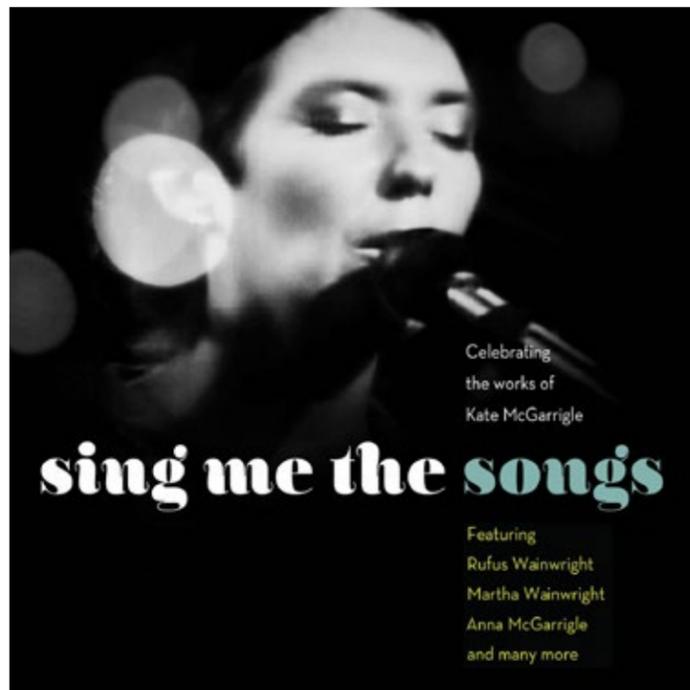
The group's haunting 1999 breakthrough, *Ágætis byrjun*, which roughly translates to "A Good Beginning," earned frequent comparisons to the melancholic Icelandic landscape. It's a challenge to find early reviews that don't include words like "glacial," "wintry," "volcanic," and "avalanche." Not that the band members have historically shied from such analogies. On a 2010 solo tour, frontman Jón Þór Birgisson (or Jonsi, for short) dressed as a nymph-like creature and performed on a set decorated to resemble a vast, untamed wilderness populated by hungry owls, foraging rabbits, and thick swarms of migrating birds. Seven albums and 15-years-plus into its career, however, Sigur Rós was due for a sonic makeover—a shakeup that finally arrives in the form of the driving, urgent *Kveikur*.

The band, now a trio following the 2012 departure of keyboardist Kjartan Sveinsson, has rarely sounded this aggressive. Its more naturalistic tendencies, while far from absent, are supplanted by a menacing, machine-like pulse. The first sound listeners encounter, for example, is a massive roar that sounds something like a fighter jet passing closely overhead—the kind of sound that would undoubtedly send Bambi and his furry friends scrambling to find cover.

Elsewhere, the three-piece conjures the industrial majesty of Nine Inch Nails on the lumbering, fuzz-laden title track, constructs massive walls of drum noise on "Ísjaki" (Orri Pall Dyrason has evolved into an absolute monster behind the kit), and turns out easily the most abrasive song in its expansive catalog with "Brennisteinn." The latter is an eight-minute whirlwind of buzzing guitars, possessed strings, and disembodied vocals that doesn't end so much as it corrodes and gradually falls to pieces.

Yes, it's still impossible for those who don't speak his native tongue to discern the meaning in Birgisson's words. But judging from song titles that translate to things like "Sulfur" ("Brennisteinn"), "Storm" ("Yfirborð"), and "Was" ("Var"), it's safe to assume the lyrical content took a downcast turn to match the album's more ominous musical direction.

Occasionally, the angelic Sigur Ros of old turns up. "Bláþráður," for one, hints at the celestial wonder of the band's past work, with Birgisson unleashing a series of "ohh ohh ohhs" in that still-weightless falsetto. But more often than not, the trio sounds content to embrace its primal urges this time around, ditching ghostly atmosphere in favor of visceral, earthly thrills. Heaven, at least for now it would appear, can wait. —**Andy Downing**



Sing Me the Songs: Celebrating the Works of Kate McGarrigle

Nonesuch Records, 2CDs

Sometimes, a moment on an album serves as a summation of the entire project. On this tribute to late Canadian singer-songwriter Kate McGarrigle, such a revelation stems from Emmylou Harris, who reprises her self-penned “Darlin’ Kate.” A heartbreaking elegy to her lost friend, who died of cancer in 2010, the song begins with a tender account of the deathbed scene. But Harris is also singing about McGarrigle’s power as an artist. “With your perfect words and all that voice/We fell in love/We had no choice.”

It’s highly unlikely that you, either, will have a choice with *Sing Me the Songs: Celebrating the Works of Kate McGarrigle*. Culled from three concerts in London, Toronto, and New York, this double-disc is no standard tribute. It’s breathing artwork in its own right, honoring McGarrigle’s wide-ranging legacy as a songwriter, collaborator, and artistic inspiration.

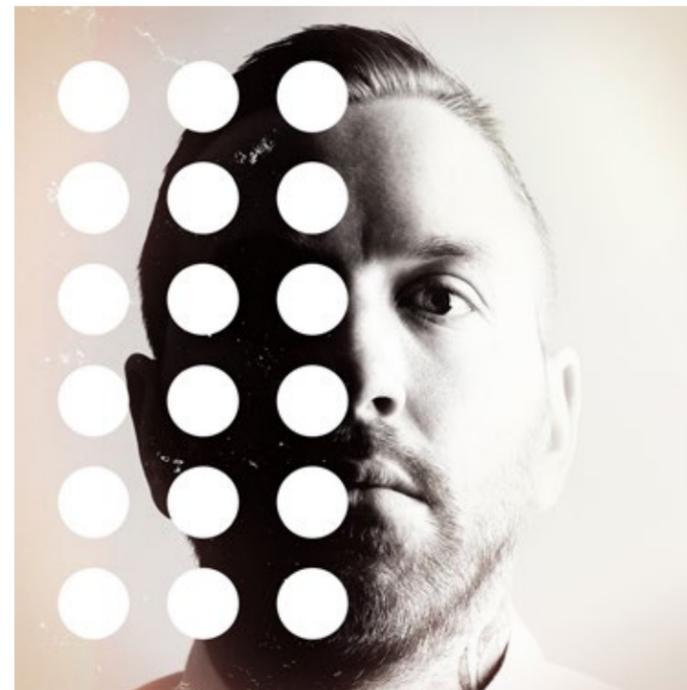
What makes this release so organic is that it’s not a parade of disparate celebrities popping in for a tune. The project was piloted by Kate’s sister and duo partner Anna McGarrigle, and Kate’s children, the singer-songwriters Rufus and Martha Wainwright. Songs are performed to evocative effect by Kate’s actual family, friends, and admirers.

Surrounded by a shivery violin and stately piano, Rufus Wainwright and Harris take turns giving voice to the bereft diner who sits at the center of “I Eat Dinner (When the Hunger’s Gone).” The details devastate in their simplicity, both from what is there (“leftovers with mashed potatoes,” “a light that switches on”) and what is forever gone (“no more candlelight, no more romance, no more small talk”). This is more than just fine writing; it’s an exquisite painting.

An equally disarming spot comes from Martha Wainwright, who sang backing vocals on the original “Matapedia.” She takes center stage to interpret her mother’s song of memory and mistaken identity, the ache in her voice palpable. “Go Leave” is interpreted twice. Antony Hegarty renders it as dramatic torch song, while Linda Thompson, backed on guitar by ex-husband Richard Thompson, envisions it as forlorn folk ballad. In both versions, the lyrics detonate in the one-sided study of a break-up filled with slivers of anger, confusion, and desperate hope.

Other highlights include performances by Norah Jones, Teddy Thompson, Krystle Warren, Peggy Seeger, and Jimmy Fallon. Like the life it commemorates, the saddest part of this A+ release is when it ends.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**



City and Colour

The Hurry and the Harm
Dine Alone, 2LP or CD

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And what, precisely, is Green searching for? It’s a question he doesn’t shy from throughout, singing: “I’m looking for a way out” (“Paradise”); “[I’m] searching for wisdom” (“Two Coins”); “I’m just looking for the sweetest melody” (“Commentators”). At least on occasion, the singer uncovers the latter. The entire record is richly appointed, awash in lonesome acoustic strumming, shuffling drums, gospel organ, and Green’s aching falsetto, which, at times, calls to mind Justin Vernon of Bon Iver. It’s an instrument he unfurls with particular success on “Take Care,” a stripped-down tune that feels like an optimistic prayer surviving amidst the darkness surrounding it.

“I will provide you with reason to believe,” sings Green atop delicate fingerpicking. “I will not desert you in your time of need.” It’s a brief moment of hope on an album on which the singer professes to being emotionally dead (“Harder Than Stone”), seeks solace from his troubles in the bottle (“The Lonely Life”), and storms away from a former lover, leaving her to be ravaged by thieves (“Thirst”). Perhaps it’s true what he sings on “Two Coins”: “I’ve always been dark/With light somewhere in the distance.”

The music can be equally tumultuous, veering from jaunty folk-rock (“Harder Than Stone”) to comparatively dark moments where the instrumentation neatly matches the shadows haunting Green’s words.

Dallas Green, the singer-songwriter and sole creative force behind City and Colour, spends a bulk of his fourth full-length studio album, *The Hurry and the Harm*, physically and emotionally adrift.

On “Of Space and Time,” the former Alexisonfire guitarist wanders a desolate road, a murder of crows circling overhead, and is plagued by mysterious forces “eating away at [his] brain.” Even as the album closes, he envisions himself remaining unsettled throughout his final days, wondering aloud whether he’ll be able to find a comfortable resting place before death comes a-calling.

Witness the jagged electric guitar that knives its way through “Thirst” as the frontman sings of being overcome by an “ocean of anger.”

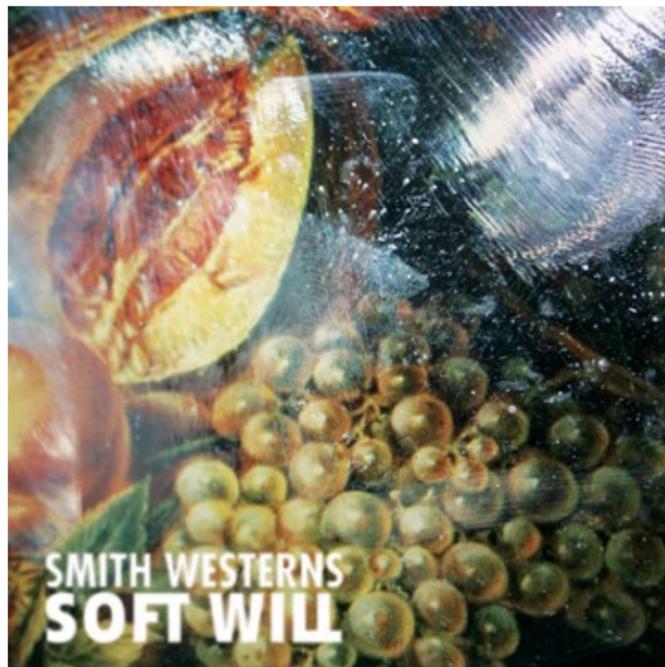
Yes, the album can be a little one-note (“Death’s Song” and “Of Space In Time” appear to differ in title alone), and Green isn’t averse to tacking on a throwaway cut or two (“The Golden State” is a West Coast-bashing number that plays like a bland response to Phantom Planet’s even blander “California”). But the musician’s willingness to bare his soul, and his keen ear for melody, should be enough to garner any audiences’ admiration—if not some rest for the ever-wandering soul. —**Andy Downing**

Early on *Soft Will*, the third album from Chicago's pristine pop-rock trio the Smith Westerns, singer Cullen Omori wistfully sings to the song's inspiration that he wishes he could see their "dark side." Who knows how he would describe what he may find, as the musical universe of the Smith Westerns isn't one where the unseemly is a common occurrence.

While one would have to stop short of calling the Smith Westerns optimists, the band writes songs as if they're composing mid-afternoon daydreams. This is an album of mini-escapes, where a piano-based reverie such as "XXIII" recalls the languid psychedelics of Pink Floyd and "Cheer Up" makes its case with watery guitars, silky harmonies, and ever-so-slight symphonic touches.

With three albums completed by the time most people graduate college, the Smith Westerns are definitely growing up fast, but *Soft Will* retains the sense of innocence and longing the band has become adept at putting into four-minute pop songs. Disappointment in "3am Spiritual" is that "you don't look like you did on TV" and "Only Natural" channels the hurt of a fresh breakup—images of reading alone and "oceans part for you" poetry that no doubt will cause someone to cringe when the age of 30 is reached.

But more than any one particular moment, the Smith Westerns are skillful at recalling a



Smith Westerns

Soft Will

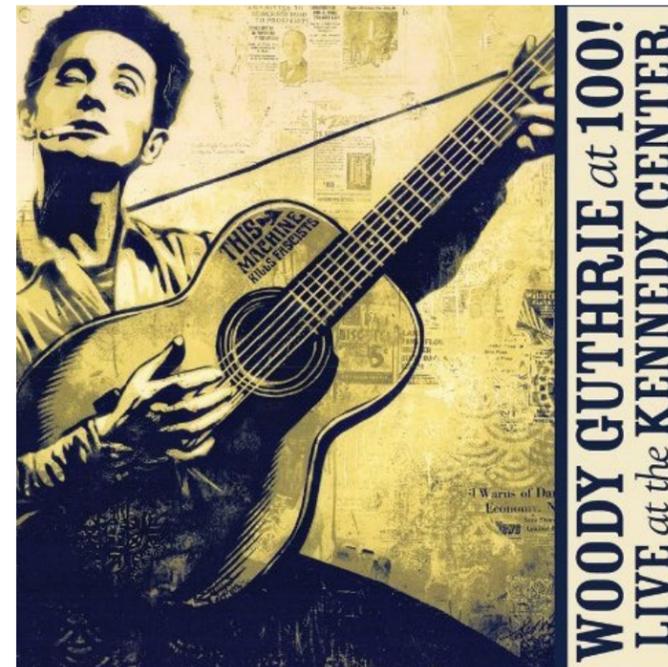
Mom + Pop, LP Or CD

- Purchase LP from Music Direct

time, either an era when harmonious pop was all it took to get a radio hit (after one album on Fat Possum, the band is on indie Mom + Pop) or a period when first heartbreaks and new crushes were life and death. "Glossed" ricochets between high and lows—twinkling guitars, falsetto backing vocals, and sudden, swooshing, keyboard-driven drops—and, on in "Fool Proof," sliding guitars and bouncy synths fight back the sadness.

The tempo doesn't shift much for 40 minutes, but there also isn't a moment where it feels anything less than a rather lovely soundtrack to handholding. "Varsity" ends the album with a sing-along, where guitars and keys dip in and around each other, and the band goes out crooning that "it's hard to be alone." It is, but the thesis driving the Smith Westerns is simple: All you need is love.

—**Todd Martens**



Woody Guthrie at 100!:

Live at the Kennedy Center

Sony Music/Legacy, CD/DVD

All-star tributes can be underwhelming affairs. They're almost always too long. But, sprinkled in the mix, you usually find glorious interpretations that stop you in your tracks. Such is the case with this homage to the songs of folk legend Woody Guthrie.

Recorded at the Kennedy Center last year, the live concert recording covers the bases of Guthrie's oeuvre. His songs are both dirt-simple and poetically complex, from populist anthems to searing political indictments. He was, at his core, a guy who cared.

And it's clear the artists celebrating him care too, including Rosanne Cash, Old Crow Medicine Show, Jimmy LaFave, John Mellencamp, and Jackson Browne. These musicians and more perform with varying degrees of success. As for the sub-par showings? Joel Rafael sounds perilously close to a Dylan parody on "Ramblin' Reckless Hobo." Yet the most thankless task falls to Donovan, who gamely takes on the annoying children's ditty "Riding In My Car."

One can understand Ramblin' Jack Elliott's shaky handling on "1913 Massacre." The man is 81, so god bless. But there's no forgiving the caterwauling battle of egos when the entire cast assembles for mass sing-alongs of "This Train Is Bound For Glory" and "This Land Is Your Land." If this were vaudeville, the hook would come out.

There's a silver lining. Artists that capably put their own stamp on the Guthrie canon include Sweet Honey in the Rock ("I've Got to Know"); the Del McCoury Band ("So Long, It's Been Good to Know Yuh"); and Ani DiFranco with Ry Cooder and Dan Gellert ("Deportee").

After Woody Guthrie's death, his family discovered notebooks filled with his lyrics to a number of unfinished songs. Lucinda Williams puts music and her scorched voice to one of them, the unsettling prostitute's tale "House of Earth." It's one of the two genuinely head-turning moments here. The other knockout punch comes courtesy of Judy Collins. She arrives like a dark angel on "Pastures of Plenty," a painful meditation on Dust Bowl migrants.

Singing against lovely, insistent piano and guitar, she turns Guthrie's words into a depth charge: "I worked in your orchards of peaches and prunes/I slept on the ground in the light of your moons/On the edge of your cities you'll see us and then/We come with the dust and we're gone with the wind."

The tracks by Collins and Williams alone are worth the price of admission. The two create the greatest tribute of all—unique interpretations that make Guthrie feel more alive than ever.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**



Coming to Terms

A Candid Conversation With Jason Isbell

By Andy Downing

©Photo by Michael Wilson

On “Alabama Pines,” the opening track off Jason Isbell’s 2011 album *Here We Rest*, the singer-songwriter interrupts a peaceful Sunday drive home to stop off at a liquor store, admitting, “I can’t stand the pain of being by myself/Without a little help.”

This, it turns out, was another instance of art imitating life. Isbell has recently opened up about his struggles with alcoholism in numerous interviews, admitting he can no longer recall much of the time he spent recording and touring with Southern rockers the Drive-By Truckers, a band with which he parted ways in 2007.

“You come to and you’re in a room full of people you don’t know and you don’t trust, and your life can be in danger,” said Isbell, 34, in a recent phone interview. “That happened in a lot of shitty hotels on a lot of different nights for me.”

Aware of his downward spiral, and determined to not repeat past mistakes, Isbell gave up booze early in 2012. This decision, as well as his February marriage to fellow musician Amanda Shires, forms the backbone of his fourth solo album, *Southeastern*. The career-best effort, awash in country rock, folk, and Americana, is populated by a range of damaged characters that, much like Isbell, are struggling to come to terms with past misdeeds.

“That’s certainly a major theme,” said the musician. “I didn’t set out to do that, but it’s something that was on my mind while I was writing these songs.”

In a wide-ranging interview, Isbell opened up about his decision to give up drinking, the process of becoming an adult, and why you never want to be pitted against his wife in a board game.

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On Here We Rest, it seemed like you were writing about characters that were broken and emotionally raw. This time around, there's a sense many of them have finally stumbled upon the right path—even if they're still reconciling the damage that's been done.

Mmm-hmm. I'm trying to expand on that sentiment since I certainly don't disagree with it. I really wanted to try to have some hope on this record. That's something I've had more of in my life lately, and I wanted that reflected in the music. The world isn't as terrible a place as I thought it was a couple years ago—at least not my world. I think I finally came to the realization I have it a whole lot easier than most folks do.

How important was it for you to end the album on a more optimistic note with "Relatively Easy?"

The world isn't as terrible a place as I thought it was a couple years ago—at least not my world. I think I finally came to the realization I have it a whole lot easier than most folks do.

I did that on purpose. I don't know how much a tracklist matters to people anymore because I don't know if people listen to records the whole way through like they used to, but that kind of thing is important to me. I wanted to leave on a good note. I certainly wouldn't want to put a song like "Elephant" last, or people would need to eat some ice cream or something like that to cheer themselves up afterwards.

"Relatively Easy" is an interesting track. There's a real sense of maturity and empathy in the your words. I don't think it couldn't have been written by someone who hasn't been through a few rough patches.

Who hasn't, you know? Anybody who cares about anybody has had to deal with that kind of tragedy and that kind of loss. I think if you're paying attention to the people around you, those stories are everywhere.

True, but you have to reach a certain point in your life before you feel that kind of empathy for others and start to realize, "As bad as things might seem for me, these people over here actually have it worse."

Oh yeah, that one does take awhile. I was a pretty pissed-off teenager for 32 years [laughs]. It took me a long time to realize that compared to 99.9999% of the world I'm really, really lucky. I've had a lot of personal struggles over the last couple years, and a lot of things I myself had to overcome, but it wasn't like I was walking three miles a day to get water for my family.

On "Different Day," the narrator keeps returning to this idea they were a different person 10 years prior. You're 34 now. How would you have described yourself at the age 24?

That's a good question. I was still pretty wide-eyed and adventurous, I would think. In those

days I didn't think before I spoke or acted as much as I do now. I allowed a lot of decisions to make themselves back then. Once you figure out how to make decisions on your own rather than allowing them to be made for you...you've solved a pretty big problem.

What's the first decision you can recall making for yourself rather than simply allowing events to unfold?

Well, when I quit drinking...a whole lot of that decision-making actually returned to me. I'm not saying the alcohol was making the decisions, but when I really put my foot down and quit drinking it helped me make decisions in more of an informed manner. When I quit drinking and got into a serious relationship that really made all the difference for me. Those two things started branching out into other aspects of my life...and really forced me to address the way my decisions and my behavior effected other people.

It seems like Amanda was an instrumental part of that process. (continued)

Very much so. I've been in relationships before I felt were healthy, but I never really thought it was possible to be this happy and satisfied with somebody. I never thought that was for me. I thought that kind of happiness was a myth. So, yeah, coming to terms with actually having something worth keeping is very interesting to me, and I think it came out when I was writing the record.

On "Songs That She Sang in the Shower," the narrator talks about "repeat[ing] the mantras that might keep [them] clean for the day." Did you turn to an organization like Alcoholics Anonymous to help find sobriety, or is it someone you pursued on your own?

I don't really talk about that part. That's a little more information than I'd like to give people.

On the surface, "Live Oak" is a murder ballad. But at its core, the song is really about a man trying to make peace with his past. How much of that was inspired by the decision to forego alcohol?

I would say all of it. That song really formed around my anxiety about what parts of me would be lost on the other side of that. And it wasn't just booze, but deciding to become an adult in general. You start to wonder what parts of yourself people are attracted to, and you wonder if you're going to lose those when you finally do decide to start behaving in a grownup manner.

Do you feel like you've lost something?

I don't know. The jury's still out on that. I didn't lose any of the people that were most important to me, and we'll see about the rest of it. It's been interesting to me to see what's still there. What kind of person I am now compared with who I was.

I was surprised the record label included a beer koozie as a bonus for fans who placed a pre-order for the album, considering the circumstances.

©Photo by Eric England



Yeah, that could also be used for soda pop [laughs]. I don't think alcohol is evil. I'm not one of those folks. I think a whole lot of people need a drink. Anyone who can have one and stop needs one.

There's a line on the record where you say "from the sky the highway's straight as it can be." Time and again, you kind of return to this idea that the closer you look at a person, the more you see we're all flawed and damaged and trying our best to somehow hold it together.

I think the older you get the more you realize everyone is dealing with some pretty serious issues. I think that's something that comes with maturity. When you're younger it's so important to be nice, and everybody is judged so heavily on whether or not they're nice to you. You're so focused on impressing everybody and pleasing everybody and making everybody like you, and the older you get, the more you realize that's just exhausting. Those folks have foibles and flaws just like you do, and it's not your responsibility to make everyone like you or to be nice to everybody. I think it's more important to be honest about things.

By taking that approach, it seems like you can write about simple gestures and personal relationships and have them take on these bigger, more universal concepts like love or friendship or death.

Yeah, a lot of that comes out of things I listen to. James McMurtry, for example, is really good at making these small, everyday gestures or phrases really take on broader meaning, and that's the kind of world I like to live in. I like that kind of precision, and I like that there can be a lot of poignancy in common conversation. I like to imagine that very often when someone says something to you about their day they're saying more than just those simple words. I'm sure it's not exclusive to old folks, but it seems like that's the way my grandparents talk. There's more to what they're saying, and a couple hours after talking to them you realize how they were actually teaching you something or passing along some piece of information you might not have understood completely at first.

You almost pursued a master's degree in creative writing. What ultimately led you to choose songwriting instead of a career as a fiction writer or poet?

Cause I like to eat [laughs]. I like paying rent. I grew up playing musical instruments, so it seemed like a natural fit. I started playing guitar when I was really young, and when it occurred to me you could mix the two together in a song, it seemed like the greatest thing in the world. And it still does. To me that's always carried more weight than just words on a page.

I'm curious about the physical aspect of your songwriting process. Do you sit at a desk? Work on a typewriter?

I write with a pencil, and usually it's at the dinner table. I like to spread things out and be by the window there where I can see everything. If I'm on the road I'll do it wherever I can. I've written on bar napkins, and I have notebooks with me all the time. Sometimes I'll just sing into my phone for a minute or two. But in a perfect situation, I'm sitting at home at my dinner table with a pencil so I can erase. I hate looking at scratched-up, marked-up corrections. I'm not sure why. Maybe it's a little OCD thing I have.

You're also married to a fine songwriter. Is there any sense of competition between the two of you?

You can't really be competing with your wife. Right before we got married her granddad said, "You can either be happy or you can be right." You can't be too competitive, but there is a standard we try to maintain. When we've finished a song we'll play it for each other and make some corrections and suggestions here and there. But we don't really compete other than I know what she's going to be writing will be of pretty high quality and I don't want to be the one in the family that drops the ball.

What about when it comes to Scrabble? Do you get competitive there?

Yeah, there we're very competitive. She's a cheater at board games [laughs]. ●



Mark Lanegan

Imitations

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Since splitting with the Screaming Trees nearly two decades ago, Mark Lanegan has preferred to hide in the shadows and draw on his well-deep baritone to haunt, shade, and suggest. Capable of raising his ire and upping the volume, Lanegan instead opts for slower, bleaker, more methodical approaches. The strategy is befitting a moody singer that seemingly invites scarecrows to roost on his shoulders and death to linger in the air.

As there's no irony in his vocabulary, he's the quintessential *noir* vocalist—a hovering presence that serves as the musical equivalent of the mysterious, protagonist-torturing figure in any number of late 40s/early 50s film noir classics. Only Lanegan doesn't need to act or dress the part in order to manipulate circumstance and exact revenge. He simply utilizes his single-malt-stained, low-register husk of a voice to express ominous portent, cast anguish, boil tension, or convey tremendous burden.

Which is why hearing the imposing artist croon a tender-footed rendition of Nancy Sinatra's "You Only Live Twice"—yes, *that* "You Only Live Twice," the title song to the James Bond movie of the same name—comes as quite the surprise, one of several on *Imitations*, Lanegan's eighth solo album. Fans aware of his three collaborative efforts with former Belle and Sebastian member Isobel Campbell will recognize the move isn't without precedent. With Campbell, Lanegan has produced modern versions of the Lee Hazelwood-Nancy Sinatra duet records on which she is the soothing beauty, he the raspy beast. Yet, on his own, Lanegan has rarely (if ever) delved into such gentility—let alone straightforward versions of three Andy Williams tunes. Is this really the same man that specialized in mournful elegies, functioned as a vocal undertaker during his stint in Queens of the Stone Age, and played a menacing Lucifer to Greg Dulli's lascivious Mephistopheles in the Gutter Twins?

The explanation lies in Lanegan's desire to make a record akin to those he heard growing up. "When I was a kid in the late Sixties and early Seventies, my parents and their friends would play the records of Andy Williams, Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, and Perry Como, music with string arrangements and men singing songs that sounded sad whether they were or not," he explained in late June on his Web site, adding that he shared the same affinity for country records by the likes of Willie Nelson and George Jones. Hence, *Imitations* mixes vocal standards with a handful of contemporary numbers—the latter ranging from Chelsea Wolfe's rustic "Flatlands"

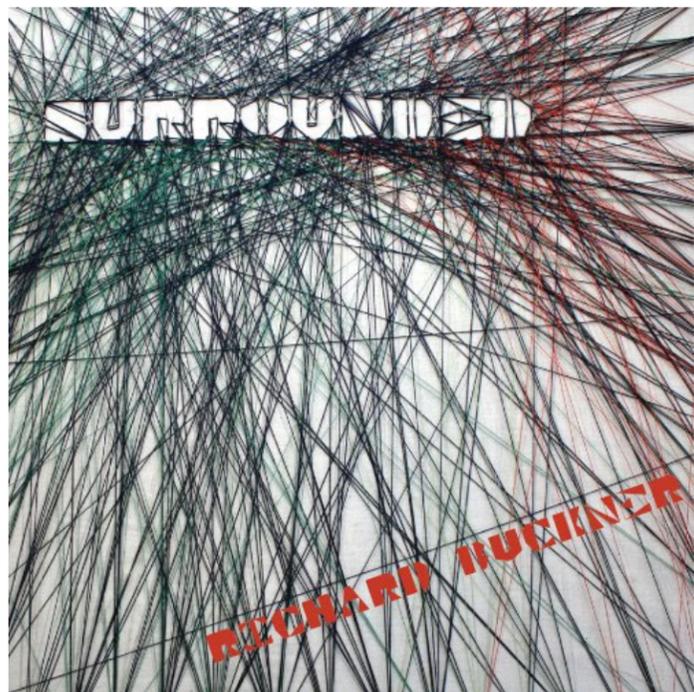
to Dulli's gorgeous chamber ballad "Deepest Shade," a song penned for the Twilight Singers but never released.

While Lanegan brings a subtle high-and-lonesome country feel to Vern Godsin's "She's Gone," he treats all the material with solemn reverence. He's not out to rearrange or conjure different meaning. Stripped-down and beautifully scored with the bare minimum of clean guitars, horns, and strings where necessary, *Imitations* is, by and large, an idiosyncratic singer's homage to the vocal craft, and to songs tinged with various degrees of heartache. Lanegan doesn't possess the range needed to pull off "Lonely Street" or fluidity of

French to convincingly deliver Gérard Maset's "Élégie Funèbre." Yet he's a natural inhabiting John Cale's "I'm Not the Loving Kind," Frank Sinatra's "Pretty Colors," and even "Autumn Leaves," all of which now sound even more despairing than before. Which isn't to say they surpass the originals; that isn't the point, nor is it Lanegan's aim.

Indeed, evaluated and enjoyed within the context and ambitions Lanegan outlined, *Imitations* adds to the impressively diversified resume of an artist who's a singer in the truest sense of the term. Jones, Cash, Dean, and the boys would be proud. —**Bob Gendron**





Richard Buckner ● Purchase LP from Music Direct
Surrounded
Merge, LP or CD

Even when Richard Buckner sings about being lost in a crowd or on the run with a would-be lover, he has a way of sounding achingly, devastatingly alone. Indeed, the cult singer-songwriter's deep catalog could be described as one extended, heartbroken sigh. It's a trend that continues on the California-born musician's latest full-length studio effort, *Surrounded*, an album that, in spite of its title, finds Buckner again striking out on his lonesome.

"I was alive," he sings atop acoustic strumming and rich autoharp on "Foundation," "But a vision left alone."

As on 2011's *Our Blood*, Buckner continues to distance himself from his more stripped-down, alt-country roots here, embracing electronic textures that add a lushness to the material while somehow increasing the gulf between the singer and the rest of humankind.

Witness "Cut," a percolating tune where machines stand in for fellow musicians, heightening the sense of solitude. "When You Tell Me How It Is" sounds similarly dense albeit deserted, Buckner layering on crisp acoustic guitar, dissonant melodica, and distant background loops that mimic the hum of a life-support system. It's essentially the work of one man locked away with his machines.

Buckner again refuses to linger, and he works his way through the album's nine cuts in just a shade over 34 minutes. Even so, *Surrounded* never once feels rushed. It's simply as long as it needs to be, which speaks to the singer's ever-expanding abilities as both a writer and an editor.

On *Our Blood*, the musician tends to deliver his words with a clear sense of urgency, often singing as though his time were running down and he needed to get everything onto tape before expiring. Here, he takes a more casual approach, and his tone practically beckons listeners closer, as if he were sharing a series of increasingly intimate secrets.

Of course, trying to cull specific meaning from Buckner's phrasing can be a tricky proposition. His lyrics tend to be elliptical and difficult to grasp; when he sings of "the shade of the night/only leading you on" on one song, he could easily be speaking of his own slipperly words. Their specific meaning, like a firefly at dusk, seems to momentarily flicker before again giving way to all-consuming darkness.

Even so, the singer's lyrics speak to deep reserves of loneliness (he sings of "waking just in time to miss the show" on "Lean To"), a desire to make a deeper connection ("We should go out sometime," he hopefully offers on "Go"), and an awareness of his own limitations. "The caption should say he doesn't know where he's going," he sings wearily on "Beautiful Question." Even if this is true—and Buckner's albums appear to argue the statement is true for all of us—it certainly doesn't make the journey any less enjoyable. —**Andy Downing**

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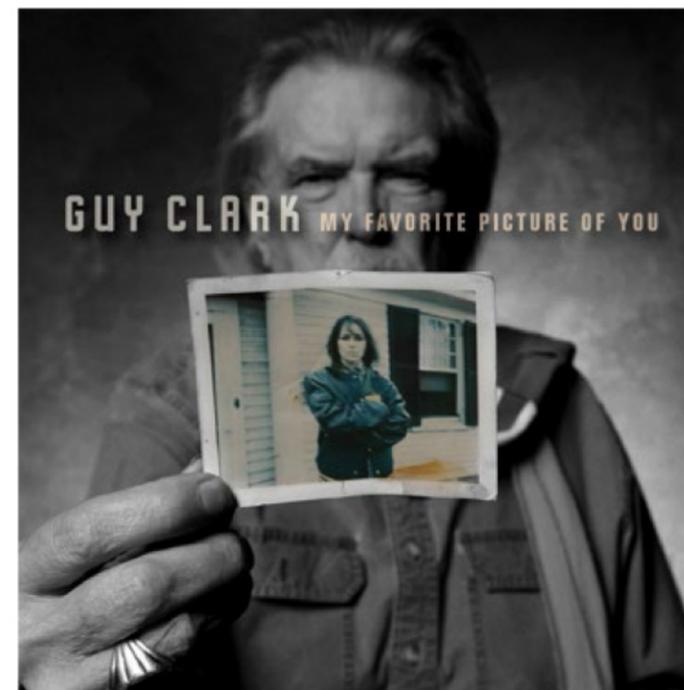
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MUSIC



Guy Clark ● Purchase LP from Music Direct
My Favorite Picture of You
Dualtone, LP or CD

As a young man, Guy Clark made his name as an edgy, new-breed country songwriter along with the likes of Townes Van Zandt and Mickey Newbury. Now 71, he's taken on the mantle of lion in winter.

My Favorite Picture of You is a finely wrought, late-in-the-day statement. The centerpiece is the title track written for his wife, Susanna, who died in 2012. On the album cover, Clark holds a Polaroid of her as a young woman. The song is a shattering ode to that photo and all it represents: the good times, the bad times, and the woman who stuck with him through it all.

Clark displays a deep social conscience in several songs. The bright Tex-Mex melody of “El Coyote” belies the darker story at its heart: undocumented Mexican workers exploited and abandoned by the “coyote” they’ve paid to smuggle them across the border. “Heroes” spotlights a damaged Iraq War veteran after they’ve come home.

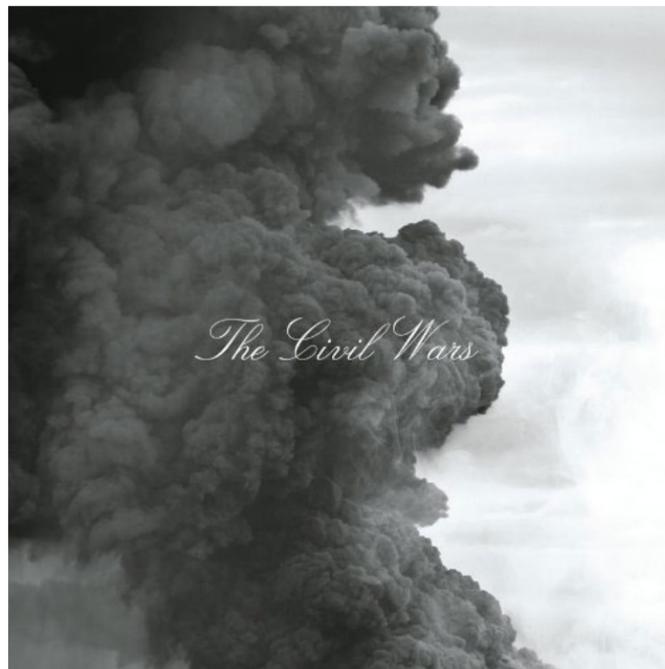
Employing old-school country recitation, Clark tells the story of a scarred young man going off the rails: “A silver star and a pistol in a drawer/The morphine just ain’t workin’ no more.” Like John Prine’s classic “Sam Stone,” “Heroes” cuts with scalpel precision, focusing on the raw specifics of one soldier’s story.

The singer’s songs are built on mournful cello, quietly burbling banjo, sweet fiddles, and warm acoustic guitars. Melodies are memorable and winning. But the lyrics, delivered in Clark’s weather-beaten voice, are what resonate most. Like a gifted short-story writer, Clark is all about details honed to a razor’s edge. “Rain In Durango” is a shrewdly observed character study of a rambling girl: “She wound up with a backstage pass/Was hangin’ with the pickers in the band/Till her heart got broke by a banjo man/Now she’s had all the bluegrass she can stand.”

Every cut is a smart, distinctive gem. The riveting western story-song “The Death of Sis Draper” would make the late Marty Robbins smile. Clark also casts a sharp eye on the dangerous, addictive life of an artist in “The High Price of Inspiration.” And he offers up a cheeky take on life in “Good Advice.”

“Don’t give me no advice that rhymes/I’ve heard it all a thousand times/Don’t start preachin’ between the lines/Give me somethin’ I can use.” What Clark gives us is thoughtful art. *My Favorite Picture of You* is a quiet treasure.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**



t's impossible to separate the broken music on the Civil Wars' self-titled sophomore album from the drama currently surrounding the folk-rock duo.

Last fall, Joy Williams and John Paul White abruptly called off a European tour, issuing a tersely worded press release that cited "internal discord and irreconcilable differences of ambition." More recently, Williams has done interviews where she's said the two singers are no longer on speaking terms and there are currently no plans to tour in support of the new record. Reconciliation, it appears, is nowhere on the horizon.

Against this backdrop, the pair's latest effort plays like an extended breakup. "Oh, I wish I'd never seen your face," the two harmonize on the album's bruised opening cut, "I wish you were the one that got away." White, his voice a deadened whisper, opens the reflective "Same Old Same Old" singing, "I want to leave you/I want to lose us/I want to give up." Even more damning is Williams opening admission on "Eavesdrop," particularly considering the pair's incommunicado status: "I don't want to talk right now."

The Civil Wars

The Civil Wars
Sensibility Music/
Columbia, 2LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

This kind of disharmony was all but unthinkable just two years ago. The group released its 2011 debut, *Barton Hollow*, to near-universal acclaim, racking up a pair of Grammy wins (for Best Country Duo/Group Performance and Best Folk Album), more than a half-million in album sales, and plaudits from contemporaries like Taylor Swift, who invited the duo to record a song with her for the soundtrack to the *Hunger Games* movie.

In spite of current tensions, the album maintains a sense of desperation, as Williams and White wish they could somehow pull closer despite the gulf steadily widening between them. "Just hold me," they plead as "Eavesdrop" builds to a feverish close. Although

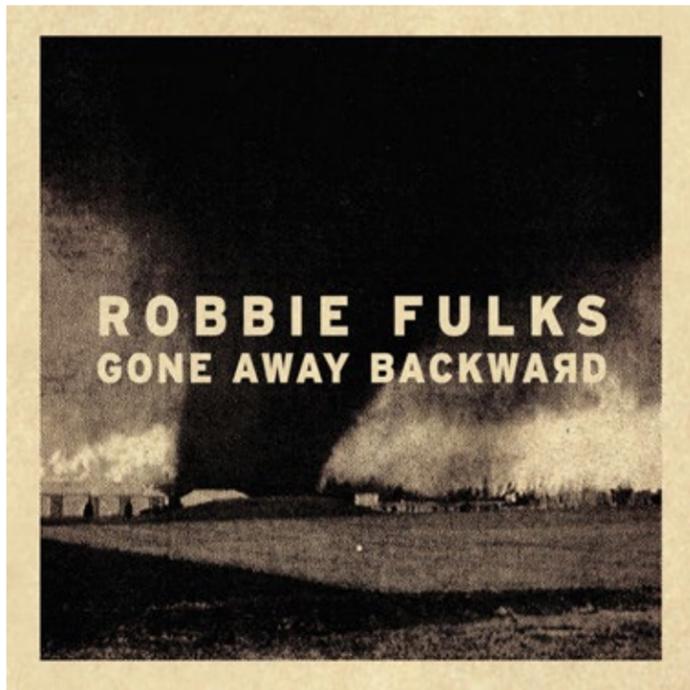


©Photo by Allister Ann

the two were never romantically linked—both are in relationships outside the band and have always denied any involvement beyond a musical partnership—they share an obvious intimacy that surfaces on songs like "Dust to Dust," a lilting slow dance that feels a bit like listening in on a private conversation. A similar closeness informs "From This Valley," a mountain waltz driven by White's limber acoustic strumming.

While much of the music here cuts deeper than the band's surface-level debut—note the acidity that surfaces in "Oh Henry" when Williams sings, "The grass is green everywhere but underneath"—there are times the devastated atmosphere borders on maudlin. This is particularly true on a pair of ill-chosen covers, including Etta James' "Tell Mama" and a ponderous, glacial take on Smashing Pumpkins' "Disarm" that appears to exist solely to test a listener's reaction time in reaching for the "skip" button.

Despite these flaws, however, *The Civil Wars* remains a stirring and oftentimes emotional effort. If current appearances hold and the album serves as the pair's swansong, well, there are certainly worse ways to go out. —Andy Downing



Robbie Fulks

Gone Away Backward
Bloodshot Records, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

Back in the 1990s, Robbie Fulks emerged on the radar with his blistering anti-Nashville manifesto “Fuck This Town.” Yes, Fulks is a genuinely funny guy. But despite a string of complex albums, his early image as an alt-country smart-ass can still obscure the sincere breadth and depth of his talent.

Fulks mostly plays it straight on the new *Gone Away Backward*. A chunk of the album showcases Fulks’ sure way with old-school country and bluegrass (the moody mountain lament “I’ll Trade You Money For Wine” and lightning-fast-picked instrumental “Pacific Slope”). But he also stretches into shivery modern parlor ballads (“The Many Disguises of God”), slinky acoustic blues (“Imogene”), and several terrific hybrids of modern country and folk.

Filled with small-town ennui and wrapped in a gentle melody, “Where I Fell” is alternately funny, mournful, and exhausted. The song uncoils like something Roger Miller would’ve written during a severe hangover, right down to a couple bars of enervated whistling. Fulks sings, “Daddy used to catch his supper in this river/ Now you can’t swim it/Smells like a 20-ton truck full of paint thinner/Sank down in it.” For all its clever, twisty wordplay, it’s a poignant soliloquy from a man resigned to live where he has fallen—an America of increasingly diminished returns.

There are a few wiseacre moments here. In the bluegrass tune “Sometimes the Grass Is Really Greener,” a mountain musician tries his luck in Nashville. The lyrics find Fulks still getting in his digs against the industry powers that be. It’s fairly amusing, but at this point, predictable: “The record company man confessed he liked me/But he had to shave a few rough edges down/Cut my hair like Brooks and Dunn’s/Trade the banjo for some drums/’Cause no one would buy that old high lonesome sound.”

Fulks strikes gold when he sets such salvo aside and plays from the heart. He’s winningly sentimental on the country-folk ballad “That’s Where I’m From,” a man’s bittersweet look backward at his down-home country roots. Yet the pretty albeit emotionally crushing “Guess I Got It Wrong” is the standout track, putting Fulks within striking distance of heavyweights like Don Williams and Gordon Lightfoot.

It’s times like these when you are forcibly reminded Fulks isn’t just everyone’s favorite alt-country funnyman. He’s one of the most serious songwriters around, inside Nashville or out.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**

Neko Case

The Worse Things Get, The Harder I Fight, The More I Love You
Anti-, 2LP or CD

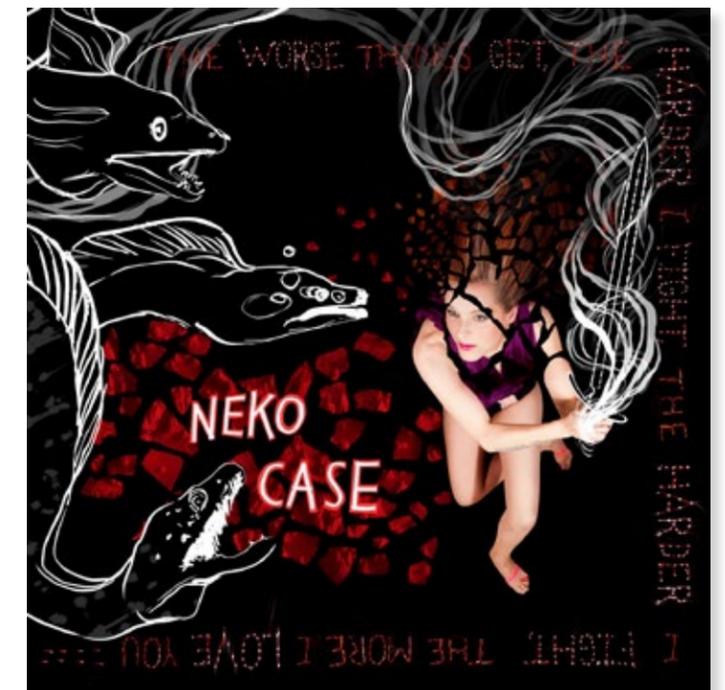
● Purchase LP from Music Direct

N

eko Case outlines a number of options

at the start of her latest solo venture, the singer’s first in four years. “Hey, little girl,” she sings on album opener “Wild Creatures,” “would you like to be the king’s pet or the king?” But it’s not exactly an either/or proposition.

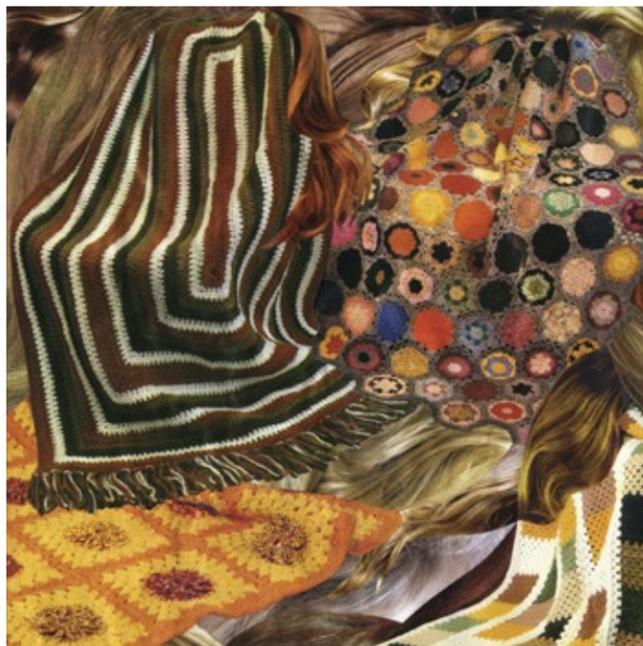
To step into Case’s world has increasingly become a journey into a storybook-like land. These tales are sometimes bruised and somber, but reality is askew, the arrangements are darkly lush, and the voice is never less than clear, rich, and sublime. As “Wild Creatures” gets whisked into a cauldron of magical woodwinds, fiery strings, and sturdy choirs, Case hints at other potential paths for the “little girl.” Invisible and odorless are the traits our hero desires, but Case would settle for the position of king.



Yet, beware of the man at the top. “It’s the loneliest,” Case sings, her voice calming what was a suddenly violent piano. In two-and-a-half minutes, Case has given us a Tolkien-worthy epic full of backstabbing members of royalty and hellish-sounding choirs. Both singer and orchestrator eventually come back down to earth. Not all of *The Worse Things Get* strays from the artist’s country-dipped backbone. But taken as a whole, the record is one of her most lively and mysterious efforts to date.

“Night Still Comes” is full of early-morning mysticism and borderline-surreal lyrics (“My brain makes drugs,” Case croons at the start), with the subtle addition of orchestral touches and call-and-response backing singers adding more depth. “Man” is frantic rocker with bursts of fuzz-laden guitars and raining keyboards, whereas “Where Did I Leave the Fire” crackles with echoes, crickets, and jazzy pianos seemingly lost in a haunted forest. “Change the way I love you,” Case then demands on the gospel scolding “Local Girl.”

Ever more ambitious, “Ragtime” combines bits of the aforementioned songs and then some. An old-timey keyboard simmers as Case takes the listener on a confidently casual stroll around big, brassy notes and ghostly, operatic singers. As she drowns in a wonderland of roots-gone-mad sounds, she pointedly takes stock of her environs: “I am useful and strange.” No doubt, that. —**Todd Martens**

**Ty Segall***Sleeper*

Drag City, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct



©Photo by Denee Petracek

Ty Segall has finally descended from what seems like a prolonged amphetamine high. Or, at the least, the garage-rock maven mellowed long enough to take a breath and allow his growing legion of fans to do the same. Nothing wrong with exhaling every once in a while.

Segall, who has been releasing records with myriad bands since 2005 before embarking on a solo career in 2008, came into full bloom during the past 15 months. A pair of records, *Twins* and *Slaughterhouse*, closely followed the promising *Goodbye Bread*, issued toward the end of 2011. Rather than mimic the too-much, too-soon approach of many of his contemporaries that release nearly every song they record, Segall justified his prolific output by way of albums steeped in solid melodies, concise arrangements, sincere originality, and simple hooks. He also blew away crowds with fervent live shows via a band that included guitarist Mikal Cronin, whose *MCII* stands as one of this year's power-pop gems. What would Segall do for an encore?

As it happens, turn the volume down, shut off most of the amplifiers, flirt with introspection, and leave fans wanting more by releasing just one album for the entire calendar year of 2013. Primarily unplugged and indirectly personal, *Sleeper* exhales with the increasing maturity and poise of a 20-something pondering life's heavier moments and challenging situations. The LP is Segall's most straightforward singer-songwriter effort, and his most serious. Not surprisingly, its gestation coincided with his father's death and the vocalist/guitarist cutting

off communications with his mother.

Rather than the art of a musician who sounds prepared to jump off a roof into a swimming pool below, or one motivated to see just how many eardrums he can make ring with decibel-rich distortion, *Sleeper* prizes atmosphere, acoustics, and color. Segall's established proclivities for psychedelia and paisley-underground pop shine. His calm voice and acid-melted falsetto often streams through subtle effects filters that engender a wavy, foggy, British quality.

Guitar fills, such as the slide patterns on the fun-with-mirrors country-folk of "6th Street," zig and zag in directions equivalent of those of Lombard Street in his former home base of San Francisco. Sadness gives way to self-assertion and pained relief in the form of jangly rhythms ("The Man Man," "She Don't Care"). On the coda to "Queen Lullabye," Segall even flirts with raga mysticism.

Many of the tunes take on the quality of hazy dreams: Time and place remain fuzzy, voices echo, everything is over before you can completely grasp what just happened. "Oh dreamer/My sleeper/My dream's dream come true," Segall warbles on the gorgeous chamber-pop title cut, playing the role of his lover's baby blue as strings soar in the background and a thickly resonant unplugged guitar strums in the foreground. It sets the tone for an effort on which Segall appears to seek comfort and peace of mind.

Indeed, where the vocalist's previous works are glad to be the center of attention—extroverted affairs that thrive on energy, volume, and speed—*Sleeper* is content to be a wallflower that stands off to the side and lurks in the quiet corners of a room. And, as made clear by the ongoing three-decade-plus career of Robyn Hitchcock, whose arc and sound Segall looks to be tracing, being an underdog has its benefits. —**Bob Gendron**



Superchunk

I Hate Music

Merge Records, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

Credit goes to Superchunk for crafting what is arguably the album title of the year. It's three words, "I Hate Music," that when affixed to a CD, LP, or collection of MP3s, encapsulates a number of the mixed emotions of fandom, alluding equally to its limitations and necessity.

It isn't hard to guess where Superchunk ultimately lands on this love/hate debate, especially when one considers that Mac McCaughan and Laura Balance, the architects of the long-running Chapel Hill, N.C. band, have also spent the last two-plus decades building Merge Records into one of the most beloved brands in independent rock.

The line appears on the second track, "Me & You & Jackie Mittoo," which begins, as many a Superchunk song starts, with a clenched riff and McCaughan's lean vocals, always higher-pitched and more exuberant than one expects. "I hate music," he tells us, arguing "it can't bring anyone back to this earth." Then the kicker: "But I got nothing else, so I guess here we go."

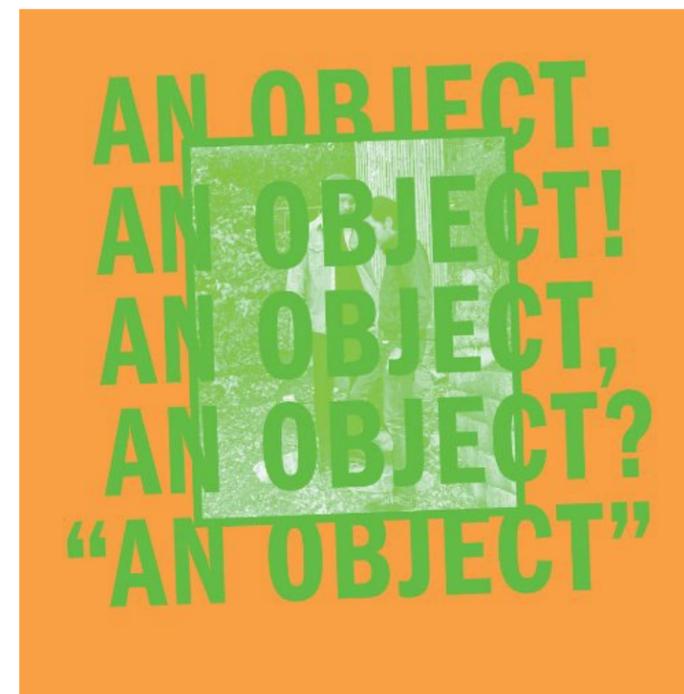
Consider it something of a thesis here, as Superchunk—over the course of these 11 songs and 37 minutes—presents an album of punk rock at its most grown up. Adult concerns and simple pleasures abound. They "ate and drank and ate and drank" amid the wily, fancifully fast hooks of "Trees of Barcelona" and want nothing more

than to lock the door and be left alone in the frantic "Staying Home."

Each song dispels the myths that rock n' roll is a young person's game, as *I Hate Music* and 2010's *Majesty Shredding* (the band's first album in almost a decade) reveal Superchunk at its leanest and most thoughtfully direct. Questions linger—"Do you like this place?" McCaughan asks early in "Overflows"—long after any emotional exhaustion is erased by drummer Jon Wurster's never-less-than song-defining rhythms. The band slows down and amps up the cynicism on "Out of the Sun," and "Your Theme" sees McCaughan and Jim Wilbur building guitar upon guitar in a search for a rock n' roll identity (with the help of some

glorious "ba ba bas"). The slow-building and pensive "What Can We Do" gets sturdier with each verse, as the struggle to maintain a relationship without getting "tied up" or "trapped" becomes increasingly desperate, and increasingly unlikely.

The song title of the latter is one of many unanswered, post-thirty-something questions posited throughout the set. "Do you think the answer is love?" McCaughan wonders on the shimmering "Low F." If it at first seems an optimistic query for these veteran rockers, it isn't any more silly or abstract than putting one's faith in the healing power of a pop song, which Superchunk unabashedly does time and time again. —**Todd Martens**



No Age

An Object

Sub Pop, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

Noisy punk rock isn't supposed to sound lonely. The very description connotes loudness, some sort of commotion or a ruckus, and that usually involves people. Or, in the case of No Age, people manipulating machinery. How else to properly explain what rhythmic operator Dean Spunt and guitar tormenter Randy Randall conjure up on *An Object*, the L.A. band's fourth album.

Songs such as "Defector/ed" and "A Ceiling Dreams of a Floor" create an effect of running in place. Spunt's momentum is all forward, while Randall's guitars, whether via the glistening metallics of the former or rainy feedback on the latter, seem content to take their time getting to their destination. The end result is a record that's alternately loud, fast, and meditative. If No Age had begun to fill in the gaps with digital trickery on recent albums, here, instruments are toyed with before giving way to more modern sounds.

"Running From A-Go-Go" begins as something of a distress call, the guitars twisted and morphed until they sound like an old reel-to-reel machine. "One more night alone," Spunt sings, always matter-of-factly as images of late-night drives and truck stops dominate. It's cliché for a band to write about life on the road, but No Age gets away with it by emphasizing little more than the emptiness. If you're going to tackle well-traversed ground, do it with focus.

Randall's riffs hit like giant blocks of reverb, and how accessible a particular song is (or isn't) usually depends on how much he chips away at the excess. "Circling With Dizzy" attacks like bees just stripped of a hive while "I Won't Be Your Generator" sees the pair writing a rather concise, albeit spiteful, relationship-gone-south ditty. "Lock Box" nearly trips over itself with dueling rhythms, each a stumpy little block of frustration, and "No Ground" is two-and-a-half minutes loaded with finger-in-the-socket guitar riffs.

"Who do you think you are?" Spunt shouts, adding, sarcastically, "Your life is set in stone." No Age doesn't believe that, of course. The band has once again gone in search of a melody by drilling away at the concrete. —**Todd Martens**



Bigger Than Life

A Conversation With Original Sly and the Family Stone
Drummer Greg Errico

By Andy Downing

The late 1960s/early 1970s were a famously tumultuous time in the United States and, as attested by the new career-spanning box set *Higher!* (reviewed here), few bands recorded music that better reflected the era than Sly and the Family Stone. *TONEAudio* contributor Andy Downing recently spoke with the group's original drummer, Greg Errico, about the formation of the band, Sly Stone's steady decline, and the likelihood of any future reunion.

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hy do you think this music has stood the test of time the way it has?

Great songwriting. Sly's lyrics and stories touched people. Then there's just the magic the group had. It was a strong bond, and that carried over into our performances and recordings. The combination of those things seems to have created this thing that has a life of its own. When the new generation is hearing it, it still connects with them even though they've never seen the group or been part of the marketing and promotion and all that. It's just there. A lot of times we go out and people don't necessarily remember or connect with the name of the group the Family Stone, but you say one of the songs and they go, "Oh yeah!" So they remember the songs. So, yeah, the music still lives and still connects with people.

How did you first come into contact with Sly?

Well, Sly was a DJ on a great radio show back then, so I knew of him. His brother, Freddie, we had a group called the Stone Souls for a little over a year. Sly had made a few swipes at starting a group. I think it was called Sly and the Stoners. It didn't work out, and he was taking another shot at it. So he handpicked everybody. I literally went over to the house for rehearsal one night with the group Freddie and I had, and when I showed up nobody from the group was there. I walked in the room and Sly and Freddie said, "We're going to start something new tonight." They had already talked about this, but I didn't know. That very night everyone showed up and we talked about what we were going to do. Then we rehearsed for about a week and started performing.



© Photo by Stephen Paley

l-r Sly Stone, Cynthia Robinson, Freddie Stone, Rose Stone, Jerry Martni, Larry Graham, Greg Errico

How would you have described Sly in those early days?

Oh, he was just electric, colorful, [and] intelligent. He really connected with people. His charisma really carried over when we got onstage. He was bigger than life.

You were part of a mixed-race, mixed-gender band at a particularly tumultuous time in American history. Did those outside tensions play into the music you were making?

For us, I mean, yeah, you're absolutely right. It was a challenge when we went on the road. There were extra things we had to deal with and were confronted with when traveling around the country.

But as far as the music goes, I think that diversity and that mix brought color and interesting elements that wouldn't ordinarily be in a group at that time. To tell you the truth, at that point and time when all this psychedelic rock is happening, we were doing R&B. Of course, we mixed in heavy influences of rock and roll and psychedelic and jazz.

You mentioned being confronted by some of those outside elements. Is there a particular incident that really stuck with you?

Yeah, right off the top, there were a lot of riots in the big cities and it was literally martial law in some cities.

I remember we were driving through Detroit and we were out of gas so we had to pull off downtown. And we pull off, and we knew there were things going on, but we didn't know of anything in any specific areas. We just needed gas at two or three in the morning so we pulled off. We drive a few blocks and all of a sudden we're surrounded by Army trucks and there might have even been a tank or two. The next thing I know we're out of the car with our hands up against a brick wall on some building on some side street downtown and they have their rifles out pointed at us. It was a tense moment, to say the least.

I thought it was interesting that in the liner notes of this new box set you said of the song "I Get High On You," "You can tell we're experimenting with different stuff, searching for a sound." Do you think there was a particular moment you really found your voice as a group?

I don't know if there was a moment. I think it was an incremental thing. I can remember moments where it was like, 'Okay, we solidified something we were trying to do.' Then it would get to another stage. We brought new elements, and the material was getting better. And these things happened in leaps. *(continued)*

We were experimenting with different things at the time, and some stuff stuck and some stuff didn't.

It seems like you guys essentially created the template for what would become 70s funk when you released "Thank You" in December 1969. Did it feel like you had hit on a new sound?

We were pretty proud of what we were creating. We started the group in December of 1966, and we had done five albums by '71 when I left the group, including the greatest hits, so all that was done in a five-year period. Things were really moved along at an accelerated pace. I was 17 when I started the group, and at that age you're just flying. You're not thinking about anything.

"Stand" really launched the group into the public eye. Could you tell even in the studio you had something special with that song?

Yeah, you could feel the dots were connecting. Every time we went back in the material was getting better and better. We were very confident going into the studio, and we weren't afraid to try or do anything. We had all these great elements, so something had to come out the other end. I mean, we had no idea about the significance and the scope of what we were creating at the time, and what it would end up being and what it would mean in music history.

Can you recall the first time you heard one of your drum breaks sampled by another artist?

You know, that was way later on. I had stopped playing for a while, and I remember listening to the new stuff coming out and going, 'Jesus that sounds like me.' This is in the back of my mind; I'm not actually saying this to anybody. Later on I came to find out it was hundreds of songs, but I didn't know it for years.

Even in the band's heyday Sly was tight-lipped when it came to the media. Did you feel like you really got to know him being around him? Or did he always have his guard up?

In the early days? Oh, we used to hang and go to movies. We bought boats and we'd go to the lake together. He wasn't like that with us. We used to hang.

I read a 1974 Melody Maker interview with him where he said, "I won't ever be predictable," and I have to imagine that was a blessing and a curse for you guys.

Well, you know, yeah [laughs]. In contrast to your last question, I remember when he told us he was going to move to Los Angeles [in late 1969]. We all looked at each other...because we realized it was the beginning of the end. From that point, yeah, there was, well, not a wall, but less and less communication and less and less brotherhood. He moved down there and became a victim of a lot of the wrong things.

What part did you actually play in recording sessions for There's a Riot Goin' On?

Well, with *Riot*, I had left the group and the tracks I'm on were tracks we already had done. For instance, "Thank You for Talkin' to Me Africa," and "Runnin' Away." He did the rest of it upstairs in his home studio in Bel Air, I think it was. I never went down there.

What did you think when you first heard the album then?

Well, when it came out someone brought it by. It was a definite change. It got darker, and it definitely reflected some of the turmoil of the moment. The name is *There's a Riot Goin' On*, so it all made sense. There were no lies there.

Was that a difficult album for you to listen to?

No, I mean, it wasn't difficult. How do I say this? I kind of expected it to be like that. There were no surprises, really. There was still some great songwriting, but, yeah, it was darker than earlier Family Stone.

How challenging was it on a personal level to watch Sly's decline and not be able to do anything to stop it?

Very frustrating. That was one of the reasons I left. It was exactly that. I didn't feel like there was anything I could do anymore. It's funny, this week someone just sent me some lost footage from a show we did in 1970. (continued)



©Photo of Greg Errico by Fred Lombardi

I was just watching some of it a little while ago. Someone said it was played on German TV, but I think it was recorded somewhere in London or the UK. The reason I'm bringing this up is because looking at it, I'm looking at Sly and he's having a good time. I'm looking at Freddie, though, and I can see some anger. And I'm looking at me, and I see anger. We're kicking ass, but I can see anger. I can see it in there.

When did you last talk to Sly?

Whew, let's see... It's been a couple years at least. I talk to people

that speak to him, but I haven't spoken to him in quite a while.

Have you completely given up hope of any reunion?

You know, we made a couple attempts, and I don't know how capable... You know, I don't know what to say about that. We went down for Coachella [in 2010]. Do you know anything about that?

Oh yeah, of course.

Have you seen that footage? I spun on my seat [behind my drum kit] and turned around to the camera—and this was

broadcast all over the Internet—and I had tears running down my eyes. It was very difficult to go through that. So what can you say?

The damage has been done and the chemicals have taken a toll. I gave it a shot then, and I got my ass kicked. As long as we're all still alive I guess a miracle could happen, but that's probably what it would take at this point. ●



Sly and the Family Stone

Higher!

Legacy/Epic, 180g 8LP box set or 4CD box set

When Walt Whitman wrote in “I am large, I contain multitudes,” he could have been talking about Sly Stone, the creative force behind funk/soul pioneers Sly and the Family Stone.

Over the course of his decades-long career, Stone has adopted countless guises: the outgoing showman, the damaged recluse, the king of the dance floor, the spark of the riot, the clear-eyed prophet, and the hazy burnout. All these sides and more can be heard on *Higher!*, a sprawling, four-disc set that attempts to boil more than 13 years of music down to a relatively taught 77 tracks.

Songs appear roughly in chronological order, beginning with 1964’s aptly titled “I Just Learned How to Swim” and running through 1977’s “High,” initially recorded for one of the singer’s solo albums. Because of this structure, the first two discs are dominated by oddities and failed explorations, with Stone’s mixed-race, mixed-gender band hitting on the occasional gem (previously unreleased slow burner “I Know What You Came to Say”) as it attempts to find its footing. Drummer Greg Errico discusses this point in the expansive liner notes, which include a track-by-track synopsis and lengthy essay by Jeff Kallis, the author behind Stone’s only authorized biography.

“This track was recorded during the same time period as ‘Underdog,’ as it has many of the same attributes,” wrote Errico of “Undercat,” a throwaway instrumental that closes the second disc. “It ended up becoming the song ‘Plastic Jim’... You’ll hear the similarities. With most of our songs, they would develop or morph through experimentation...”

While the band’s musical prowess is undeniable in even these early sketches (Larry Graham’s bass playing is both nimble and athletic, while Errico doubles as something of a human breakbeat on funk standouts like “Chicken”), it isn’t until 1968 rolls around that the crew really hits its stride.

Disc three captures this too-short period where Sly and the Family were arguably the biggest hit-makers on the planet, dropping classic singles like “Everyday People,” “I Want to Take You Higher,” and “Somebody’s Watching You” with practiced ease. Even castoffs from the era sound absolutely vital.

The previously unissued instrumental “Feathers,” for one, appears to be constructed from little more than soul horns, some terse guitar, and Errico’s rail-driving drums. Yet it crackles with life and tension. Even better is a series of tracks recorded live during the band’s August 1970 performance at England’s Isle of Wight Festival, highlighted by a monumental version of “Dance to the Music” where it sounds like Stone is trying—and quite possibly succeeding—to raise the dead.

But on the tracks from *Riot* included here (“Family Affair,” “Runnin’ Away”), the frontman, his body and mind ravaged by copious drug use and a growing sense of paranoia, sounds incapable of finding contentment even within.

Few artists so poignantly documented the ways 1960s hippie idealism corroded against the backdrop of the Vietnam War and assassinations of transformative figures like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. Stone, for his part,

Consider *Higher!* a long-overdue reminder of why Stone still matters, and why he deserved far better than his current standing suggests.

Unfortunately, the band’s time at the top was painfully short-lived. It’s a notion Sly and Co. hinted at on “Somebody’s Watching You,” singing, “Ever stop to think about a downfall/Happens at the end of every line.”

Before the fall, however, Sly Stone managed to pull himself together just long enough to record what stands as his defining album, 1971’s *There’s a Riot Goin’ On*. It remains a difficult piece to absorb—a blast of dark, desperate funk every bit as damaged as the man who created it. On “Stand,” recorded just 12 months prior, Stone sang about finding freedom in one’s mind.

never quite recovered. Even as he managed to record a handful of noteworthy songs (“In Time,” “Frisky”) in the ensuing years, he never recaptured the same manic energy or sense of zeitgeist that defined his work from the late 60s/early 70s. Worse, he currently exists as little more than a cautionary tale, popping up now and again (at the Grammys, onstage at Coachella) to remind us that, yes, he’s still as broken as ever. Consider *Higher!* a long-overdue reminder of why Stone still matters, and why he deserved far better than his current standing suggests. —**Andy Downing**



Deer Tick
Negativity
 Partisan, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

G

rowing up can be hard to do.

Since emerging from Providence, Rhode Island, in 2007, and reeking of alcohol, tobacco, and lord knows what else, John McCauley and his rotating cast of Deer Tick bandmates have turned youthful abandon into compelling theater. For years, the group's boozy concerts frequently teetered on the edge of disaster, as though things were just a shot and a beer from completely unraveling.

The persona sometimes carried over into the band's off-stage interactions. I interviewed McCauley twice in 2011. The first time, he was outgoing and loquacious despite (or more likely because of) admitting he was already on his fifth beer of the day. It's probably worth noting, at this point, it was not yet noon when we chatted. The second time, the frontman could hardly muster a complete sentence, shrugging his way through the conversation as if the previous night's shenanigans still clouded his brain.

At times, the band's albums have followed a similar pattern. The group split 2011's *Divine Providence* neatly down the middle, following a riotous first half with a slow,

meandering hangover of a second half—a shift that suggested all the late nights finally had taken their toll. And who can blame the band, really? Can anyone aside from genetic freaks like Lemmy and Shane MacGowan maintain such pace into their 30s and beyond?

With *Negativity*, Deer Tick sounds bound and determined to make the transition into adulthood. McCauley kicks off the album with a soul-kissed marriage proposal on "The Rock," a title that could have taken on any number of illicit meanings on past albums. Then, on "Mirror Walls," he sings, "I cut my credit cards and tried to grow up" like a man formulating some grand plan for his future. Heck, the album even

includes a guest turn from singer Vanessa Carlton (on the he said/she said of "In Our Time"), a clean-cut radio darling who one could imagine appealing to mainstream music fans more likely to associate Deer Tick with the pests one must avoid while hiking the wilderness.

Try as he might, however, the singer can't quite escape his damaged past. Songs reference everything from his father being jailed on charges of conspiracy and tax fraud ("With a hug and a kiss you may say goodbye to all you've ever known," he croaks on the stiff-upper lip of "Mr. Sticks") to the dissolution of his engagement and subsequent slide into alcohol and drug use. On the horn-stoked "Trash," for one, the

singer struggles to rouse himself for a noon motel checkout before referring to himself as a "wasteful savant."

While McCauley hasn't quite shaken free of his demons—the "monsters in [his] periphery" close in again on the eerie "Thyme"—he's clearly trying to gain some semblance of control, and, musically at least, the band has never sounded this sure-footed. It stomps its way through shaggy Memphis soul burners, swooning ballads and other rollicking numbers that conjure the shit-kicking spirit of the its rowdier past. Maturing, it would seem, doesn't mean one has to grow up completely.
 —**Andy Downing**



©Photo by Anna Webber



Chvrches

The Bones of What You Believe
Glassnote, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

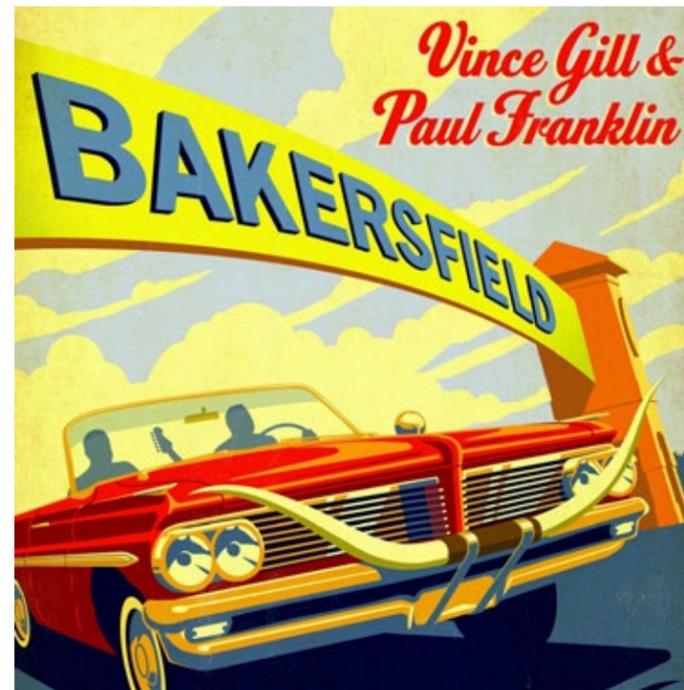
Scottish synth trio Chvrches comes out ready for war on “We Sink.” Lauren Mayberry is a luminous vocalist, but she’s looking for a revolution.

“Let me stop for a second,” she sings mid-song, but she doesn’t, instead taunting that she’ll be a “thorn in your side” till death. Keyboards fire lens-flaring sunspots around her, beats shiver and shake, and, as Mayberry declares “we are gonna fail if you lead us,” Chvrches delivers a vintage-tinged blast that feels tailor-made for our times of economic and political strife.

One of the debut album’s greatest achievements takes retro-styled synthpop, a genre the underground and mainstream have heralded as chic for much of recent memory (see Lady Gaga, Passion Pit, M83, Daft Punk, Kesha), and makes it sound vital. There’s never any doubt that this relatively young band—Chvrches has existed for less than two years—views its role as one of importance.

“You can’t get enough,” Mayberry sings on “Lies,” promising that she can “make a true believer of anyone.” The sounds behind her may be laser bright, but they possess heft. The beat steps forward as if it’s one of the robots leveling a techno city in Guillermo del Toro’s *Pacific Rim*. Meanwhile, the push and pull between sweet and venom makes one inclined to believe her more often than not. It’s a theme Chvrches works well, as “Gun” sees Mayberry becoming one of pop’s cheeriest-sounding aggressors. The singer threatens to weaponize herself while backing mates Iain Cook and Martin Doherty layer keyboards as if they’re trying to conjure a backing choir—twinkling like Tinkerbell at song’s start but soon shadowing her every word with spell-like blasts of digital flurries. “Tether” finds Chvrches updating the slow-build rock anthem for festival dance tents, and “Recover” delivers a take-me-or-leave-me ultimatum with all the tranquility of a satellite spinning in space.

Yet Chvrches never gets too out there. Even “Science Visions,” which at times sounds like a lost Tangerine Dream soundtrack cut from the 80s, ultimately emphasizes open-armed choruses rather than atmospheres. The only interruptions in momentum arrive via three moments when those other than Mayberry take the vocal reins. Rather than attempt to match to her buoyancy, Cook and Doherty try to play it straight. But when you have a frontwoman ready for battle, best get out of her way. —**Todd Martens**



Vince Gill and Paul Franklin

Bakersfield
MCA Nashville, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

Vince Gill’s post-superstar career has been a fresh reinvention. Unchained from the Top Forty, he’s freely following his roots music muse. An affable guy with fierce talents, Gill has quietly become a leading conscience for country music in the 21st century.

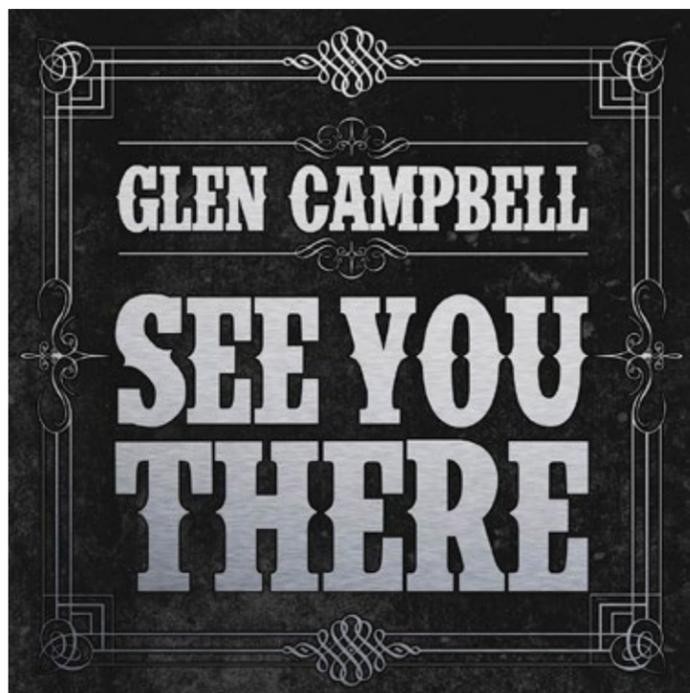
His recent projects are both fascinating and straight from the heart. He produced Ashley Monroe’s acclaimed album *Like a Rose*. He’s brought trad-country traditions back into focus as a member of the Time Jumpers. And now, with his new *Bakersfield*, Gill teams with esteemed steel guitarist Paul Franklin for a worthy tribute to titans Merle Haggard and Buck Owens.

This is a musician’s musician album, filled with an A-list ensemble of players. At the center are Gill and Franklin, monster pickers with proper egos. They stretch out on solos but never overplay. If you’ve come looking for guitar wanking, go elsewhere.

The album kicks off with a blistering version of Owens’ “Foolin’ Around.” It’s clear from the first note that no one treats this music like a delicate Faberge egg. The sound is a consummate package of hard backbeats, dancing fiddle, walking bass lines, choked steel, and stinging electric guitar. One is reminded that the Fender Telecaster is indeed a revolutionary instrument. While Franklin is an acknowledged steel guitar master and revered veteran session man, Gill gets his due here as an ace axeman in his own right. Between the two, strings are bent, snapped, caressed. It’s dazzling and seemingly effortless. Country-guitar geeks will be in heaven.

The duo simultaneously channels and updates the spirit of an era. These songs are visceral renditions, from the muscular two-stepper “He Don’t Deserve You Anymore” to the boozy, insinuating “The Bottle Let Me Down.” Gill subtly conjures the unique vocal styles of Haggard and Owens. His yelping croon fits snugly into the pocket of Owens’ “Together Again.” He also inhabits Haggard’s ex-con manifesto “Branded Man” with nuance and energy.

A lesser artist would embalm these classics or mangle them beyond recognition. But nothing on *Bakersfield* feels cowed by legend or tries too hard. Gill and Franklin embrace history with equal parts gusto and respect. —**Chrissie Dickinson**



Glen Campbell ● Purchase LP from Music Direct
See You There
 Surfdog, LP or CD

It's impossible to listen to *See You There* without thinking about the sad circumstances surrounding its making. Glen Campbell, stricken with Alzheimer's disease, recorded these songs during the same sessions that produced his 2011 release *Ghost On the Canvas*. They are largely revivals of his greatest hits with new arrangements by producers Dave Darling and Dave Kaplan.

Of course, it's worth remembering that Campbell's history is deep and often underrated. Before his solo fame, he was part of the Wrecking Crew, the prominent team of Los Angeles session men that played on a number of major 1960s recordings. Campbell's credits include studio work on the Beach Boys' groundbreaking *Pet Sounds*. Even Carlos Santana used to be in awe of Campbell's guitar virtuosity.

But Campbell's world-class chops took a back seat to his eventual solo hits, some near-mystical epics penned by iconic songwriter Jimmy Webb. Campbell's clear, yearning tenor branded a number of unforgettable singles: the Vietnam War soldier's cry "Galveston"; the exquisite rendering of loneliness via "Wichita Lineman"; John Hartford's portrait of a romantic rambling man on "Gentle On My Mind." They endure.

And they're also some of the songs Campbell revisits here, reworkings that range from ragged to glorious. The album opens with an emotional jolt courtesy of the piercing "Hey Little One," a gorgeous orchestral mix of timpani drum rumble and atmospheric guitar chords. Despite his illness, Campbell's crystalline voice remains striking. It's a heroic performance. Ditto for "Wichita Lineman," a classic of desire and dislocation. With its swooping steel guitar, throaty guitar notes, and Campbell's keening voice, lonely never sounded so good.

The same can't be said for the choppy "Gentle On My Mind," with its overly flanged guitars and Campbell's rushed, artless vocal. It makes one long to return to the haunting original. As for "Galveston," it's rendered as an overly busy, complicated stew.

Other winners include a rainy-day version of "Rhinestone Cowboy," effectively stripped down to Campbell's voice and one moodily strummed guitar. "Waiting On the Comin' of My Lord," featuring Jose Hernandez, attains the big, bright feel of 60s AM radio pop by recalling the mariachi horns of Herb Alpert & the Tijuana Brass and the breezy strings of classic Petula Clark songs.

There's also great beauty in the lush wall of sound on "What I Wouldn't Give." Campbell sings "Just close your eyes/I'll see you again." Like the best moments on this album, it feels like a bittersweet send-off. —**Chrissie Dickinson**

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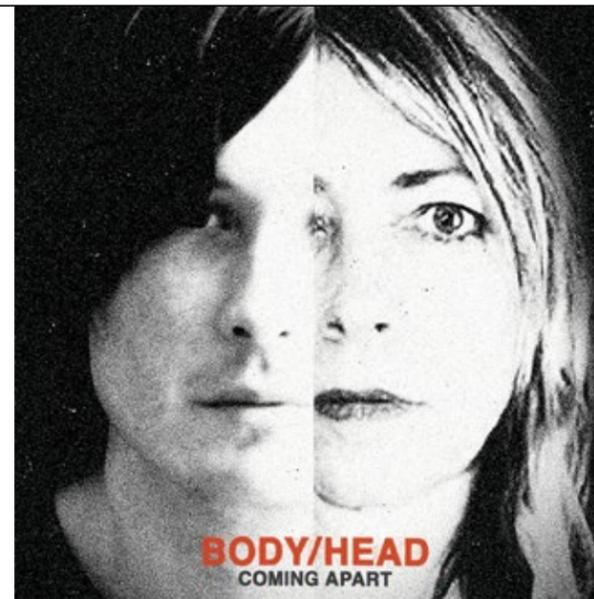
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MUSIC



Body/Head ● Purchase LP from Music Direct
Coming Apart
Matador, LP or CD

Sonic Youth is no more. Anyone still mourning the loss of New York's long-standing art-house noise rockers—a band that amassed three decades of occasionally tuneful, often atonal and reliably experimental works—should listen to *Body/Head*.

The new project from one-time Sonic Youth co-anchor Kim Gordon is the music equivalent of ripping off a Band-Aid. It's going to hurt, and best to just get it over quick. But there's no point in letting a rock n' roll wound brought on by the dismantling of a beloved band fester longer than it needs. So yes, this one is going to be painful. The agony may not arrive until Gordon starts barking (track three, "Last Mistress"). Or it may be kept at bay until it becomes apparent that the guitar is tuned only to its "haunted house" setting on every song on this album. But the hurt will come. *Coming Apart* is a dreadful listen.

Fans of Sonic Youth will no doubt hear an album inspired by the dissolution of Gordon's longtime marriage with former bandmate Thurston Moore. She has spoken openly about the relationship's end and her attempts to save it. Those are difficult interviews to read, and *Coming Apart* feels largely an attempt to manage emotions that will never quite make sense.

The album, for instance, opens with a guitar that sounds as if it's being murdered, its every scrape of a string being drained for blood. Gordon sounds less like a vocalist and more like someone who has had the entirety of life stripped from her, noting that she can "only think of you in the abstract." The line is not without its power. However, managing the whispers, clanks, and scrapes that accompany it (and all these songs recorded with guitarist Bill Nace) proves to be an endurance test.

A press release helpfully (annoyingly?) comes with a self-described "think piece" written by a professor at Barnard College/Columbia University. It informs us about the obvious, that this is drone music, where the lingering of guitar notes are "ritualistic" and "the question of quality is beside the point." The latter contention is one worth debating, as *Body/Head* is still a product, and one that, like every other album Matador releases, will be sold at record shops the world over. It needn't conform to verse-chorus-verse structure (heavens no), but this abrasive, ambient noise and vocal moaning appears therapeutic only to the one performing it.

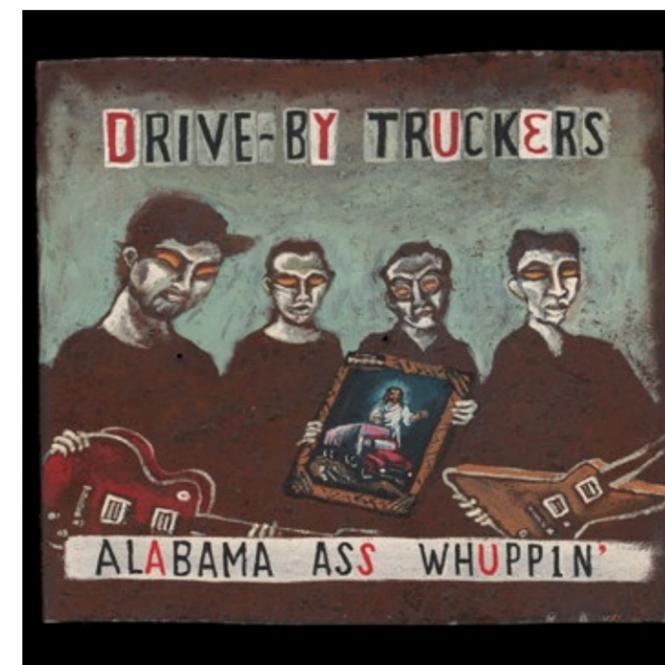
And yet there are moments where Gordon hits on ideas that could be germs of commanding songs. Take the demented, alarm-like riff of "Actress," or the heartbeat-driving "Murderess." We may never know what they could have been without the warbles and extended moments of tape hiss, but they live, for now, as sub-Laurie Anderson art projects. The album does have one almost song in "Aint," and it's heartbreaking. Gordon tells us the possessions she does and doesn't have over its six minutes.

"I've got my hair," she sings, and then she gives a laundry list of things she does indeed count among her arsenal. Head? Check, she has one of those. Brains? Check. Ears? Check. Eyes? Check. Nose? Check. Mouth? Check. Smile? Check. Tongue? Check. Chin? Check. Boobs? Check. Arms? Check. Soul? Check. Sex? Check. Hands? Check. Fingers? Check. Legs? Check. Feet? Check. Toes? Check. Liver? Check. Bladder? Check.

Anyone who dabbled in high school poetry may sense that the word "freedom" is coming next, but the song doesn't fail because it becomes predictable. After all, finding one's footing after a failed relationship is a universal dilemma, and one that will forever make for potent songs—pop and experimental alike. The key word is "songs," and those are lacking here. —**Todd Martens**



©Photo by Daniel Coston

**Drive-By Truckers***Alabama Ass Whuppin'*

ATO, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

Out of print for more than a decade, *Alabama Ass Whuppin'* chronicles the Drive-By Truckers before the group released its 2001 breakthrough *Southern Rock Opera* and long before the collective refined, ever so slightly, its bar-band sound. Raw, ballsy, crude, and imperfect, it's the kind of truthful live album artists don't make anymore—a shit-kicking, warts-and-all set designed to be turned up to maximum volume and enjoyed with shots of cheap whiskey and cut-rate beer. Available for the first time on vinyl, it's restored from the original ½-inch analog tape mixes and bestowed with much-improved cover art by Wes Freed.

When queried about a possible reissue of the 12-song set years ago, singer/guitarist Patterson Hood said it would again see the light of day when the time was right—but that he didn't know when that time would be. Judging from the grinning recollections in his informative essay, he's come to terms with allowing the greater public to witness what one of today's sharpest, smartest, most dependable bands resembled just as the members were deciding to devote themselves full-time to the cause. "It's a document of a period in time that I wouldn't go back to for all the money in the world, but I'm proud of the shows that we played and the songs that we wrote," he writes.

Taking its title from a phrase singer/guitarist Mike Cooley may (or may not) have uttered, *Alabama Ass Whuppin'* was recorded at a handful of Georgia dive bars and small clubs shortly after the quartet released its sophomore album. As such, it's the equivalent of a blurry Polaroid in which the subjects don't remain still. The Truckers were already in transition away from a Southern-fried country/roots act and toward a harder, brash rock n' roll band infused by punk vigor and lit by liquor-fueled energy.

From the opening notes of the damning, distortion-bleeding "Why Henry Drinks," it's apparent the group is playing for its life

and couldn't care less about its knock-off-brand instruments and secondhand amplifiers. From a technical standpoint, Hood, Cooley, and company are leagues better now, but back then, they had a deeper connection to the dead-end-town feelings of "Buttholeville" and vicarious existence of "Steve McQueen" because they were the people in those songs. Ditto the uncredited cover of Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Gimme Three Steps," which seems like it's going to fray at any second. The barn-burning rendition of Jim Carroll's "People Who Died" does, in glorious hell-raising fashion.

Hood's prior reservations about *Alabama Ass Whuppin'* are understandable: It isn't representative of the Truckers' past decade-plus and a few tunes, such as "The Avon Lady" and "Margo and Harold," at best loom as curiosity items. Yet "18 Wheels of Love," "Lookout Mountain," and poignant "Love Like This" (the only Cooley-sung track here, another sign of how things have changed) indicate the greatness that lie around the corner. Hearing how the band got there is one helluva ride.

—**Bob Gendron**

DOES THE CLASH STILL MATTER?

A new box set causes Todd Martens to ponder this vital question—and several others.



The Clash
Sound System
Sony/Legacy, 11CD/1DVD box set



L-R Joe Strummer, Paul Simonon, Topper Headon, Mick Jones

©Photo by Adrian Boot

T

he members of punk rock pioneers the Clash were confronted with a lot of nonsense while they were a band in the late 70s and early 80s. When in 1980 the group released a dub-influenced cut titled “Bankrobber,” a song about growing up the son of a criminal, a review in a prominent U.K. publication took scraggily voiced Joe Strummer to task for not being the son of an actual bank robber. And when the band shifted its political focus from London to the world at large with 1980’s *Sandinista!*, the *NME* quipped, “What do they see when they look in the mirror? Third world guerrillas with quiffs?” Each of these instances is detailed in Marcus Gray’s biography *Last Gang in Town: The Story and Myth of the Clash*.



Of course, those that mix politics and music are often held to a higher standard, as Clash-sampling electronic artist M.I.A. found out in 2010 when the *New York Times* contrasted her desire to rebel with her hunger for truffle fries. Hell, even the Clash viewed the socially conscious with skepticism, criticizing on 1978's rhythmically shifting "(White Man) In Hammersmith Palais" the groups that would turn "rebellion into money."

Sony's new 11-disc, 1-DVD Clash retrospective *Sound System* doesn't set out with the ambition to debunk any myths or tell a straightforward narrative. It gives us all but one of the Clash's albums (only the band-

splintered *Cut the Crap* is missing) and an assortment of outtakes, B-sides, and demos (52 of them in all). Contextually, Sony relies on a \$189 retail price and a hefty, impressively detailed boombox-like crate to tell us that this is important—that the Clash not only still matter, but warrants this treatment.

It would be tired and obvious to point out how un-punk it all seems, especially the inclusion of a cigarette-like poster roll, military dog tags, stickers, and a blank book (blank!) whose cover is adorned with a famed Strummer quote ("The Future is Unwritten"). But going down such a route is as reductive

as those that sought to criticize the Clash's socially conscious ambitions on the basis of the band's purported authenticity rather than the artfulness of its work.

In fact, if one were to attempt to affix any narrative to *Sound System*, it would be one of tragedy. The collection shows us the output of a band that was both blissfully raw and restlessly prolific. But also one that sputtered out while its creativity remained at a high. Diehards will head straight to the outtakes (you already have the albums, after all, and this is clearly aimed at the serious collectors) and marvel at how quickly the Clash improved.

A 1976 rendition of "I'm So Bored With the U.S.A." is cluttered with needless lyrics, including what sounds like Strummer directing some ire toward Boston baseball fans. It's a long way removed from the refined, tempo-shifting guitar fluidity that is the live take on "Stay Free," recorded just two years later. The song is a showcase for Mick Jones' innocence-lost vocals and, along with "Cheapstakes," one of a handful of unexpected live songs found for this project.

Working against *Sound System* archivists is the fact that little in the Clash catalog remains unearthed. In just six years, the Clash cut eight CDs worth of music. The 50-plus scraps here are largely culled not from the band's first two punk rock albums—1977's self-titled debut and 1978's *Give 'Em Enough Rope*—but its later period, when world music and groove-based structures dominated its music. Some of it is, admittedly, a little goofy, such as the retro video-game effects and island drumming of *Combat Rock*-era outtake "The Beautiful People Are Ugly Too." But when a band releases double and triple albums in the span of a few years, one has to know what was left on the studio room floor likely won't be gold.

More important is how *Sound System* illustrates that this is a band that, long before Paul Simon or Vampire Weekend, recognized that music borders should be erased, be it entryways to underground American clubs ("Magnificent Dance") or Jamaican dancehalls ("Rockers Galore on a U.K. Tour"). And this, too, is a band that, long before U2, LCD Soundsystem, or the entirety of 80s new wave, showed us rock n' roll and dance music belonged together (varying mixes of "Rock the Casbah").

The Clash's musical hunger is evident in the footage of the would-have-been 1981 documentary *Clash on Broadway*, in which the group looks down with amazement at New York City beatboxers (and a possibly inebriated Topper Headon doubts his future drumming for the Clash). It's also revealed on a string of previously unreleased tracks, including via the jazzy head-case electronics of an extended edition of "Sean Flynn" and hippy synths of "Idle in Kangaroo Court."

Sure, the Clash shed punk rock (as a sound, that is) rather quickly. Still, as a document of a late-70s movement, the Clash's self-titled debut remains irrefutable. The remastering on the early, no-frills tracks—and indeed, throughout the project—is lively but unobtrusive. Casual listeners won't notice much change, but headphone examination reveals a little more fluidity in Paul Simonon's bass on "Garageland" and a smidge more scruff in Jones' guitars on "Janie Jones," tunes that still hit hard and fast.

So, what about questions of value and relevancy? Completists will grumble about what's missing. For nearly \$200, *Sound System* lacks any reflection of the loving work that went into remastering live albums in 1999 and 2008 (*From Here to Eternity* and *Live at Shea Stadium*, respectively), which illustrate the unwieldy nature of a Strummer live performance. Also, there are odd omissions here and there, such as the more overtly electronic B-side "Mustapha Dance," the slow-dance cover of Motown's "Every Little Bit Hurts," and many of the outtakes found on the 2004 reissue commemorating the 25th anniversary of *London Calling*. (continued)

Sound System illustrates that this is a band that, long before Paul Simon or Vampire Weekend, recognized that music borders should be erased, be it entryways to underground American clubs or Jamaican dancehalls.

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MUSIC



©Photo by Adrian Boot

L-R Joe Strummer, Paul Simonon, Mick Jones

The latter in particular is hard to find, and largely relegated to eBay, where it sometimes fetches more than \$50. There's no excuse for leaving those 21 demos, or 30-minute making-of film, off this set. Forcing the band's most serious fans to go on any sort of scavenger hunt is inexcusable, especially when they're given a blank book (blank!) instead of more songs. Fans will adore what's here, but why not go the extra step and make this a one-stop shop?

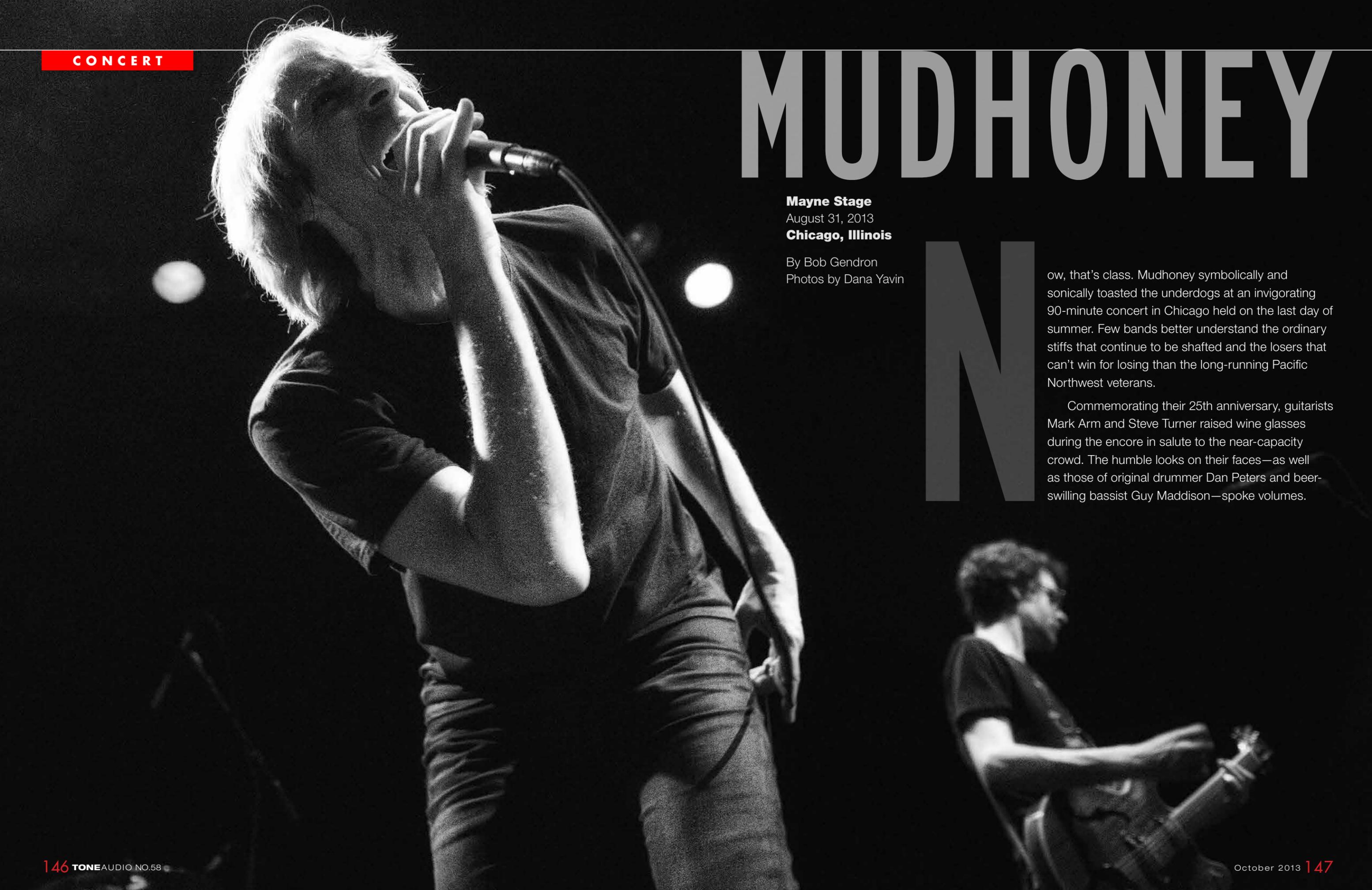
If there's a bottom line, it's that the Clash still matters. This conclusion is clear not from some of the box's collected essays (from the likes of studio

technician Tim Young or Clash videographer Don Letts, later a member of Jones' post-Clash band Big Audio Dynamite) or any of the set's extremely brief outtakes of Clash interviews. Rather, such enduring importance becomes evident while viewing the 60-odd-minute DVD of promotional videos and rare live footage that dates back to 1977.

One needn't spend a dime to understand why Clash tunes such as "Bankrobber" culturally polarized audiences. Simply re-watch the video for "Rock the Casbah," once an MTV staple. It was, as director Letts writes, "a half-baked idea," in which

Strummer, Jones, and company were directed to act militant in front of an oil derrick, all while an Arab and a Jew run amok around Texas eating fast food and tossing garbage in fancy pools. Yet, even today this seems daring. Here is a band addressing tension in the Middle East, simply because that is what a band does.

No wonder the Clash was cocky. The *Sound System* DVD has a clip of Headon responding to a question about the Clash's future. "Musically," he said, "we go forever." Not everyone needs the extras here, but it is nice to be reminded of Headon's sentiment now and again. ●



MUDHONEY

Mayne Stage

August 31, 2013

Chicago, Illinois

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Dana Yavin

Now, that's class. Mudhoney symbolically and sonically toasted the underdogs at an invigorating 90-minute concert in Chicago held on the last day of summer. Few bands better understand the ordinary stiffs that continue to be shafted and the losers that can't win for losing than the long-running Pacific Northwest veterans.

Commemorating their 25th anniversary, guitarists Mark Arm and Steve Turner raised wine glasses during the encore in salute to the near-capacity crowd. The humble looks on their faces—as well as those of original drummer Dan Peters and beer-swilling bassist Guy Maddison—spoke volumes.



In the sweepstakes that was the late 80s/early 90s Seattle scene, Mudhoney served as the dark horse: second fiddle to each of its nationally hyped peers (save, possibly, for kindred spirits Tad) and the last of the first-wave artists to score a major-label deal. But here the odds-beaters stood, mixing the intensity of their youth with the focus that comes with maturation, outlasting and outperforming nearly every group with which they've shared a bill.

Of course, longevity only counts for so much. A band cannot remain vital on nostalgia alone. Arm and company seemingly recognized this, airing material from this year's excellent *Vanishing Point* album and interlacing it with established favorites. Bold and adventurous, Mudhoney didn't follow the tossed-off plan embraced by countless legacy acts by simply playing one or two new tunes to try and give the illusion of creativity and relevance. Eight recent songs—including an opening one-two punch of the greasy "Slipping Away" and chant-inviting "I Like It Small"—anchored a set ensconced in punk attitude and chased with shots of garage-rock psychedelia.

Always up for a party, Mudhoney isn't as sloppy, drunken, or raucous as it was two decades ago. But tradeoffs for tighter, more disciplined rhythms and direct, searing deliveries have made it a better band. Mudhoney's trademarks—primal arrangements, catchy hooks, menacing humor, off-kilter beats, fuzz-drenched distortion—remain in tact. So

does the rawness. And Arm, apparently immune to vocal changes usually wrought by aging, still yowls and wails like a savvy outsider disgusted at the caliber of humans and privileged actions surrounding him. He's also honed a tart sneer on par with peak-era Iggy Pop and Johnny Rotten. And he's got the body language to accompany it.

When freed of guitar duties, Arm bent himself into pretzel-twist positions, his arms, shoulders, and legs jutting from multiple angles. He spun around on one leg, leaned forward on another as if practicing advanced yoga, and got to face-to-face with the crowd. Singing as if possessed, the frontman entered search-and-destroy mode on the confrontational "The Only Son of the Widow From Nain," using his eyes to scan and his howled refrains to threaten. He alternated between leaning forward and backward, contracting and surging with the music, lashing out ("Chardonnay") with the same contemptible urgency he invested in grimy, wrong-side-of-the-tracks narratives ("Here Comes Sickness").

Arm's slide guitar fills provided an ideal foil to his six-string partner's crunchy chords and stun-gun wah-wah pedal effects. Turner's death-ray blasts on the cosmic "In This Rubber Tomb" recalled the sonic language that fills comic-book dialogue balloons. He turned the zig-zagging "Get Into Yours" into a push-and-shove match and kicked the blues into reverse

during "Judgment, Rage, Retribution and Thyme." Peters played it equally cool, proving his era's Charlie Watts during the march-and-chug signatures of "Suck You Dry" and playing off the dirty, scuffed Arm-Turner dynamic on "Sweet Young Thing Ain't Sweet No More"—a song that came on as the bastard child of the protagonist in the Rolling Stones' "Mother's Little Helper." For "You Got It," the group's collective rumble gave the impression of a train wreck in which one freight car piles into the other. Only this accident was intentional, and kept in check by Arm's bitter jabs at an adversary.

So, rock n' roll is only a young person's game? Nope. Mudhoney relayed frustration, disillusion, resentment, and the associated consequences of such conditions with the authoritative confidence and humorous disposition of a band that's seldom known any other realities, but which is grateful for never having flirted with the trappings of vapid celebrity or auto-pilot existence.

"I want to be a star/I'm going to have a car/And you'll have to admit/I'll be rich as shit," Arm deadpanned on a cover of Fang's "The Money Will Roll Right In." Along with the emotionally liberating "Hate the Police," Mudhoney has made the sarcastic send-up of fame, fortune, and fakeness its own. As the band well knows, money can't buy everything. Integrity and originality are worth far more.



Pearl Jam ● Purchase LP from Music Direct
Lightning Bolt
 Monkeywrench, LP or CD

Pearl Jam's rather sudden, later-career consistency has been a pleasant surprise. *Lightning Bolt* isn't as lean as 2010's *Backspacer*, and it lacks the ferociousness of the band's Bush-era efforts, but there's more to like than not on Album No. 10, postponing, for at least another a few years, Pearl Jam's preordained ascension into the role of classic-rock arena fillers. Heck, Eddie Vedder even brings out his crowd-pleasing ukulele on break-up ditty "Sleeping By Myself," and the song doesn't feel like a novelty. Some victories, especially for a band more interested in fine-tuning a sound rather than pushing boundaries, are minor.



©Photo by Danny Clinch

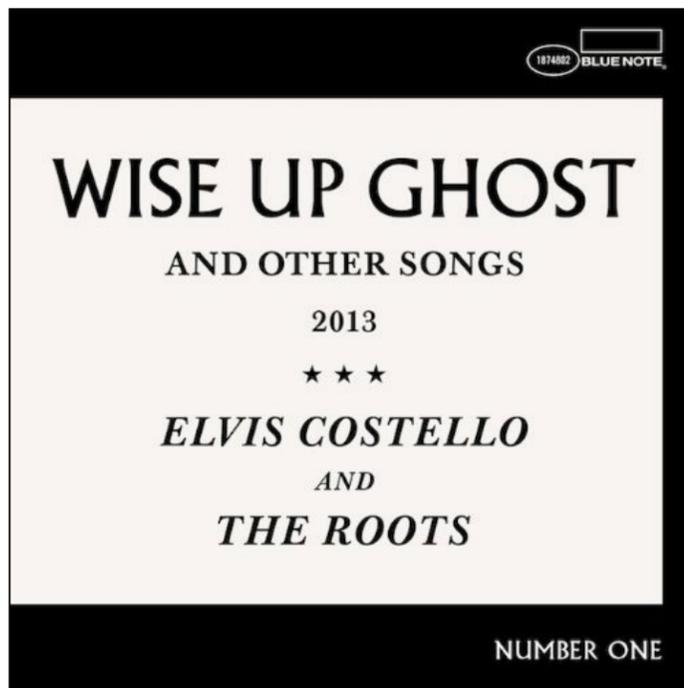
As is the band's norm of late, the record starts brisk and heavy, with the first three songs propelled by Matt Cameron's hard-and-fast drumming. It's less intense that it is reassuring, since Pearl Jam remains a band that believes in the power of the drum fill. As trends have shifted and the shaggy, hearty feel of grunge now feels more dated than revolutionary, Pearl Jam too, has grown. A song like the title track, which quickly ramps up its musical layers and swiftly settles into a solo before hitting the 90-second mark, comes across like the earnest preservation of an art form. It's a lovingly crafted ode to an era when musical transcendence was six strings and 45,000 people in box seats.

Throughout, the tone is reflective, with Vedder looking ahead by looking back and not always liking what he sees. He's recovered from a fall from grace in the bluesy "Let the Records Play," where music is religion, and he's splitting town after learning how to "put all your faith in no faith" in the guitar howler "Get-away." Selfishness gets addressed with some Heartbreakers-inspired piano revelry on "Lightning Bolt," and "patience is tried" on "Mind Your Manners," on which Mike McCready's punk-rock guitar skids to a halt in deference to Cameron's cymbal-banging fireworks.

Sure, there's one too many moments on which the band indulges its softer side. "Sirens" is a mild offender, saved by some moonlight guitars and Vedder's open-wounded falsetto as he fears his impending mortality. "Yellow Moon" and "Infallible" aren't as lucky, more like mid-tempo seat-fillers than necessities. A passable lighter-in-the-air episode arrives on the violin-graced fireside strummer "Future Days," as well as the slightly more interesting atmospheric diversion that is "Pendulum."

When Pearl Jam revs up, the band still does so as effortlessly as

anyone around. While nothing here is immediate as the *Backspacer* track "The Fixer," album centerpiece "My Father's Son" comes close and should be a tour favorite for years to come. Jeff Ament ricochets his bass around the equivalent of a tortured mental funhouse while Vedder curses his hand-me-down genetics. It's not a paternal rant, but a call for freedom and tolerance for mistakes. "Can I get a reprieve?" Vedder yowls, even as he's already answered his own question. —**Todd Martens**



Elvis Costello and the Roots

Wise Up Ghost

Blue Note, 2LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

In *Mo' Meta Blues*, the recent autobiography from Roots drummer Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson, the musician defends his diverse tastes, writing, "You'd think at this point there'd be an understanding that I'm not faking, that I love music of all kinds."

He's not lying. The drummer's list of collaborators stretches from Bay Area hip-hoppers Blackalicious to piano balladeer Fiona Apple, and from rap royalty (Jay-Z, Q-Tip) to pop radio megastars (John Mayer, Christina Aguilera). Considering Elvis Costello's own reputation as a serial collaborator (he's recorded alongside Burt Bacharach, Allen Toussaint, Michael Tilson, etc.), it was only a matter of time before these two crossed paths, which they finally did due in part to the Roots' ongoing role as the house band on "Late Night with Jimmy Fallon."

Despite the obvious chemistry between the musicians, the atmosphere throughout is far from celebratory, and the players spend much of the album reacting to a world they see sliding into chaos. "You're either for or against us," Costello sings amidst the march to war of "Tripwire," which borrows a melody from his own "Satellite." "And that is how the hatred begins."

Things only grow bleaker from there. A would-be bride turns terrorist on the haunting "(She Might Be a) Grenade," while the Latin-spiced "Cinco Minutos Con Vos" includes mentions of drones and endless hails of gunfire. "Come the Meantimes," in turn, finds Costello ready to meter out some biblical justice of his own, suggesting it's time to "gather some stones and make them atone."

The musical backdrop is steeped heavily in soul and R&B, yet you can tell Questlove, who wrote and produced the album alongside Roots producer Steven Mandel, has done his homework on Costello. This shouldn't come as a surprise. The drummer is a notorious workhorse, and he prides himself on his level of preparation. "The second I find out a band has been booked [on 'Fallon']," he pens in *Mo' Meta Blues*, "I go to Rdio or Spotify and listen to their albums. I look for interviews on YouTube. I want to make sure I'm well versed by the time they arrive."



©Photo by Danny Clinch

As a result, musical and lyrical nods to Costello's past are scattered throughout. The moody "Stick Out Your Tongue," for one, includes musical references to "Pills & Soap" off 1983's *Punch the Clock*. Other songs, like the piano ballad "If I Could Believe," are merely suggestive of the past, and the gorgeous tune sounds like it could have been lifted from any Costello set from the last several decades.

Despite the Roots sharing co-headliner status, however, it often feels like Costello leads the charge. In retrospect, it would have been nice to see Roots MC Tariq "Black Thought" Trotter stop by for a guest verse or two to shake things up, particularly as the record meanders through its less-focused second half ("Can You Hear Me" clocks in at over six minutes, but feels much, much longer). Regardless, it's a pleasure to listen in as these likeminded souls exchange musical ideas—even if many of them inspire a lingering sense of unease. —**Andy Downing**

Near the end of *Bitter Rivals*, the third album from New York noise-pop partiers Sleigh Bells, vocalist Alexis Krauss expresses shock and dismay at running into an old partner. “When I heard you were still alive, I must admit I laughed, I cried,” she sings, her permanently upbeat voice once again rising above the vague semblance of a heavily distorted riff behind her.

That sense of surprise—one somewhere between happiness and bewilderment—could also be applied to the mere existence and approach of Sleigh Bells itself. Opposite emotions tug at each other throughout *Bitter Rivals*, and if it’s not quite a new look for these lovers of arena wailing and rudimentary hip-hop, there’s enough digital tweaks to indicate that Sleigh Bells still has room for growth, albeit not without awkwardness.

When the duo of Krauss and Derek Miller shredded onto the scene into 2010 with their full-length debut *Treats*, the ear-splitting bombast of the album’s mix of trashcan synths, bargain-basement guitar effects, and muffled, sloganeering vocals had a one-and-done feel.



Sleigh Bells

Bitter Rivals

Mom + Pop, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

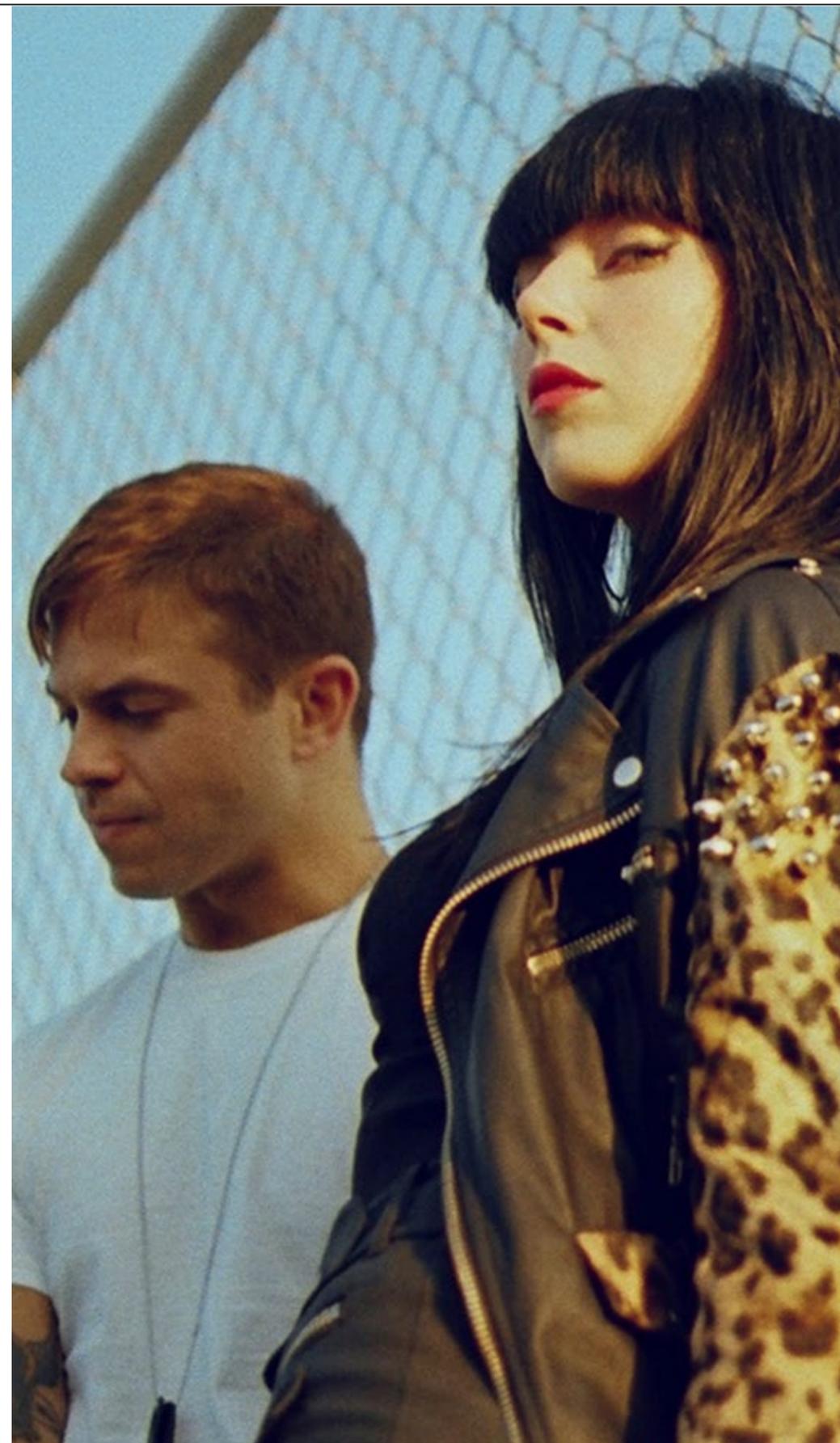
Krauss’ accessibly cheery vocals provided a beacon of light into the mess of noise—a mélange of 80s metal and 80s hip-hop that sounded as if it were mixed by the old Shea Stadium soundboards. But where to go when everything has already been cindered?

Last year’s *Reign of Terror* provided some guidance, as the album’s best tracks saw Sleigh Bells creating near-ballads out of the cacophony. Melodies, never the band’s strong suit, were abstracted, and vocals were further buried and layered, yielding a trancey, borderline art-punk feel. *Bitter Rivals*, the mere title of which implies the combustion of polar opposites, attempts to split the difference while adding some warmth, often in the form of bringing Krauss to the fore or fleshing out keyboard arrangements.

Emphasizing anything other than Krauss or the guitars proves disastrous on “Young Legends,” where the synthesizers channel reggae at its most cartoonish and recall novelty throwaway acts such as Aqua. Adding more space and clarity also puts a greater focus on the lyrics, which doesn’t always work in Sleigh Bells’ favor. Witness the Dickens-quoting title track or the “hole in my chest” heartache of “Love Sick,” where two-dozen shifts in direction can’t make up for the lack of one good one.

Not all is lost. “Minnie” has a ticking time-bomb beat and the requisite guitar terror, while piano twinkles and heavily sampled call-and-response vocals cause the song to burst with little flourishes that have the listener looking in different directions. Actual audible guitar strumming brings balance to “Sugarcane,” and “You Don’t Get Me Twice” is a less a song than an assembly of bits and pieces of a dance routine. Here, Krauss is alternately whisper-sweet and conversationally cold. Handclaps and fingersnaps keep the focus on the movement.

Similarly, the approach works well on “24,” where the album is its most hypnotic. Guitars sound like instruments played with knobs, and Krauss, the piano, and the effects seem to circle around one another. “Sing Like A Wire” is even more forceful, as the act’s penchant for cheeseball effects tries to match the duo’s hot-and-cold nature. It all makes *Bitter Rivals* a draw, the mixed results making the move feel more lateral than forward. —**Todd Martens**





Polvo
Siberia
 Merge, LP or CD

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In spite of its title, there's little desolate about *Siberia*, the second album Chapel Hill-based math-rock quartet Polvo released since reuniting in 2008. Much like its predecessor, 2009's *In Prism*, the record is dense and knotty, packed with twitchy guitar passages, dissonant outbursts, and complex time signatures. Even when the music is at its scruffiest, however, it's still played with impressive precision, conjuring images of Bill Murray's well-drilled band of misfits in *Stripes*.

Members Ash Bowie and Dave Brylawski continue to split singer/guitarist duties, and the two spend much of the album locked in an epic duel. Opener "Total Immersion," which stretches out over six winding minutes, sets the tone. The guitarists seemingly jab at one another, tumble to the floor, and bounce back on their heels in a defensive posture. Polvo still incorporates unusual tunings, but its sound, much like most people, has thickened with time.

"The Water Wheel," in particular, sounds beefed up and ready to rumble, the dual front men growling at one another atop oddly melodic brambles of guitar for nearly eight minutes. The song's defining moment (as well as that of the album) arrives precisely at 5:02 when the two guitarists briefly trip over one another before regaining their footing and locking horns in an off-kilter jam session that's near-dizzying in its majesty.

Fans of the band's mid-90s work—particularly the still-vital *Exploded Drawing*—that harbored concerns about the ongoing reunion (just look to the Pixies to see how these things can quickly devolve into lazy cash grabs) needn't anymore. While there are missteps (the synth-driven "Light, Raking," for one, comes on like an alternate score to some cheesy 80s sci-fi flick), there's never a sense the musicians are content to till the same old ground.

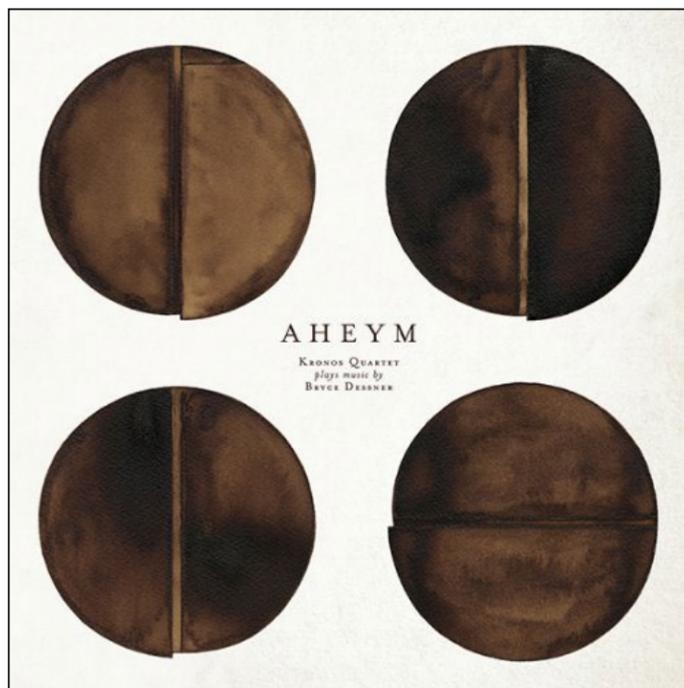
Instead, they push forward, weaving electronic jams as delicate and intricate as spider webs ("Blues Is Loss"), rolling out mystic acoustic numbers that hover like mist over water ("Ancient Grains"), and embracing a more primal, roughhewn side (witness "Some Songs," a skeletal guitar throwdown built on corroded riffs that cough, sputter, and stampede). Considering the band's on-again/off-again past, it's advised you enjoy the ride, however long it might last. —**Andy Downing**

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Bryce Dessner, guitarist of The National, and chamber ensemble Kronos Quartet share considerable common ground. Along with his main gig in the Brooklyn-based indie rock band, Dessner serves as composer in residence at the Dutch Muziekgebouw Frits Phillips. One could also point to his classical training as a reason why strings and unusual time signatures work on The National's recent *Trouble Will Find Me*.

Meanwhile, Kronos has made its affinity for such modern minimalist composers as Steve Reich and Terry Riley extend to rock covers and collaborations. Four years ago, Dessner produced the 2009 Red Hot AIDS relief compilation *Dark Was The Night*, which included Kronos' version of Blind Willie Johnson's "Dark Was The Night, Cold Was The Ground." So, his four compositions that comprise *Aheym* resulted from close affinity, if not outright inevitability.



Bryce Dessner and Kronos Quartet

Aheym
Anti-, 2LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

The title piece is named after the Yiddish word for "homeward" and its source materials are stories from Dessner's grandparents about immigrating to the United States. In some ways, the piece can be heard as reflecting traditional Jewish refrains—especially in David Harrington and John Sherba's minor-key violin lines. But there are no obvious, say, klezmer, riffs. Perhaps previous Kronos collaborator John Zorn deserves more credit for using his Radical Jewish Culture concept to expand how the music should be defined. More compelling is how the quartet's unison moves repeat the basic melodic theme and slowly grow in intensity toward Jeffrey Zeigler's cello solo.



At seven and a half minutes, "Little Blue Something" is the shortest piece. It's dedicated to two other minimalist composers, Czech viol da gamba players Irena and Vojtech Havel. Sort of a cross between a small cello and violin, their instrument is relatively rare in chamber ensembles nowadays. While no passages obviously replicate the viol's resonance, the quartet's sparse tones build a sense of tension that is retained toward the piece's stirring conclusion.

Although twice as long and built as a suite with different sections, "Tenebre" follows a plan similar to "Little Blue Something." It begins with Yang's quietly stuttering cello part before Harrington, Sherba, and viola player Hank Dutt

come in to subtly modulate repeated phrases. Then, their high-pitched held notes turn eerie. But when Sufjan Stevens' multitracked voice enters, the result sounds too precious, as if it's trying to make the performance reach toward the ethereal. It doesn't fit in with the quartet's own four-way conversation.

Brooklyn Youth Chorus performing Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro's "Tour Eiffel" is far more effective. The ensemble starts unaccompanied, but Dessner slowly joins in on guitar alongside pianist Lisa Kaplan and low-key percussionist David Cossin. The quartet moves gracefully from background to foreground, creating a cultural exchange that sounds like a true partnership. —**Aaron Cohen**

THE PIXIES AND THE REPLACEMENTS AT RIOT FEST CHICAGO

September 15, 2013

Humboldt Park

Chicago, Illinois

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Robert Loerzel

For the Pixies, it was a chance to demonstrate any surviving shred of relevance. For the Replacements, it was an opportunity to give fans a dream come true. For both influential artists, it was an exercise in nostalgia. And when it was over, 35,000 rain-soaked people witnessed the breathless highs and sour lows often generated by band reunions. More important than the music played, the groups' back-to-back headlining performances on the final evening of Chicago's three-day Riot Fest conjured the unwritten rules and risky consequences that accompany every musical Second Act.

Having decided to give it another go nearly ten years ago, the Pixies' comeback jaunt has lasted longer than the quartet's initial run—a stretch that witnessed the release of two of the most influential records (*Surfer Rosa*, *Doolittle*) in rock history and another two full-lengths (*Bossanova*, *Trompe le Monde*) that stand up to most anything recorded by peers. However, until the weeks leading up to Riot Fest, the Pixies had for nearly a decade strictly milked the past, issuing just one forgettable song while touring on the back of material devised while Reagan and Bush were in office. They teetered on transforming into their generation's Eagles, an act content to sell seats on the basis of playing favorites such as “Debaser,” “Here Comes Your Man,” and “Monkey Gone to Heaven” for listeners that missed them in the late 80s or arrived too late to see them open for U2 in 1991, right before they split.

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Running on empty, the Pixies were desperate for a shakeup—or, better, the alarm-sounding awareness that they were soiling a once-infallible legacy. This summer, circumstances turned both awkward and promising. In June, the stunning news that original bassist Kim Deal departed hinted the band received the jolt it needed to shock itself off life support. Another sign arrived in early September with the immediate release of *EP-1*, the Pixies' first new music in an eon. Alas, everyone's worst fears soon became reality. The sorry songs on *EP-1* are embarrassingly bad, caricatures of the group's defining work. Suddenly, Deal's decision to leave—she said she didn't want to do it anymore—looked brilliant. Who could blame her? What, exactly, would the Pixies resemble going forward?

If the depressing showing at Riot Fest looms as an indication, the foursome is in the process of succumbing to the paint-by-numbers stasis welcomed by aging pop acts that ink deals to play Las Vegas residencies. Singer/guitarist Frank Black can no longer hit frenzied high notes and, approaching lyrics in the unfeeling way one recites a memorized poem in high-school English class, displayed none of his former zaniness. As a whole, the collective sounded lifeless, flat, punch less, uncaring, and devoid of dynamics. After beginning the set with two covers—the Fall's "Big New Prinz" and the Jesus and Mary Chain's "Head On"—the Pixies sleepwalked through familiar fare like the once-great "Subbacultcha" and "Wave of Mutilation," draining

the life blood out of the very tunes responsible for hot-wiring so-called "alternative rock" into a movement.

To her credit, Deal's replacement, ex-Muffs leader Kim Shattuck, tried to ease concerns related to her predecessor's absence. She tossed her head to and fro, plugged away at her bass, and attempted to elicit sparks of enthusiasm. Yet Shattuck came across like she's filling a role rather than fully enmeshed in the collective fabric, and can't spell Deal on background vocals. The Pixies' stabs at recent work ("Indie Cindy," "Bagboy") only underlined how far they've fallen. Given his inaudibility and tired showing, guitarist Joey Santiago might as well been unplugged. Save for Shattuck, none of the Pixies moved. No, the Pixies were never a remarkable live band even in their creative heyday. But now, they are a stiff bore, a group fattened by the lucrative paychecks nostalgia begets, and far better experienced on record and remembered for what once was, not for what they've become.

For these and other credibility-staining reasons, and the inescapable void left by two deceased members, the Replacements resisted persistent calls for reunions—even turning down rumored high-six-figure paydays to head up Coachella and Lollapalooza. This is a band, after all, that literally broke up onstage at its final show in Chicago in July 1991, ending in a shambolic fashion befitting a group renowned for disorganization, drunkenness, in-fighting, self sabotage, and all manner of erratic behavior. In the time since, solo careers sprouted and withered. *(continued)*

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Singer/guitarist Paul Westerberg lived a largely reclusive existence in Minneapolis while bassist Tommy Stinson joined the post-*Use Your Illusions* lineup in Guns N' Roses, where he's stayed since signing on in the early 2000s.

Of course, unlike the bitter hostility preventing the longed-for reunions of the Smiths and Husker Du, Westerberg and Stinson actually get along. While the former adamantly downplayed the possibility of getting back together, the amicable relationship of the 'Mats' two surviving members always meant hope existed for fans—particularly those born after the group imploded. And, when last year Westerberg and Stinson collaborated on an EP to benefit guitarist Slim Dunlap, people again began to wonder. Wishes were finally granted this summer as Westerberg announced the 'Mats would perform three shows. In addition to reflecting the band's do-it-on-our-own-terms history, its choice to bow at Riot Fest rather than one of the larger, commercialized gatherings spoke to an indie-derived integrity and punk-honed background that inform the 'Mats' early albums.

"I'm a music-business professional," cracked Westerberg as he reached towards his feet, tore out a clock installed to keep the band from exceeding curfew, whirled its cord around, and tossed the device aside shortly into the group's 75-min-

ute set. His spontaneous actions drew loud applause and laughter, intimating that, after all these years, the frontman remained brash and unpredictable. He also entertained with other clever jokes and humorous remarks, going as far as to note that the watery guitar tone on "Swingin' Party" resembled that of the Cure—and not in a good way.

It almost seemed too perfect. For slapdash moments and self-deprecating traits always went hand-in-hand with the 'Mats and, to the extent that the slouching Westerberg and Co. embraced a tossed-off persona, the music was anything but. The band stomped, snarled, strutted, and serenaded through 25 well-rehearsed songs punctuated with the type of soulful investment and ragged-but-right vibrancy usually lacking in Second Act appearances. With guitarist David Minehan and drummer Josh Freese filling in the personnel gaps, the 'Mats sounded strong and, gulp(!), professional. They were having fun, and didn't embarrass themselves or their music.

In touching on garage punk ("Love You Till Friday"), jukebox ballads ("Waitress in the Sky"), glam-splotched rock ("Kiss Me On the Bus"), gritty pop ("Color Me Impressed") and tipping their collective hats to country (via Hank Williams' "Hey Good Lookin'") and early rock n' roll (by way of a sped-up rendition

of Chuck Berry's "Maybellene"), the Replacements served notice that their diverse body of work is still vital. Westerberg's sturdy voice negotiated the gaps between vulnerability and guardedness, sarcasm and seriousness, and daring and safety that many of the group's tunes address with head-on inertia and honest emotion. A few forgotten words and stray chords added to the impression that what transpired came straight from the heart, and not from any sense of obligation (contractual or otherwise) or want for further recognition.

At present, the Replacements have no further shows scheduled, begging the question of whether they're leaving well enough alone and refusing to fall into the predictable cycle that ensnared countless acts that reunited and fell short of expectations. Every band should be entitled to one comeback, one shot at the big payday, one chance to please new and old fans. The Replacements seized those opportunities and akin to Led Zeppelin in 2007, limited the number of their concerts to make them destination events to which audiences traveled to experience, knowing full well it was a now-or-never venture. Time will tell how much the 'Mats value the showbiz adage "leave them wanting more," an important lesson that, to their detriment, the Pixies failed to heed. ●



Paul Westerberg of the Replacements

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Drake titled his latest full-length studio album *Nothing Was the Same*, but a far better name might have been *Nothing Has Changed*.

Not that this is a bad thing, necessarily. The 26-year-old Canadian remains a respectable rapper, a smooth singer, and an excellent curator of sounds. (His beats, largely courtesy of longtime producer Noah Shebib, are universally fantastic, lacing together everything from house to downcast R&B so chilled it appears to be frozen in polar ice.) He also continues to pack songs with a healthy dose of pathos. This is the guy, after all, who spent nearly six minutes emoting about getting liquored up and drunk dialing an ex on his 2011 breakthrough “Marvin’s Song.”



Drake
Nothing Was the Same
Young Money/Cash Money/Republic, CD

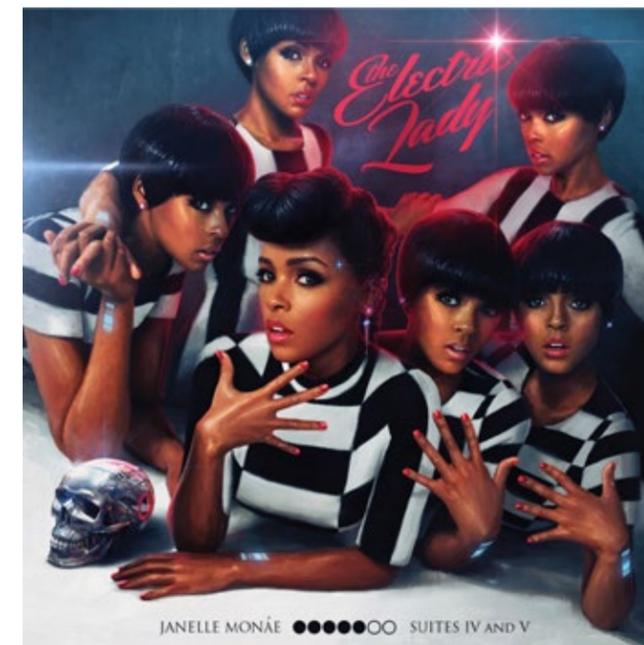
These days, the rapper is still beating himself up over his romantic failings, and he spends his time pining for a handful of former flames, most memorably Courtney “from the Hooters on Peachtree” Street in Atlanta, a reference so specific even the Facebook overlords might raise privacy concerns. As a matter of habit, Drake has always walked the line between have-it-all bluster and on-my-own despondency, and he doesn’t stray from the template here. One minute he’s boasting “my life’s a completed checklist” with chest-thumping authority, the next he’s professing a need to cut ties with the world before his inevitable breakdown.

He’s also, like most celebrities, wholly enamored with the concept of fame, and spends large chunks of the album opining on his trending status. On “Started From the Bottom”—an odd sentiment coming from a guy who’s been a star since landing a role on a Canadian soap opera as a teenager—he professes the “story stayed the same through the money and the fame.” That the first instinct isn’t to

LOL at this proclamation is a testament to Drake’s ability to remain relatable in spite of his massive fortune. He’s like the anti-Mitt Romney in this way.

At times, however, his tortured-baller persona starts to wear thin, and there are far more cringe-worthy lines here (here’s looking at you, “Girl, you know I’ve seen you naked”) than on any other Drake album, which says something. Of course, over-sharing has always been the rapper’s thing, which makes him the ideal star for this me-first Internet age, and he doesn’t disappoint on suave confessionals like the aptly titled “Too Much.”

As with many web-savvy youngsters, Drake also isn’t afraid to do a little trolling, which is exactly what it feels like when the rapper samples Wu Tang Clan’s “It’s Yourz” for a track called “Wu-Tang Forever” and turns it into a sing-song ballad miles removed from the cold concrete streets of Shaolin. It’s flawed, to be sure, but Drake somehow pulls it together, which serves as an accurate description of the rapper’s utterly unique career. —**Andy Downing**



Janelle Monáe
The Electric Lady
Atlantic, CD

f a little crazy goes a long way, then Janelle Monáe’s *The Electric Lady* illustrates how far a lot of it can go. The short answer: A 19-track album that feels as if it’s a time-traveling trip through R&B’s past and present. If there’s a genre, Monáe likely touches upon it, if even for a brief layover. She’ll drop a soul-stopping rap, sweetly serenade a lover, and then lead a girl-group stomp and complete it all as if she’s R&B’s answer to James Bond—her suit never wrinkled, her pompadour always in place. And speaking of spies, there are spy overtures, too.

Monáe’s gift on this, her second full-length album, and the fourth and fifth parts of her still-growing sci-fi epic (we warned there was some crazy), is that she’s able to finesse her way through disco, soul, gospel, classical, jazz, rock, and whatever smooth, loungey vibes are found in-between it all. For all the genre bending, *The Electric Lady* feels remarkably pop-minded and accessible. If 2010’s *The ArchAndroid* had a little classical-meets-ambient weirdness, *The Electric Lady* sticks closer to the groove.

Those who have been with Monáe since the 2007 EP *Metropolis*, which introduced the planned seven-part storyline of the sent-from-the-future Cindi Mayweather, may find the Monáe of *The Electric Lady* a little more earthbound. There’s one—OK, two—too many ballads, and, yes, the skits have got to go. But as Monáe makes it clear on the title track, this is a “classic kind of crazy.”

There’s humor, as one moment, she’ll be calling out for more wine. And there’s an underlying social conscious. (continued)



©Photo by Marc Baptiste

Witness the overworked janitor on the warped synth-rap of “Ghetto Woman” or the shimmering tune of economic decline that is “Dance Apocalyptic,” where maxed-out credit cards and bomb threats hint that there’s more to Monae’s silliness than marrying acoustic strumming with the colorfulness of the Ronettes. If the world is going to hell, this isn’t a bad party for its finale.

Beyond the stylistic globetrotting, there’s also a heck of a guest list. Prince slings up beside Monae on “Givin’ Em What They Love,” where fireside crackles and shakes give way to guitar solos and an orchestra.

“Q.U.E.E.N.” features an assist from another R&B adventurer in Erykah Badu, not to mention a beat that is driven by finger snaps and what may or may not be a kazoo. “Primetime” gets sensual, “It’s Code” is teleported from the 60s (complete with sugar-meets-vamp crooning from Monae), and “Dorothy Dandridge Eyes” bridges laidback funk and jazz without schmaltz. Fine, with a little schmaltz, but if you’ve made it to the end, you’ve already long surrendered to Monae’s anything-goes journey.

—**Todd Martens**

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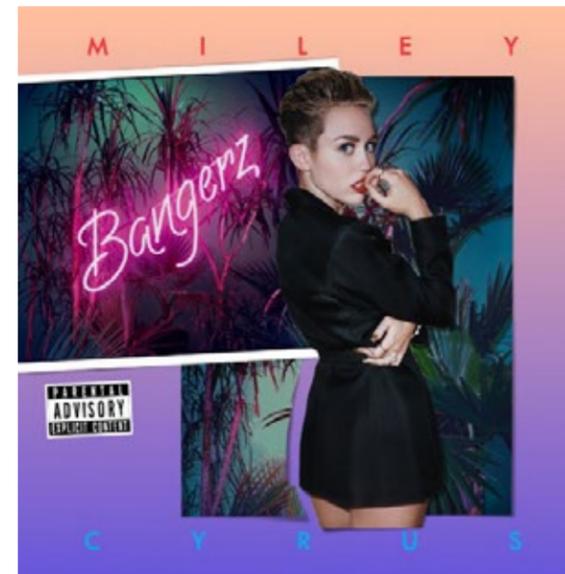
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Miley Cyrus
Bangerz
RCA, CD

When *Bangerz*, the third Miley Cyrus record to not contain any “Hannah Montana” branding, was officially made available for streaming in the days before its October 8 release, it was okay to feel a bit dirty. The media, after all, has been treating Miley’s transition from a virginal teen brand (one who loves her country-singin’ pops!) to a corporate sleaze peddler as if the spectacle amounts to the equivalent America’s Royal Wedding. Miley seemed ghoulishly eager to exploit it all.

She grinded on teddy bears, talked balk to Sinead O’Connor, and did some very un-Disney-like moves with a foam finger. So when *Bangerz* hit the Internet, it triggered a universal pop-culture curiosity to see how crazed, how sexy, and just how downright adult it was going to sound. Our little Hannah Montana is all grown up, so pull up a chair and watch this former daddy’s little girl make the leap into a self-described “female rebel.” What a disappointment: *Bangerz* turns out to be a rather boring show.

The album has the correct ratio of midtempo tracks to club tunes (just shy of half, if you get the 16-song expanded edition that clocks in at an overstuffed hour), and lyrics that needle but never really provoke. A tune such as “4x4” won’t sound too bad among the din of clinked glasses and conversation in a crowded bar, although it will likely be indistinguishable from “Cotton Eyed Joe” when relegated to background music. (Apparently, the country doesn’t come off as easily as Miley’s clothes.) Later, “FU” finds Miley bringing her rasp into Amy Winehouse territory but serves as a reminder that Miley the rock singer (see Top 10 hit “See You Again”) has more bite than Miley the pop singer (see all of *Bangerz*).

Here, liberation is choosing a “battery pack” over a man on the “Push It”-referencing “SMS (Bangerz),” on which Miley raps. The collaboration with Britney Spears also sees both artists digitally processed to the point of anonymity. As evidenced by “#Getitright,” vulnerability is handled even more poorly. Hitmaker-for-hire Pharrell Williams rips off Michael Jackson’s “Black or White” to leave Miley writhing around in bed waiting for her man to hang up the phone and pay attention to her. One surprise is that *Bangerz* contains very few actual bangers. “Maybe Your Right” is a ballad that reaches

for “Simply the Best” grandeur and “Adore You” tries to make the argument that there’s no orchestra a MacBook can’t improve.

The biggest offense is that none of it feels much fun. Even the hit “We Can’t Stop” is the veritable party song at its most fatalistic—its tone woozy and slowed down. Like Weezer’s “Can’t Stop the Partying” or even “Key & Peele’s” LMFAO parody “Non-Stop Party,” it’s a party because we’re too dead inside to do much of anything else. This is tragic because Miley is actually quite personable and, by all accounts, has a genuine appreciation of music history, as her elegant, stripped-down tackling of classics such as “Lilac Wine” and “Jolene” has made clear.

Bangerz, however, seems to exist for two reasons. One, because “Party in the U.S.A.” was a bigger hit than her pop-rock tunes, and two, because Miley, while no longer starring in a television show, is still following a script. From Annette Funicello to Selena Gomez, many a teen star has taken the show-some-skin path to adulthood, and while there’s no shame in wanting to dance along to *Bangerz* at a party, we should all feel embarrassed we’re still hungry for the same ol’ song and dance.

—Todd Martens



Lindi Ortega ● Purchase LP from Music Direct
Tin Star
 Last Gang Records, LP or CD

"I know someday when the sun has set I will go dig up the dead/Lift their bodies from their graves and I'll lay them in my bed," she muses. "To fill their hollow hearts with all of my broken parts/And all the love that they were never shown." Hello!

Ortega, a critically acclaimed Canadian singer-songwriter, is a Nashville transplant. But, as she shows time and again on *Tin Star*, she's not just anyone's typical Music Row chanteuse. Which is also why she's not on a major country label. Where a country star like Jason Aldean sings about generic partying on a dirt road, Ortega takes a detour into the graveyard itself to "search for sweethearts underneath the dirt."

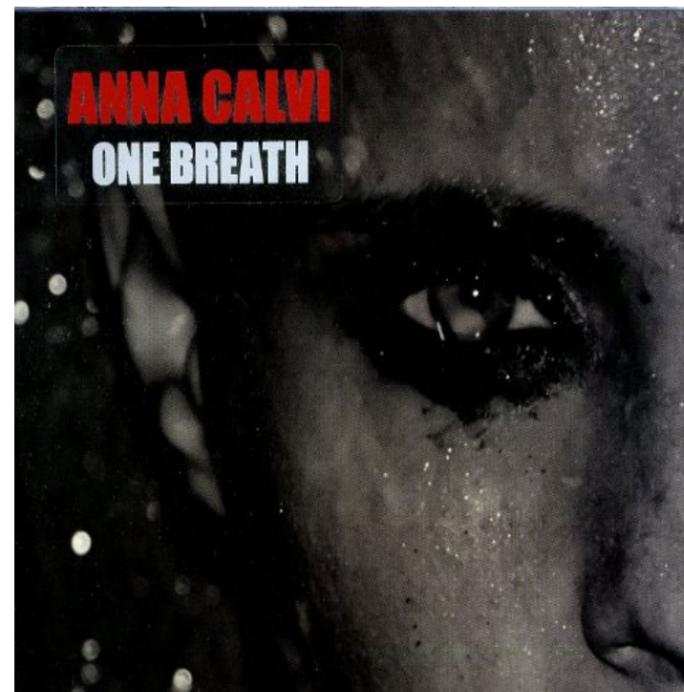
The girl's got serious brass. There's much to love here. Ortega possesses a haunting soprano that moves from wistful whisper to full-bore sass. On the lush and dreamy title track, her quavery ache invokes classic Skeeter Davis singing against a muted mix of piano and strings. On the upbeat "Voodoo Mama," she lists toward the sparkling dynamism of Dolly Parton.

A couple of songs into Lindi Ortega's new album, she sounds like a talented neo-cowpunk with an Ennio Morricone soundtrack fixation. That's cool enough in its own right. But then, the fifth track, the ethereal tearjerker "Lived and Died Alone," rolls around. It's a mind-bending piece of forlorn goth-country that proves she's clearly in a league of her own.

Although Ortega nails sad like nobody's business, she's also no reticent wallflower. The brash, bluesy "I Want You" is punkishly demanding. Ortega and crew summon the ghosts of swamp-punk icons the Gun Club and the Cramps.

Grammy-nominated producer David Cobb—who has also worked with Secret Sisters and Shooter Jennings—frames Ortega with sympathetic and inventive arrangements. Together, they reference a number of touchstones. You can almost see the Sergio Leone tumbleweeds blowing past the reverb-drenched guitars of "Hard As This." And the strummed guitars of "Gypsy Child" hark back to Buck Owens' "Streets of Bakersfield."

In "This Is Not Surreal," Cobb sets her haunted vocals against a sweetly picked Spanish guitar. "One must always suffer for the sake of their art," she sings. Coming from Ortega, this isn't lip service to an ideal. It's a statement of fact from a singer-songwriter that takes real risks and sticks to her artistic guns. —**Chrissie Dickinson**



Anna Calvi ● Purchase LP from Music Direct
One Breath
 Domino, 180g LP or CD

There's drama in the work of Anna Calvi.

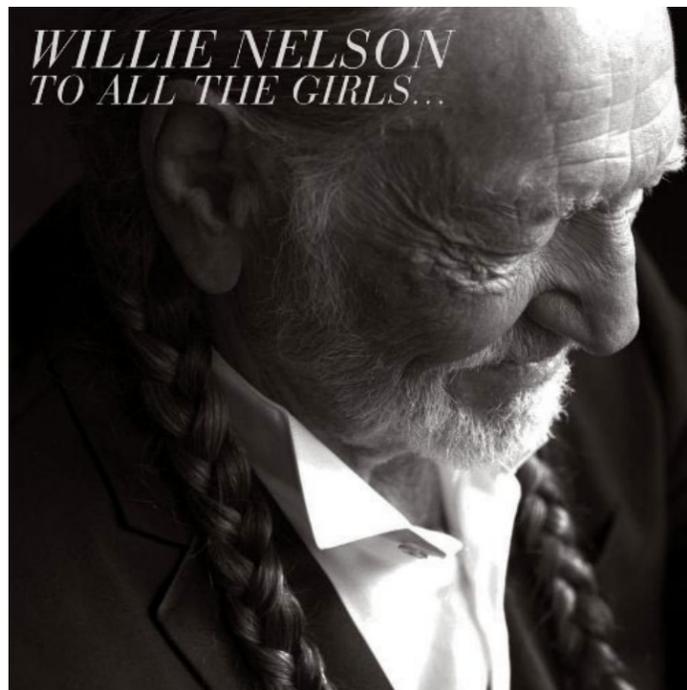
In one instance on *One Breath*, stressed guitars and breathy lyrics give way to a Stravinsky-inspired string arrangement. In another, sparse, water drop-like rhythms build to a sweeping lovesick ballad only to disintegrate into something eerily similar to Mike Oldfield's "Tubular Bells," known to most as the theme for *The Exorcist*. Yet another tune is a little more than an angelic choir, and it comes only moments after a track in which a vampiric, dirty guitar riff raises all sorts of hell.

The British singer/songwriter isn't lacking for theatricality. She sings unsympathetically, her alto blood red in its vivacity, her tone elegant in that Nick Cave, David Lynch, PJ Harvey-like blue, and her orchestrations as ornate as "Downton Abbey" but as recklessly lustful as "Game of Thrones." Forgive the visual references, but the onetime film composer hopeful takes a widescreen approach. Perhaps that's why her criminally small fan base may consist almost entirely of fashion designers.

One Breath, Calvi's second album, builds on the elegant sinfulness of her 2011 debut, where tension is raised but never fully released. "Is it so cruel to see your cry?" she sings early on, an administer of anguish but also the key to its relief. Church organs simmer, rattlesnake grooves taunt, and Calvi leaves the final act to the imagination. "Show me where it hurts," she coos on "Cry," just as guitar strings sound as if they're being skinned rather than strummed.

It's all, as Calvi describes in a press release, trying to channel "the moment before you've got to open yourself up." Such emotion inspires a multitude of sonic variations. "Eliza" is a Western romp on which rhythms echo as if recorded in a tomb, and "Piece by Piece" is oddly warm in its dissonance, the string orchestrations dreaming of a happily-ever-after even as studio-aided instrumentation twitches all about.

On the title track, momentum builds on a slow march of whistling, teasingly relaxing digital landscapes and vocals so intimate you can practically see the cracks in Calvi's scarlet lipstick. "It's gonna change everything," she sings, her voice just above a whisper as guitars lurk like vultures. Then the rug is pulled, and a classical orchestra springs to life. Some may marvel at its beauty, other may feel manipulated, but the journey is gripping. —**Todd Martens**



Willie Nelson

To All the Girls...

Legacy Recordings, 180g 2LP or CD

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Over the years, Willie Nelson has recorded with a disparate list of artists without losing his own style or credibility. His choice of duet partners ranges from variously unnerving (Toby Keith) to legendary (Waylon Jennings, Merle Haggard) to downright odd (Julio Iglesias). Regardless of singing partner, however, Nelson always comes out smelling like a rose.

The Red Headed Stranger celebrates his 80th birthday this year by continuing to crank out new material at a furious pace. His latest, *To All the Girls...*, is a duet album with 18 country-pop female singers. It's his third release in 16 months. Maybe that's part of the problem: Too much, too fast. God bless Willie on his b-day, but the duet king delivers another decidedly mixed bag here.

Of the youngsters joining in on the party, Miranda Lambert shines through the weeping steel of "She Was No Good For Me." A current star of the genre, Lambert is a real-deal singer who can hold her own with the elder statesman. The same can't be said for the bland Carrie Underwood on "Always On My Mind." The original song is classic and understated, yet the new arrangement gets middle-of-the-road lounge treatment. Underwood has big pipes, but there's little emotion in her perfectly slick notes.

Wynonna Judd and Nelson's sassy take on "Bloody Mary Morning" fares better. Similarly, Rosanne Cash delivers a vulnerable reading on the pensive ballad "Please Don't Tell Me." Not to be left out, Sheryl Crow does a worthy Rosemary Clooney imitation to Willie's Bing Crosby on "Far Away Places."

Arrangements throughout are low-key and tasteful. Several are filled with tinkling piano and sweet strings. But a sameness sets in on many tracks, a detriment to many of the talented women assembled here—including Secret Sisters, Paula Nelson, and Brandi Carlile. Worse, two of the greatest singers alive—Dolly Parton and Loretta Lynn—get lost in the shuffle.

Other flaws find Emmylou Harris injecting her trademark vocals into the bittersweet Tex-Mex outing "Dry Lightning" only to suffer from an annoyingly brief time slot. Likewise, Alison Krauss is underused on the slinky "No Mas Amor." It takes the titanic Mavis Staples to finally blow through the surrounding gauze with the southern-fried gospel-soul number "Grandma's Hands."

Yes, it's good to see Nelson so productive at his age. But next time out, less really would be more.

—*Chrissie Dickinson*

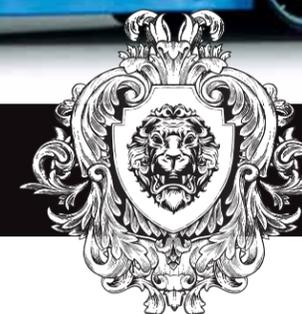
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RUTHERFORD AUDIO



NEIL YOUNG'S 27TH ANNUAL BRIDGE SCHOOL CONCERT

October 27, 2013

Shoreline Amphitheater
Mountain View, California

By Jaan Uhelszki
Photos by Jay Blakesberg

Neil Young's 27th annual Bridge School concert proved a much more somber affair this year. Usually, when Young and his long-suffering manager of more than 40 years handpick performers for the celebrity-packed two-day benefit show held outside of San Francisco, they do it with a wicked gleam in their eye, choosing a few high-wattage performers that are coerced to unplug in order to fit the parameters of the mandatory all-acoustic show.

Then they sit back and watch acts like Tom Petty, Green Day, Bruce Springsteen, and the Who struggle to convert their high-decibel bombast into more temperate fare. Such forced acoustic marches are always highlights of the shows, as iconic bands attempt to overcome the limitations imposed by unplugging and apologize for their ineptitude at reconfiguring their biggest hits into more pacific renditions. Who among us doesn't enjoy seeing a preening rock god cut down to size as he sheepishly admits his inadequacies to a 20,000-strong crowd?



STEPHEN STILLS & NEIL YOUNG

And, whatever it is, something about this particular challenge impels some of rock's biggest bruisers to blabber away about their not-so-deep-seated fears. For instance, back in 1997, when Metallica's strapping lead singer James Hetfield confessed the heavy-metal stalwarts didn't have a clue what they were doing. "Does somebody know that song? Because it sure wasn't us," he said after completing a rather dainty version of the group's epic stomp "The Four Horsemen."

This, however, wasn't one of those years. Whether by accident or design, the bill—which included Jenny Lewis with the Watson Twins, fun, Diana Krall and Elvis Costello, Heart, My Morning Jacket, Tom Waits, Queens of the Stone Age, and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young (with whom Young hadn't performed since 2006)—lent a certain gravity to the affair. It was launched in 1986 by Young and his wife, Pegi, to fund the Bridge School for kids with severe physical and speech impairments. Their son Ben, who has cerebral palsy, was the first student.

You could blame the mood on the unseasonable October chill the week before Halloween, the Killers' last-minute cancellation, or Lou Reed's sad and unexpected death from liver failure that very morning. It was as if Young had prescient knowledge about the billing this year, as he chose acts with appropriate gravity and presence—almost as if the Canadian native knew Reed's ponderous and restless ghost would hover for a while before flitting off to the astral regions, demanding an appropriate and respectful send-off. Which it got.

If this solemn mood wasn't immediately apparent, all you had to do was listen closely to the three songs Young opened the show with. You can always gauge



QUEENS OF THE STONE AGE

the tone of the event by the songs he plays. Yes, Young speaks in code. In a lighthearted year, he'll walk out onstage in his worn jeans, flannel shirt, and well-loved acoustic guitar, and open with "Sugar Mountain" or "I Am a Child," maybe "Heart of Gold." On a moodier year, the fare is likely to be his own personal note to self: "Long May You Run" or "Needle and the Damage Done," or even "The Loner."

This year, the tone was even more affecting, with Young covering Phil Ochs' "Changes," the same song he sang in his fractured voice at this year's Farm Aid, along with a heartfelt and solemn preamble about Kurt Cobain and Ochs' suicides. He followed it with Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" and his own "Comes a Time," each posing more questions than answers. He was joined by Pegi, revealing an intimacy and sweetness in the way their two voices fit together, enhanced rather than hindered by the few off notes in the chorus of "Comes a Time."

Rilo Kiley's winsome singer Jenny Lewis, looking like a diminutive Irish Sea witch with her streaming red mermaid hair, was up next in a band that included the Watson Twins dressed in identical Morticia gowns. While they swayed to a beat only they seemed to hear, Lewis sang with an ancient ache in her voice, running through songs including the title track from her 2008 solo album *Acid Tongue* as well as "Head Under Water" and "Rise Up With Your Fists." The standout was the closing "Silver Lining" from Rilo Kiley's 2007 album *Under the Black Light*, a song that channels Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* and its deliciously wicked soap opera. (continued)

CONCERT

HEART

Heart showed why a day doesn't go by when you don't hear one of their songs on Classic Rock radio. While singer Ann Wilson may have lost her lithe figure, she gained stature, becoming an even better singer with more depth and complexity in her pure, strong voice than she had when the group topped the charts. She prowled across the stage like a jungle cat, defiantly tossing her perfect ringlets and pawing the boards in high-heeled shoes as she launched into Heart hits such as "Even It Up" and "Crazy On You." The band skipped the signature "Barracuda" (reportedly written as a homage to the Led Zeppelin song "Achilles Last Stand") but covered Zeppelin's most beautiful ballad, "The Rain Song." The only mishap of an otherwise perfect set occurred when Young joined the Wilson sisters for a rendition of his "Man of War," and Ann muffed the words of the first verse. *(continued)*



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Five hours went by until anyone gave Reed a proper salute, and it came from an unexpected corner—My Morning Jacket's Jim James, who has unexpected depths. He was the only artist on the eight-hour bill to acknowledge the icon's passing, explaining that Reed was "one of the greatest composers, artists, musicians that walked the face of the earth. So this one's for you, Lou." He then led Young, Elvis Costello, Lewis, and the Watson Twins in a chant-like rendition of the Velvet Underground's "Oh! Sweet Nuthin'." So trancelike was the playing that Young seemed in an altered state, waging a guitar dual with James, much like the ones he had with Stephen Stills in the past. He played so hard he dropped his guitar, which Costello swooped in to retrieve.

Killers bassist Mark Stroemer, whose acute back pain caused the Las Vegas quartet to bow out a month before the event, gets credit for this year's high point: Tom Waits' first public appearance in five years. The cancellation forced Young and Pegi to do some quick maneuvering to fill the void. They rounded up Arcade Fire and

languid folk-rocker Jack Johnson to step in on Saturday night, and called on Waits, because he's more or less a neighbor.

Well, that's not the whole story, according to Waits, inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame by Young in 2011. No, the wily raconteur insisted he was there to work off a debt he owed Young—something he didn't address until five songs into his 10-song set.

"I volunteered to come here. Long story," Waits told the crowd. "Back in the 1970s, I borrowed a lot of money from Neil. For me, it was the days of long hair and short money. He loaned it to me so I could start a restaurant. I lost a lot of money on that restaurant. Let me rephrase that: I lost a lot of Neil's money. And you don't wanna see Neil mad. Anyway, it was a small restaurant, sort of a specialized place. We were gonna have eel and donuts and fish scales—just fish scales, sautéed and all gluten-free. But it went under, so Neil said, 'Listen, you owe me a lot of money, so I have three ideas for you: Jail time, or you can come work in my yard, or you can do the Bridge School.'" *(continued)*

While one wonders how the yard would look, Waits' 10-song set turned into a wonder of eccentric storytelling. Pushing his battered hat on the back of his groomed head, the musician began his set without preamble, giving a nod and a downbeat to an ad hoc band especially assembled for this show: Primus' avant-rock bassist Les Claypool (he's Waits' neighbor, and played on three of his albums, but never played live with him), Los Lobos' Dave Hidalgo, and drummer Casey Waits, Waits' 28-year-old son.

In a little under 50 minutes, Waits took fans through a well-edited and mandatory unplugged reading of his catalog, lopping off verses and compressing others as he skittered across the present and past, reaching back as far as 1976's *Small Change* with the blurry, slurry autobiography of "Tom Traubert's Blues." Whether it was strategic or just random, he managed to include something from each decade of his 40-year career. Yet the preponderance of the songs came from 2011's *Bad as Me*, including two—"Last Leaf" and "Talking at the Same Time"—that had never been played live before.

From the rattling speed-rapped sea chantey "Singapore" to the busted but beautiful falsetto of the yearning, geopolitical blues of "Everybody Talking at the Same Time," from the ghoulish "Cemetery Polka" off *Rain Dogs* to the hot Latin samba of "Come Up to the House" from *Mule Variations*, Waits was a blur of story, color, and eccentric imagination. He upstaged Queens of the Stone Age's expensive suits and slowed-down metal, and even headliners Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young.

This marked the seventh time the supergroup played Bridge School, and perhaps qualified as the most temperature-impaired set. "We're fucking freezing here," David Crosby complained. They played the same set as they did the night before, but happily, it was not an exercise in tired nostalgia. The old friends sparked off each other with humor and ease, seamlessly moving from CSN's "Just a Song Before I Go" to Young's "Human Highway." While Stills doesn't have the range or tonality he once did, his guitar playing has only gotten better, something evident on "Don't Want Lies," which Stills wrote for his other supergroup, The Rides, featuring Kenny Wayne Shepherd and Barry Goldberg. Young encroached on Stills' personal space, stalking him with his guitar, weaving in between him and Nash, creeping behind each of them like a hoodie-shrouded sea creature.

"From time to time, people have accused us of being political," Crosby claimed. "But shit, all we ever write are love songs. OK, maybe one, two. Maybe nine political songs. I'm dedicating this to our country," he said, before four voices coalesced on a single note during an a cappella version of "What Are Their Names," chilling in both message and delivery.

"Come out, we're almost toast!" Young called to the artists huddled in the wings, waiting for the annual last-song jam. Bundled up against the cold, most of the day's performers—sans Waits—came out to blend their voices with CSN&Y's near-perfect harmonies on Graham Nash's timeless anthem "Teach Your Children," dedicated, naturally, to the Bridge School faculty. ●



TOM WAITS

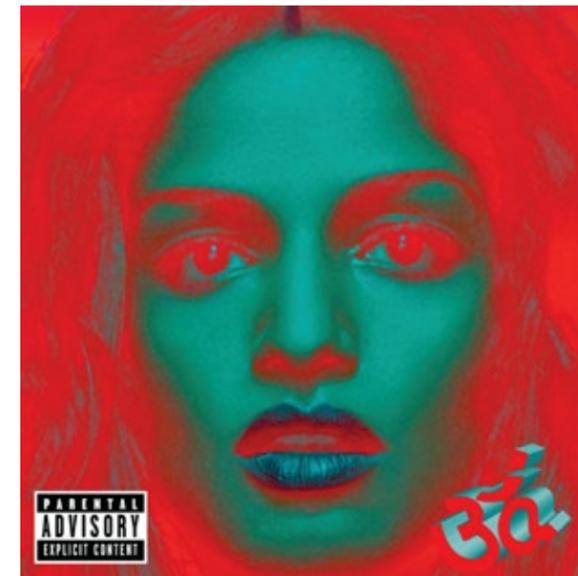
Label mates and champions of fashion-first pop, Lady Gaga and M.I.A. plot different courses to the dance floor. A middle finger on the Super Bowl halftime show for one; a flying dress named Volantis for the other. Each instance is evidence of their knack for generating headlines. They share more than outsized personalities—the core thesis of each artist is that we deserve a better class of pop star.

It's a noble cause, but seems especially necessary in 2013, when hot producers are interchangeable and clothes are deemed a necessary nuisance. While the artists may operate on separate ends of the spectrum—Gaga fills arenas and M.I.A. is still relegated to clubs—when it comes to cake-and-eat-it-too pop, M.I.A. and Gaga may be our best bets.

They open their new albums with big ambitions. “If you’re gonna be me, you need a manifesto,” M.I.A. sings, delivering the line like a casual brush-off amid the cacophony of a third-world market. “Enigma pop-star is fun,” Gaga declares gleefully, and then mixes up religion, oppression, and sex by referencing a burqa as a piece of erotic fashion. Such lines indicate what follows may not always be well thought-out, but sure is going to be ear-catching.



©Photo by Daniel Sannwald



M.I.A.

Matangi

Interscope, 2LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct



Lady Gaga

Artpop

Interscope, 2LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

Consider it the art of provocateering. And both artists' history offers evidence that they can deliver. M.I.A.'s "Paper Planes" and Gaga's "Born This Way" are rare hits that can double as pieces of activism. Gaga's politics were of the gender variety while M.I.A. took gangsta clichés and applied them to class warfare and imperialism.

Yet *Matangi* and *Artpop* capture each artist at a potential crossroads. M.I.A.'s 2010 effort *Maya* found the artist at her most aggressive but was a sales dud, and Gaga's *Born This Way* (the album) didn't quite hit on the cultural level of her less socially conscious works—you know, the ones that contain the lines about "disco sticks" and such. Both performers take the paths to less resistance on their latest works: turn up the beats, tone down the thoughtfulness.

While it's sometimes dangerous to go looking for meaning in Gaga's lyrics, her high-art references and tendency to accentuate her flaws rather than her glamour shots always present an intriguing challenge. Mixing modern art and classicism, as she does on the Jeff Koons-meets-Sandro Botticelli album cover that graces *Artpop*

©Photo by Inez and Vinoodh



(which also throws in a little disquieting, robotic nudity for good measure) works well in imagery, less so on the Top 40.

But conflict is fine. Laziness, however, isn't, and *Artpop* retreats to the more simplified electro-pop of her "Poker Face" days. It's rough early on, as Gaga plays with images of Uranus and her ass on "Venus." For every good idea, there are two of the cringe-inducing variety. "G.U.Y." employs plenty of hook-inducing moments, utilizing electronic drops, whizzes, and spoken-word runway struts as Gaga distorts images. "Fashion!" deviates from the programmed norm to feel alternately soulful and operatic, while "Manicure" takes Gaga's puzzling love of 80s hair metal and makes it palatable with pulse-racing beats and downright combative handclaps.

But the fun is derailed when Gaga tries to dig deeper. The addiction ballad that is "Dope" manages to be over-the-top even though it utilizes little more than piano and voice, Gaga channeling AxI Rose to forcefully sing any meaning right out of the tune. "Do What U Want" is intended as a take-down of tabloid culture, with the vocalist willing to surrender her image but not her mind

to the masses. An intriguing idea, perhaps, but one that falls apart with a lusty R. Kelly guest spot.

The album's title track is even more muddled—the mission statement, such as it is. The huffs and slight disco pull make it catchy enough, but when Gaga declares that her "artpop could mean anything," it all starts to feel a cop-out, an argument that her art is infallible because it's simply up to the listener to interpret. Fine, but then leave out T.I., Too Short, and Twista on the downright anonymous "Jewels N' Drugs," please.

M.I.A. fares better, but *Matangi* is unfortunately her least consistent work. Throughout, she tells us over and over again that she is going to screw with us, surprise us, and that any of your ideas have already "been did and done." Yet for too much of the album, she seems at a loss to find something to sing about other than her own individualism. That works once or twice, especially when it sounds as good as it does on a sing-along such as "Come Walk With Me," which mixes up nature sounds, cool dub grooves, and Far East breakdowns. Eventually, however, one wants M.I.A. to start showing rather than telling.

Matangi can still sound vital, if only because few other artists pull from global influences in the same way. Sounds and images—the uncle that took the boat to Iran on the bottle-breaking "Bring the Noise," the hip-hop-meets Middle East mash-up of the arresting "Bad Girls"—are worn like party camouflage. She sounds less passionate on the ravey "Y.A.L.A.," which brings too much new-age mysticism to the dance tent. The hippie vibe continues on "Lights" when she declares herself a "counter to the counter" over sleepy, droning, stoner hand-drumming.

And still, both artists still have our attention. Gaga because she hints at more, and M.I.A. because she's starting to question if she even needs more. Nearly an hour into her album, M.I.A. drops "Sexodus," a slow-burner with spy-movie horns and lost-in-orbit electronics. She's drinking fancy tea, living the high life, and sounds insecure about it.

"What'd you want it all for?" she asks repeatedly as the record fades to the black. It's a question hopefully both she and Gaga will think on before they head back to studio.

—Todd Martens



ARCADE FIRE

Reflektor

Merge, 180g 2LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

“Do you like rock ‘n’ roll music?” slurs Arcade Fire frontman Win Butler in the midst of the band’s fourth album, *Reflektor*. “Cause I don’t know if I do.”

While the group’s first three albums found Butler and Co. weaving countless Big Ideas (death, religion, war, and suburban sprawl all factor) into a host of surging rock anthems—and even winning a surprise Album of the Year Grammy for their efforts with *The Suburbs* in 2011—its latest is generally weirder and more rhythmic, steeped in elements of dance rock, disco, and reggae. At 14 songs and 86 (!) minutes, it is also bloated, indulgent, and, at times, oddly detached.

This is stranger still because Arcade Fire sounds particularly obsessed with human connection this time around. Some of Butler’s lyrics are even rooted in philosopher Soren Kierkegaard’s writings about a “reflective age” that values lip service to ideals over direct action. “The individual...does not have the passion to rip himself away from either the coils of Reflection,” he writes in *The Present Age*, a concept Butler takes and applies to digital technology. “We fell in love when I was 19,” he sings on the pulsating title track. “And now we’re staring at a screen.”

Yet for all Butler’s hand-wringing over the digital miles between us, the sprawling Canadian crew has never felt this distant or this unapproachable. Perhaps it was inevitable. Arcade Fire started small, after all, transforming its much-buzzed-about club shows into sweaty, communal sing-alongs. Now it’s arguably the biggest “indie” act on the planet, fully capable of packing arenas.

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Such physical distance between band and audience somehow carries over into *Reflektor*. Like awkward high-school teens fumbling through conversation at the prom, Arcade Fire tries to narrow this widening emotional gap with dance—an approach that works, to a degree.

It certainly helps that the band enlisted LCD Soundsystem mastermind James Murphy to help produce. His fingerprints are heard all over *Reflektor*, from the shimmying title track, which, quite honestly, bites heavily from Murphy's former group, to the

rapturous and Haitian-flavored "Here Comes the Night," which sounds like Talking Heads frontman David Byrne ditching his big suit for a pair of Bermuda shorts.

Actually, the Talking Heads serve as something of a touchstone throughout, and at least two songs make lyrical allusion to the band's afterlife ballad "Heaven." "If this is heaven, I don't know what it's for," sings Butler on one tune. Then, a couple songs later: "If there's no music up in heaven, then what's it for?"

On "Afterlife," however, Butler and wife Regine Chassagne

don't sound eager to meet their maker, hissing, "Afterlife/Oh my god, what an awful word." So instead they rage against death's inevitability ("Can we just work it out? Scream and shout 'til we work it out?") and cling to one another as darkness falls, the song's shimmering synths gradually giving way to an atmospheric drone that mimics gravity exerting its steady pull. It's a beautiful moment, and a rare human one on an album so intensely focused on the brain and the body that it quite nearly forgets about the heart. —**Andy Downing**

One of the better pop songs of the past 12 or so months remains Solange's "Losing You," on which Beyoncé's little sis goes retro, gets minimal, and shows that a little ol' fashioned Prince-inspired heartbreak is one of the better ways to get over it and, even more importantly, get down. Whereas Beyoncé is known to utilize only the top producers money can buy, Solange leans a little more indie. "Losing You" was a collaboration with Dev Hynes, who, over his career, has alternately been known as Lightspeed Champion and, more recently, Blood Orange.



Blood Orange ● Purchase LP from Music Direct
Cupid Deluxe
Domino, 2LP or CD

Hynes, on his second album under the Blood Orange moniker, continues to straddle the line between pop and R&B. But what goes on in the nightclub isn't his source of musical inspiration. Blood Orange captures something later in the evening, a lightly pulsating sound born of blurred senses. A Londoner currently living in New York, Hynes has spoken of shaping the songs of Blood Orange on "long walks I would take around the city at night." Fittingly, *Cupid Deluxe* feels comprised of fleeting glances at the lost loves and lost souls one encounters in such moments.

These are characters that "break down and pray, hoping something comes your way" after leaving work at 9 p.m. and look lovingly (or suspiciously—

it's not quite clear) at their "sweet un-careful friends." Piano notes are airy, splashing like a late night drizzle, and Hynes shape-shifts his voice into a yearning falsetto one moment, a husky spoken-word seducing instrument the next.

As evidenced by "Uncle Ace," flashes of disco emerge, but Hynes keeps his genres vague and gender roles undefined. "Not like the other girls," he sings at his most manly on "Uncle Ace," where some deft, Nile Rodgers-like guitar prancing surrounds him until a horn section envelops the groove. "Chosen" is alternately Parisian and jazzy, but gets even weirder when a choir joins in on the action. "One the Line" channels 1999-era Prince with retro synths, a funk guitar, and Wendy and Lisa-style backing vocals.

Hip-hop assists come courtesy of Clam Casino. Indie-rock singers Caroline Polachek (Chairlift) and Samantha Urbani (Friends) take turns as Hynes' go-to-soul vocalists for much of the album. But for all the stylistic hopscotch, *Cupid Deluxe* is ultimately a mood piece on which the synthy, worldly R&B of "Chamakay" and smoky hip-hop haze of "High Street" are different shades of bruised.

It's downbeat, and Hynes' looks in the mirror aren't always pretty (see "You're Not Good Enough," perhaps the year's most self-destructive, hook-filled middle finger to an ex). Yet Hynes retains the good sense to know that if you're out walking in the middle of the night, you keep moving. —**Todd Martens**



Sky Ferreira ● Purchase LP from Music Direct
Night Time, My Time
Capitol, LP or CD

It's fair to say Sky Ferreira has had an interesting year. The singer experienced her share of success. She finally released her long-in-the-works debut, *Night Time, My Time*, toured alongside Vampire Weekend, and was handpicked to open for esteemed hammer-licker Miley Cyrus when the former Disney star kicks off her arena tour next year.

Offstage, things got a bit dicier. Ferreira, 21, cancelled concerts due to throat issues, stirred controversy by posing nude for her album cover, and dealt with the fallout from a September arrest for possession of ecstasy in upstate New York. (In the same stop, her boyfriend, DIIV's Zachary Cole Smith, was arrested for possession of heroin.) Against this backdrop, portions of *Night Time, My Time* have taken on deeper meaning. "I blame, blame, blame myself," Ferreira sings on one tune. "For my reputation."

Throughout the album, the singer excuses those that place judgment on her while directing all of her ire inward. On the aforementioned "I Blame Myself," she sings, "I know it's not your fault/That you don't understand." Then on "Ain't Your Right," she sets aside her personal grievances, allowing, "I'll let you slide this one time."

Meanwhile, Ferreira flagellates herself for an inability to hold onto happiness ("24 Hours"), frets that no one has her best interests at heart (the bruised "Nobody Asked Me (If I Was Okay)"), and admits to weakness ("Ain't Your Right"). It's not all genuflecting, however, and she gloriously brushes aside all the haters on "I Will," a fiery cut directed at anyone that expects her complete deference.

Even at its heaviest, *Night Time, My Time* never sounds dour or leaden. It helps, of course, that Ferreira served her time in the major-label machine. While the singer has obvious issues with Capitol—in a recent interview, she compared being on a major with drowning, surmised she might be better off on her own, and dismissed label honchos by saying, "I'm not afraid of them"—working amongst people that know a thing or two about how to craft a radio hit has undoubtedly affected her approach.

Aside from "Omanko," a Suicide-influenced burner with tossed-off lyrics ("I'm gearing up for a Japanese Christmas") and the introspective "I Blame Myself," every song here builds to a massive, sing-along chorus. Take "You're Not the One," a soaring breakup cut with a melody eerily reminiscent of Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Want to Have Fun." Then there's "Heavy Metal Heart," a chipper goth-pop tune (think the Cure minus the fear of the sun) where the singer fully cuts ties with the prefab pop star that the label attempted to market her as embodying in the past, singing, "The way I was before/I'm not her anymore."

Fans should be glad to hear it. While this current incarnation of Sky Ferreira might occasionally be messy, she's rarely dull, and it's thrilling to listen in as this complex artist slowly, painfully comes into her own. —**Andy Downing**



The Autumn Defense

Fifth

Yep Roc, LP or CD

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However simple, *Fifth* proves an apt title for the Autumn Defense's fifth record. While fans of the duo comprised of Wilco's John Stirratt and Pat Sansone will likely embrace it, anyone looking for music with a bit more weight may find themselves reaching for a fifth of Jim Beam after wallowing in the group's throwback mellow rock.

Yes, Stirratt and Sansone are gifted players. But in service to what? The Autumn Defense lands in the softest territory of 70s rock. There are washes of such lite-radio monsters as America and Bread. "Calling Your Name" is a mash-up of the Doobie Brothers and Steely Dan. This is iffy ground to say the least, a stone's throw from the twee rabbit hole filled with Sammy Johns' "Chevy Van" and Michael Martin Murphey's "Wildfire."

But the real problem is that the Autumn Defense falls far short of the "laid-back" pantheon it references. The meandering, cluttered songs lack the solid bone structure that at least makes a song like America's affably propulsive pop hit "Sister Golden Hair" hookish and memorable.

There are also times when the Autumn Defense seems to be reaching for the evocative, quasi-psychedelic highs of the later-career Beatles, the underrated Badfinger, and select solo Beatle moments. With its jangly, buzzing guitars, "This Thing That I've Found" sounds like a grandchild of George Harrison's "What Is Life." But the Autumn Defense lacks what Harrison achieves in that memorable hit—namely, the payoff of piercing lyrics, an unforgettable melody, and an irresistible sing-along chorus.

Stirratt and Sansone are afflicted with studio-itis throughout. They busy their songs with jazzy detours and easy-listening overkill. Unable to let a pop bauble be, they gild the lily on songs that would shine with simpler arrangements. There's beauty in the melancholy pop of "Under the Wheel," but needless instrumental layers mar the presentation.

The pair also proves slight but earnest singers. Lyrics veer between the oblique and the simplistic. Awkward rhymes abound, including such amateurish observations as "Well I know with what you've written/I am absolutely smitten/With the warm endearing feeling of you" and "Something strange happens in my brain/And I find myself calling your name."

Sure, whether the Autumn Defense's breezy quirkiness is clever or cloying is a matter of opinion. But given a choice—and I can't believe I am writing this—I would opt instead to listen to David Gates' "Diary."
—**Chrissie Dickinson**

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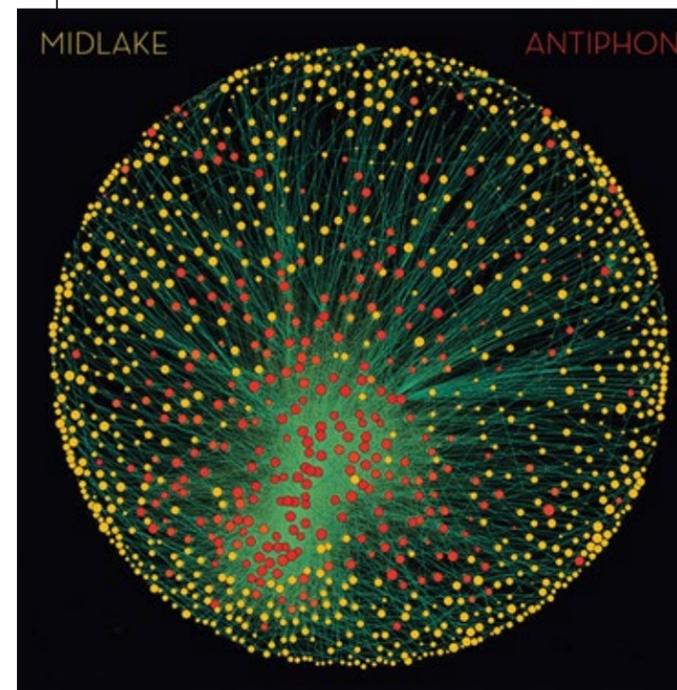
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Even before the release of *Antiphon*, the time seemed right for Midlake to break out. A well-regarded indie band from a small Texas college town, its rich folk-pop often draws from increasingly in-vogue 70s pop flourishes (see Haim, Mumford & Sons, Bon Iver). The group's orchestral touches are warm and harmonies equally opulent. At its core, Midlake's intricate sound takes root in Neil Young's *After the Gold Rush* and Fleetwood Mac's *Rumors*.

But then, the band imploded in 2012, losing songwriter and lyricist Tim Smith. One year later, however, Midlake returns, boasting a record deal with Dave Matthews' ATO Records and tour dates with Pearl Jam. Maybe all the band needed to accelerate its momentum was a near-disaster. And still, for all the drama that surrounded the making of *Antiphon*, the album primarily lacks any. It's calm and consistent even when it's nearing recklessness, and Midlake is still not afraid to use a flute.

When anchor Smith left in late 2012, taking with him nearly two years of aborted songs, the band had been moving towards a backwoods folk direction. Acoustics were laced with a sense of mysticism, as if a *Lord of the Rings*-inspired vista loomed just around the corner. That sense of magic is still here at times—the rumble and thump of “The Old and the Young,” for instance, is a loud-soft clash of marching rhythms and moonlit guitar hues—but too often, the 10-track record emphasizes little more than collective precision.

That's not to say the band doesn't play with something to prove. The title track, after all, has Midlake repeatedly harmonizing that it's going to “fight a war.” There, references to foxholes and the presence of feedback-laced guitars abound. “Provider” picks up all sorts of obtuse notes and spellbinding chimes as its rhythm coarsely yet artfully tumbles along.

Midlake

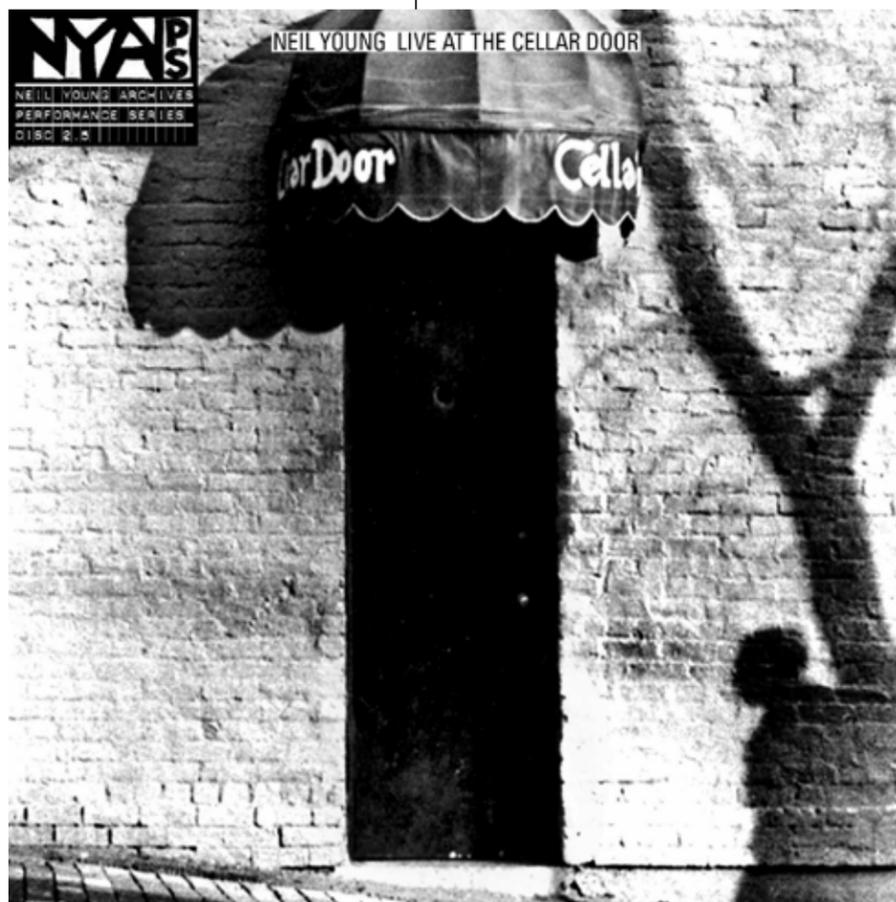
Antiphon
ATO, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

“It's Going Down” forgoes a clear-cut melody to instead plant a guitar spike in the ground, only to send it spiraling like a wooden tip-top toy around a bewitching autoharp.

But every aforementioned song is on the album's first half, and it's telling the most striking tune on *Antiphon* is “Vale,” an instrumental where a guitar torrent gives way to soothing woodwinds. It plays like an overture, giving everyone's instrument a say. That's bad news for a band that excels at vocal harmonies, and the fault doesn't necessarily lie with former lead guitarist-turned-frontman Eric Pulido. His vocals are unobtrusive, he rarely sings without accompaniment. Consider the characteristic emblematic of a new trait Midlake picks up at the album's midpoint and can't quite shake: anonymity.

—**Todd Martens**



Neil Young

Live at the Cellar Door
Reprise, 180g LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

“That’s the first time I ever did that one at the piano,” announces Neil Young, shortly after completing “Cinnamon Girl” on the 88s. The ultra-rare version of the beloved favorite is the most obvious draw on the latest volume in the eclectic icon’s erratic Archives Series. But it’s far from the only reason the 13-track set—recorded live over the course of a solo six-concert run captured at the Cellar Door in Washington, D.C. in late 1970—seems to be the equivalent of stepping into Young’s living room shortly after he released *After the Gold Rush* and became the decade’s definitive artist.

Akin to his *Live at Massey Hall* set, *Live at the Cellar Door* enchants with unfettered intimacy and naked solo performances. Given Young played a half-dozen shows during the three-day stint at the club, the only thing lacking here is more material or, at the least, different takes of songs he repeated during the residency. Clocking in at 45 minutes, the album appears to end too soon, particularly when other performances remain locked in the vaults. But as his most ardent fans know, Young is nothing if not unpredictable. His justification for why this otherwise stellar volume is confined to one LP is anyone’s guess. And pining for extra content is missing the forest for the trees.

A veritable time machine, *Live at the Cellar Door* brings listeners face-to-face with Young’s singing, piano, and guitar. His vocal timbre sounds plainly younger and still noticeably innocent, the nasal accents detectable but not as prominent as they’d become in later years. His talent on the ivories shines. Young’s fingers hit the keys as if they’re speaking their own language, one that

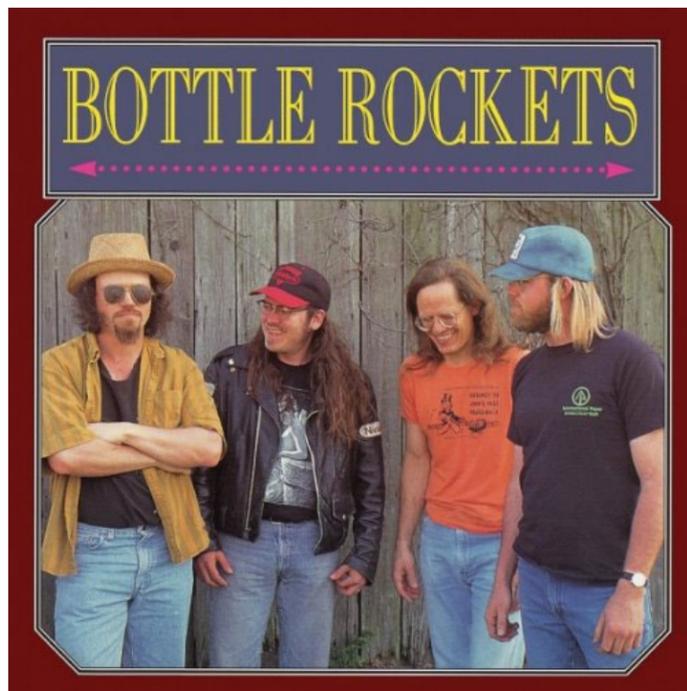
serves the poetry of the song and introduces mystery and uncertainty to then-recent compositions now recognized as standards.

On “See the Sky About to Rain,” his touch echoes the “whistle blowing through [his] brain” he lyrically describes. Young spins a gorgeous Dixieland theme that foreshadows the final verse before waltzing into the final chorus, where his digits strike with a bigger, bolder thunder that threatens to break the instrument’s hammers and strings. During a pensive “Expecting to Fly,” the Canadian native turns a bridge into a brief ballet. His pensive vocals float like vapor and convey a piercing emotion that culminates in a dramatic second stanza during which the piano’s inner cavity vibrates with trepidation.

“If I never said I loved you/Now you know I’d try,” he quivers, the song falling somewhere between an apology and a plea. Similarly, Young affords “Birds” finality at the piano, the repeated “it’s over” refrain and minimalist feel driving home a loneliness no amount of whiskey can soothe.

Young’s six-string excursions provide nearly as insightful. The then-unreleased “Bad Fog of Loneliness” unfolds as a concise fever dream; the thumb-picked “Only Love Can Break Your Heart” speaks to a near-paralyzing simplicity. Throughout “Down By the River,” his voice suggests sadness and the dead silence of disbelief while his right hand strums and thrums, the choppy motion hinting at violence and rawness.

“You’d laugh too if this is what you did for a living,” Young says before journeying through “Flying on the Ground Is Wrong,” his half-joking demeanor underlining a fading doubt and shy humor that would soon give way to supreme confidence and poker-faced seriousness. —**Bob Gendron**



Bottle Rockets

Bottle Rockets/The Brooklyn Side
Bloodshot Records, 2CD

Twenty years ago, the long-running Bottle Rockets released their self-titled debut and followed it a year later with *The Brooklyn Side*. Both albums are smart manifestos of the emergent alt-country movement. Bloodshot Records has reissued both of these long out-of-print gems in a deluxe two-CD package with bonus tracks.

Seldom has time-capsule material sounded so fresh. Revisiting the early work of these scruffy sons of Festus, Missouri—Brian Henneman, Tom Parr, Tom V. Ray, and Mark Ortmann—proves revelatory. With their mix of raw full-throttle country, punk attitude, and conscientious southern rock, this would be bold, strong material in any era. Like that of the Replacements, the Bottle Rockets' sophisticated songcraft emerges from under a raggedy veneer.

"Early In the Morning" rockets out of the gate with double-time punkish gusto and shouted vocals. Coming on like an aggressive auctioneer, there's power in frontman Henneman's hard, articulated twang on "Gas Girl." For all his punk brio, Henneman has a firm grip on the classic country love song. He plays a hilarious hilljack suitor on "Every Kinda Everything," a finely realized piece of intricate wordplay. But love is not always treated as a goof. The hindsight cheating song "Got What I Wanted" teems with palpable regret.

Henneman is extremely funny, but he also throws down in a deeply serious way. The band comes on like a gnarlier Lynyrd Skynyrd with a sharp social conscience on "Wave That Flag." Henneman's voice is sharp and hard: "You can whistle 'Dixie' all day long/If the tables turned/Wouldn't ya hate that song?" The gently strummed "Kerosene" tells the story of a tragic trailer fire and is no less searing in its message. These two songs are not just classics of the alt-country movement, but of modern country, period.

The Brooklyn Side extends all the triumphant promise of the group's debut. Henneman and crew are complex, compassionate observers of lives lived on the fringe, most prominently in the rustic "Welfare Music" and painfully humorous "1000 Dollar Car." The latter tale is a sly, scathing indictment of marginalized American life: "A thousand-dollar car ain't even gonna roll/Until you put at least another thousand in the hole/Sink your money in it and there you are/The owner of a two-thousand dollar thousand-dollar car."

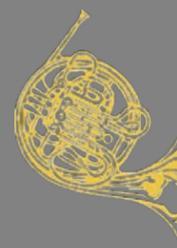
Timely as ever, the Bottle Rockets' early output remains shockingly timeless. A ragged-but-true heart never goes out of style. —**Chrissie Dickinson**

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When I was a freshman at Ohio University in the late 90s, upperclassmen would occasionally talk about Athens, Ohio being a hotbed of occult activity. Over the course of my year there, I heard whispers suggesting five city graveyards matched up to the five points of a pentagram. Rumors had it that Satanists regularly held moonlight rituals on the outskirts of town.

Then there was the presence of the Ridges, an abandoned mental hospital that looked like the setting for virtually every horror film ever made. (The complex, which opened in 1868, was littered with long-forgotten psychiatric equipment; the wall of one holding cell was painted with an elaborate mural marked with the words “Let the sun shine through.”) Still, the biggest argument for the small Ohio town being the center of all things evil might be the existence of Athens’ own Skeletonwitch, which recently released its fifth album, the mostly excellent *Serpents Unleashed*.

As always, the band sounds out of control and yet in complete command of its surroundings, like X-Men’s Storm controlling a massive hurricane. “Beneath Dead Leaves,” for one, is downright primal, piling on lead singer Chance Garnette’s demonic growl, slicing metal riffs, and drums that mimic a herd of Clydesdales stampeding through a slaughterhouse. “This Evil Embrace” is practically nuanced by comparison, swinging from torrential downpours of crunching metal noise to downright melodic passages courtesy of dual guitarists Nate Garnette and Scott Hedrick.

On past albums, the band had a Metallica-like tendency to ignore the low end. But producer (and Converge guitarist) Kurt Ballou beefs up the crew’s sound here, helping tracks like “Born of the Light That Does Not Shine” hit like musical dark matter. In other words, these tunes are seriously heavy.

“Blade on the Flesh, Blood on My Hands” lives up to its hyper-violent title. Garnette and Hedrick wield their instruments like bloodied battle axes, and Chance Garnette howls in a voice designed to manufacture nightmares in small children. If Pixar ever animates a film about death, we’ve got its Reaper right here. On “Unending, Everliving,” the frontman continues his onslaught, commanding someone “open the gates of hell” as the music thunders forward like a horde of fork-tongued, fire-breathing beasts. Best of all is “I Am of Death (Hell Has Arrived),” a punishing behemoth that sounds like the soundtrack Satan might play when he returns to the surface and begins leveling cities, countries, and continents. One imagines, however, he’ll spare Athens his wrath. —**Andy Downing**



Skeletonwitch

Serpents Unleashed
Prosthetic, 2LP or CD

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2013 Christmas Music Wrap-Up

By Todd Martens

It's that time of year again, when veteran musicians seek a little career bump by going Christmas. Results are sometimes mixed, but Tone won't let you put on a holiday record that's going to drive away the party guests. Unless, of course, that's your desired intention. Here's a look at some of the season's new Christmas music.



Bad Religion
Christmas Songs
 Epitaph, LP or CD



©Photo by Myriam Santos

The overriding feel of these eight punk rock takes on holiday tunes such as “O Come All Ye Faithful” and “Little Drummer Boy” is irony, and therefore, one can’t help but wish Bad Religion took the project more seriously. After all, why should Susan Boyle have all the Christmas song fun? Surprisingly, Bad Religion largely focuses on non-secular offerings. The group turns “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen” into a minute-and-a-half call-and-response for the mosh pit and then finds a place to decorate “What Child is This?” with an alarm-bell guitar solo. Even as a novelty, there is, however, a glaring missed opportunity: Why not cover the Ramones’ “Merry Christmas (I Don’t Wanna Fight)”?

We all agree “White Christmas” is a classic, and it’s nice that Bad Religion quotes the Ramones’ “I Wanna Be Sedated” in its opening riff, but the chance to treat a punk tune as a holiday standard is wasted.

Let the following statement always be true: As long as the public must endure reality-singing competitions, the winning contestants must record holiday records. If one is going to over-sing on highly polished old-fashioned arrangements, well then, the holidays might as well be the cause. But chances are not good that many such vocalists will have the good taste of Kelly Clarkson and producer Greg Kurstin, a team that, despite the presence of five originals, resists the temptation to modernize things. These are holiday songs in as classical of a mode as possible, many with subtle touches that allow them to easily slip into any Christmas music rotation. Clarkson brings “Blue Christmas” back to its country roots, nicely handles the jazzy-cool inflections of “Baby, it’s Cold Outside,” and remakes “Please Come Home for Christmas (Bells Will Be Ringing)” into a rather enjoyable symphonic R&B cut. The original ballad “Just for Now” is the one overwrought stinker, but the Tinkerbell-meets-Ronettes-vibe of “Underneath the Tree” is all cheer.



Kelly Clarkson
Wrapped in Red
RCA, CD

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Nick Lowe

Quality Street: A Seasonal Selection For All the Family
Yep Roc, LP or CD

The one-time Brit-pop hitmaker has largely aged gracefully, and the third decade of his career has seen Nick Lowe deliver sincerity with just a dash of wryness. It's not always clear what side wins out on his first-ever Christmas record, especially when Lowe treats "Silent Night" as if it were written for a New Orleans street parade. Organs brim, horns get frisky, and Lowe steps lightly, even tossing in some Western guitar licks. Not all is so eccentric, although the finger-snapping lounge pop of Ron Sexmith's "Hooves on the Roof" comes close. Still, much of this collection is laced with gentle takes on Americana, from the rockabilly gospel of "Children Go Where I Send Them" to the Palm Beach topicality of the approachably goofy original "Christmas at the Airport." Credit Lowe for digging deep, too, resurrecting Boudleaux Bryant's lovely slow dance "Christmas Can't Be Far Away" as well as the heart-achingly nostalgic "Old Toy Trains," a little-known tune associated with Glen Campbell.

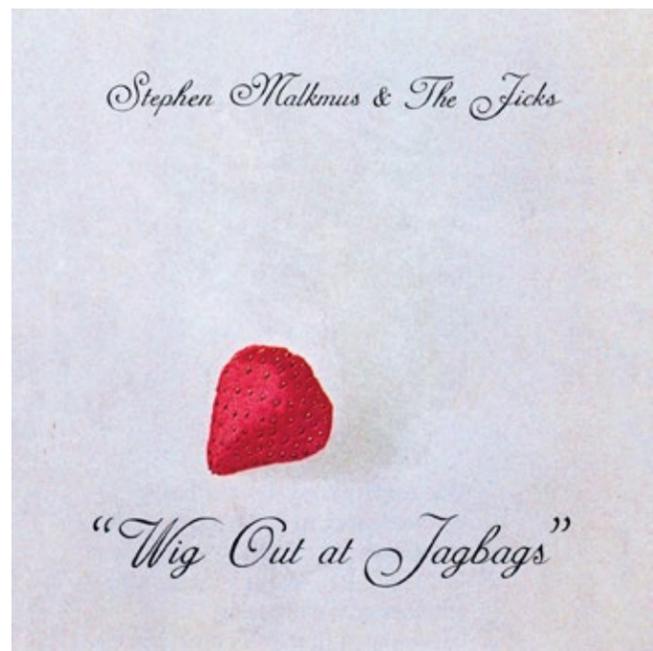




Mary J. Blige
A Mary Christmas
 Verve, CD

Give Mary J. Blige credit. Despite the fact pop producer/composer David Foster gives the album the kind of gloss that makes it sound as if the R&B star is trapped in the worst Home Shopping Network segment ever aired, the stern vocalist doesn't let the twinkles get her down. Sure, the band-member callouts in "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer" are a little much, but she brings a stand-up-and-take-notice drama to "Mary, Did You Know," transforming a song of wonder into one of a mother's anguish. She also gives "Little Drummer Boy" an impassioned, tale-of-the-underdog reading. "My Favorite Things" sounds a little too sinister, but Blige is in her comfort zone on the Donny Hathaway soul number "This Christmas" while collaborations with Barbra Streisand and Chris Botti on "When You Wish Upon a Star" are surprisingly swinging. ●





Stephen Malkmus & the Jicks

Wig Out at Jagbags
Matador Records, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

One little reunion has done a lot of good for Stephen Malkmus. After the architect of 90s indie-rock champions Pavement got the band back together for a pat-on-the-back tour in 2010, his solo work in the Jicks has felt sharper, more melodic, and as focused as songs built out of fragments possibly can be. A piano waltz one minute, a prickly rumbling bass rocker the next, and a wailing classic-rock guitar solo bombed in from 1974 generally fall all over the place.

©Photo by Leah Nash



That's what, largely speaking, Malkmus fans have come to expect. His is actually a carefully orchestrated approach to songwriting that comes off as casual, where a clever turn of the phrase results in a flip of the musical script.

Even so, *Wig Out at Jagbags* offers welcome twists on the formula that should please—and poke a little fun at—the most nostalgic of Pavement fans. Throughout, the album brims with goofy, grown-up bile. “This one’s for you, grandaaaaads,” someone shouts at the start of “Rumble at the Rainbo,” a sweet little pop-punk ditty with bright keyboards and cooing background vocals about rocking out in the “punk rock tomb” of the reunion circuit. It’s good for a few laughs (“the new material, just cowboy boots”) and reflective of a record that ages with self-deprecation.

“We grew up listening to music from the best decade ever,” Malkmus sings during the ringing guitar-pop of “Lariat.” Think he is serious? The title of the song is a rope built for hanging. “Houston Hades” goes even further to shake up any comforts. A guitar ruckus gives way to a sing-along jaunt, with skipping “do, do, dos” carrying

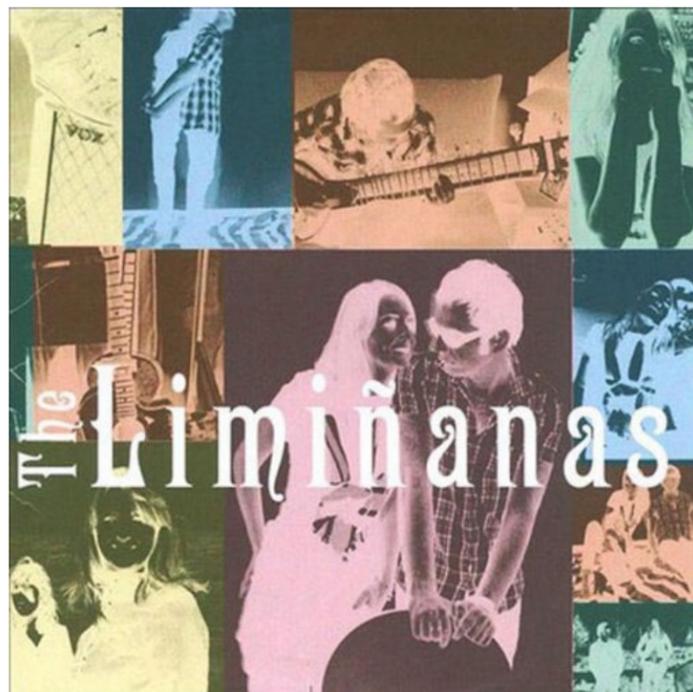
an anthem that may or may not be a rant against an entire generation procreating.

The tone isn’t completely venomous. These are songs built for a laugh, where the teenagers are “surreal,” the cultural references are to Eminem and Condoleezza Rice, and the occasional lyric sports Weezer-like corniness (see the use of “homies”). There are moments of dour reflection—the not-getting-younger winsomeness of “The Janitor Revealed”—and there are moments of bluesy, upper-class workouts (“Cinnamon and Lesbians”).

But what to make of “Chartjunk”? It is, perhaps, the catchiest song here, with a not-so-subtle nod to Billy Joel’s “It’s Still Rock and Roll to Me” and a horn section that seems to be time-traveling from an era of wood-paneled decor. It’s also Malkmus at his most forceful.

“I don’t need your winbag wisdom,” he stomps, as if he’s a general going to battle against a midlife crisis. *Wig Out at Jagbags* has a blast at fighting it off.

—Todd Martens



The Liminanas
Costa Blanca
 Trouble In Mind, LP or CD
 ● Purchase LP from Music Direct

The Liminanas emerged in 2010, billing themselves as “new French pop music for the next millennium”—an odd disclaimer for a band so steeped in 1960s retro-cool.

On its third album, *Costa Blanca*, the husband-wife duo continues to churn out hypnotic, vaguely psychedelic rock that conjures images of Serge Gainsbourg sharing a joint with the Velvet Underground in a dimly lit, velvet-appointed lounge. Opener “Je me souviens comme si j’y étais,” which translates as “I remember as if I were there,” sets an evocative tone, Lio Liminana whispering incantations atop a droning sitar, prowling bass line, and jangly guitar that could have been airlifted from a *Nuggets*-era recording.

Both Lio and wife Marie take a leisurely approach to vocals, and songs like “My Black Sabbath” (a moody tune far removed from the Ozzy-fronted crew) sound like they were laid to tape in the wee hours of the morning without causing the slightest ripple in nighttime stillness.

While the music often evokes the 60s, the Liminanas don’t come on like retro fetishists. “Votre côté yéyé m’emmerde,” for one, finds the two rattling off a litany of celebrities, songs, and icons (John Belushi, Les Rolling Stones, “Louie Louie,” and so on). It could have passed as an homage if the exaggerated eye-roll of a title didn’t essentially translate to “fuck them.” Although the group undoubtedly takes inspiration from the past, it’s clearly in no way indebted to it.

Elsewhere, the pair turns out droning cuts that come on like lost tracks from VU’s *White Light/White Heat* (the icily repetitive “Cold Was the Ground”), stomp through rickety garage nuggets (“BB”), and ease into sophisticated instrumentals like the organ-driven “Alicante,” a sleek tune that could double as new theme music for fictitious French agent Hubert Bonnisseur de La Bath of the OSS 117 spy series.

Weaker moments occur when the duo invites outsiders, breaking up the album’s hard-won intimacy. Francesca Cusimano takes the lead on “Votre côté yéyé m’emmerde,” for example, and her severe vocals emerge akin to sharp corners on an album largely constructed of fuzzed-out edges. Better are numbers such as the gently ambling “La mélancolie,” where the couple allows its voices to mingle and drift atop the track. It’s gorgeous stuff, and quite possibly the closest thing to time travel most will experience in this lifetime. —**Andy Downing**



Oh ... I Wasn't Supposed To Eat Them For Lunch?



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How to “train” your DragonFly



Lydia Loveless gained plenty of notice with her 2011 song “Steve Earle,” about a stalker-like fan that fancied himself a version of the real-life Americana artist. The tune encapsulates much of what makes Loveless such a fresh voice. She’s a belter with an idiosyncratic perspective, independent spirit, and a good chunk of punkish chutzpah.

Her third full-length release, *Somewhere Else*, solidifies her position as one of the most promising progressive country newcomers. Loveless, a twenty-something singer-songwriter from Ohio, counts some of the strong female roots artists of the past 30 years as her main musical antecedents.

She would have fit snugly in the west coast cowpunk scene of the late 70s and early 80s, and equally well in the alt-country scene of the early 90s. At times she echoes the clarion call of Lone Justice’s Maria McKee. During others, her melodic but rough-around-the-edges production recalls Lucinda Williams’ breakthrough sound of 1988. But most of all, Loveless seems to take

her most overt cues from an artist of more recent vintage—namely, Neko Case in her early country-rock incarnation. Loveless’ phrasing is frequently so reminiscent of Case’s that she’s nearly a vocal doppelganger for the acclaimed singer.

It’s churlish, however, to criticize Loveless for the similarity, particularly given the strength and cutting beauty of her pipes—and the overall

appeal of this release. Song after song is built on infectious strumming and electric riffs. Her voice is center stage, confidently curving around jangly guitars and punchy drums.

While Loveless’ lyrics are often brash and unexpected, they are also occasionally disjointed. Her words swerve between world-weary observations and the wildly uneven musings of a teenager. But

even when the lyricism is clumsy, she sprinkles songs with shrew details. Her narrators are often lovelorn, self-flagellating, and sometimes prone to drunk dialing.

On “Really Wanna See You Again,” the protagonist does “some blow,” calls her now-married ex-boyfriend, and consults a Magic 8 Ball for advice. During “Hurts So Bad,” a woman clings to a

dysfunctional relationship, smokes cigarettes, and stares at the wall “Like it’s a TV/Just like I did when I was 17.” Loveless genuinely shines as a songwriter at such moments, and akin to the great majority of *Somewhere Else*, these occasions reflect the enormous promise and continued growth of an artist deserving of everyone’s attention.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**



©Photo by Paula Masters Travis



Lydia Loveless

Somewhere Else
Bloodshot Records, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct



Warpaint

Warpaint

Rough Trade Records, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

There's only one true moment of clarity on Warpaint's self-titled second album, and it's an apology. A few seconds into the record—after listeners hear a guitar bellow and a rhythmic stutter—the sound of what appears to be vocalist/guitarist Emily Kokal saying sorry interrupts the slowly enveloping melodic churn. It's the first and last intrusion of the real world—a final moment of levity, perhaps—before the one conjured by this Los Angeles quartet gets slowly, purposefully forged.

Like running in water, the members of Warpaint are fond of saying of the band's sound. The phrase implies a level of force as well as a bit of helplessness, and it's a line Warpaint walks on the follow-up to its 2010 debut, *The Fool*. Songs are heavy, but not necessarily hard, and the mood, with one or two rather groovy exceptions, is slow but not necessarily languid. "Don't you battle, we'll kill you," the group harmonizes late in the set. Yet Warpaint isn't out to force a surrender so much as to hypnotize.

There's an immediate difference between *The Fool* and this release: structure. The former possesses more of what can be considered songs, at least in the traditional sense. Clear guitar lines unfold on fare such as "Undertow," and strumming is even audible on a track such as "Baby." The well-connected band works here with Flood and Nigel Godrich, studio technicians whose resumes include The Jesus and Mary Chain and Radiohead (no doubt spiritual advisers if not direct influences). This time out, Warpaint goes after something more abstract, resulting in a patient, ambitious, and rewarding listen.



It is, as the band has long desired, fluid. Where one song begins and ends isn't always quite clear, and the group crafts an experience that ever so slightly shifts and churns. If a song such as "Love is to Die" didn't feature drummer Stella Mozgawa pounding it to a finish near the five-minute mark, it's quite possible it'd still be playing as vocals shadow one another, guitars drip as if from a faucet, and the hook seems fashioned out of a distress call.

Throughout, the band takes a spherical approach to song-

writing. "Teese" swarms around Jenny Lee Lindberg's casually trotting bass and Kokal's choral-like vocals. On "Go In," Mozgawa tip-taps around her drum kit in jazzy fashion while the underlying push-and-pull of the song feels fashioned from a tuba. "Drive" boasts more urgency, courtesy of bubbling guitar notes that warmly and ornately blossom around the group's soothing harmonizing.

Warpaint's lyrical approach is also one increasingly built around dream-like moments. The determined parent stand-

ing amid garden imagery in the piano heartbreaker "Son," the world as colors and the sharp zigzag guitars of "Biggie," and the promise to grow up in a "starry state" in the sultry "Feeling Alright." Screams, hollers, and panting decorate the darkly manic dance of "Disco / Very," where Kokal introduces us to her "friend with a melody," only to seconds later tell us she's "like cyanide."

If it's a warning to stay away, even Warpaint at its most conceptual doesn't heed its own advice. —**Todd Martens**



Hospitality

Trouble

Merge Records, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

When a rock band goes looking for poeticism in an afternoon spent fishing, there's cause for skepticism.

Staring into a vast watery expanse for hours on end can arouse the inner Walt Whitman in even the most hip of young rockers, but New York trio Hospitality emerges from the day trip largely unscathed. The creepy-crawling rhythms in verses and hefty synthesizer-guitar crests in a chorus help, of course. Yet there are still some hints at "what does it all mean" pondering in "Nightingale," the first track on the group's second album. Transcending the self-seriousness of the situation is no-nonsense vocalist and lead songwriter Amber Papini, who is most intrigued by life's smaller moments.

That is, the nostalgic memory of reeling in a catch on "Nightingale," the bittersweet ritual of getting dolled up to go looking for love on the demure "Going Out," the dread of sitting on a plane after saying goodbye to someone dear on the stop-and-start pop-rock raver "I Miss Your Bones," and the failure to receive the recognition one deserves for folding someone's laundry on the cozily paced "It's Not Serious." Throughout, Hospitality accentuates its observations with small orchestral diversions such as a daydreaming flute or intimate bongos, the latter of which create the rhythm-like effect of bare feet on a hardwood floor.

These are the moments born in urban apartments, the oft-overlooked details that fill the lives of twenty- and thirty-somethings with day jobs rather than careers. When Papini sings knowingly that a perfect date won't last long, she does so amid a hopscotching bass and starlight-bright keyboards, instruments already set up for a trip and a fade. "Is this my fate?," she asks, more angry than nonplussed on "Inauguration," where a static buzz mirrors her agitation at a boy that left her watching an international news event alone.

If Hospitality's 2011 debut is more airy and polite-sounding, *Trouble* reconciles with the idea that edges of everyday life don't need to be smoothed out. "I wouldn't take for granted men who cheat or work or want a wife," sings Papini on "Last Words" where a trumpet gets obscured by warmly pulsating synths (cue Fleetwood Mac comparisons). Her line is more or less a mission statement. Those descriptions, of course, fit nearly every man. Hospitality is a reminder that the familiar doesn't mean mundane. —**Todd Martens**



Hard Working Americans

Hard Working Americans

Melvin Records/Thirty Tigers, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

Hard Working Americans is an ideal name for this no-frills, punch-the-clock crew. Singer/guitarist Todd Snider initiated the project, inviting a slew of veteran musicians to complete the lineup: Duane Trucks (Col. Bruce Hampton's School of Music), Dave Schools (Widespread Panic), Neal Casal (Chris Robinson Brotherhood), and Chad Staehly (Great American Taxi).

Despite the players' obvious jam-band pedigrees, songs here don't linger. Only a slow, searing take on Drivin' N' Cryin's "Straight to Hell" stretches beyond five minutes, and most tracks hover around the three-to-four-minute mark. Instead, the band approaches the all-covers album, which finds it taking on songs by a host of Americana- and roots-leaning acts both celebrated (Lucinda Williams, Gillian Welch) and overlooked (Hayes Carll, Bottle Rockets), with an endearingly workmanlike mentality. Indeed, it's a credit to all involved that songs are never overdressed. And it's clear the musicians came to the project with egos in check, determined to let the material speak for itself.

This blue-collar approach is further reflected in the track selection. A majority of tunes touch on harsh economic realities facing the working class, political ineptitude, and the ever-widening chasm between the haves and the have-nots. Considering all the songs were written in the last decade, it's fair to say these bleak modern times have in the very least inspired some beautiful music.

A handful of cuts hew close to the way the originals sound. The band slightly dials back on the stompin' and hollerin' of Hayes Carll's "Stomp and Holler," but the more straightforward rock reading doesn't stray far from the native Texan's twangier take. Other songs, however, are decked out in entirely new garb. The players transform Randy Newman's "Mr. President, Have Pity on the Working Man" into a bluesy, boozy sing-along and strip Gillian Welch's "Wrecking Ball" down to the studs to better highlight the devastation in her words.

Elsewhere, Kieran Kane's "The Mountain Song" could pass for precisely that, with the band conjuring images of the West Virginia foothills by layering the track with lush vocal harmonies, windswept piano, and insistent banjo. A bluesy take on Will Kimbrough and Tommy Womack's "I Don't Have a Gun," in turn, shows the kind of restraint most hope to see in the staunchest Second Amendment defenders, simmering for a cool four minutes without once boiling over.

Then there's a harrowing take on Frankie Miller's "Blackland Farmer," a tune nearly as tough as its beaten-back narrator, a hardened farmer that still manages to find some glory in a hard day's work, much like the grizzled gang laying down these unfussy tunes. —**Andy Downing**

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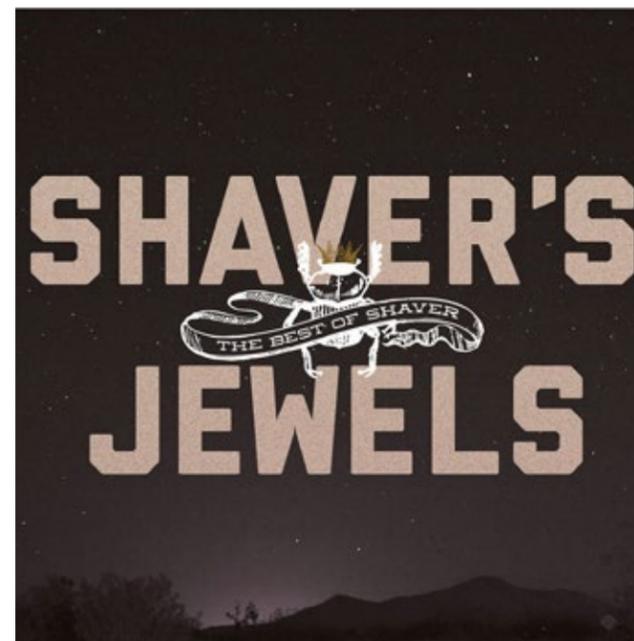
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Shaver

Shaver's Jewels (The Best of Shaver)
New West Records, CD

When it comes to songwriters, Texas does not grow them small. There's a long list of big talent, including Cindy Walker, Willie Nelson, Townes Van Zandt, Butch Hancock, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, and Rodney Crowell. It's no small feat that Billy Joe Shaver resides near the top of this stellar list.

In the ranks of the outlaw elites, Billy Joe, now 74, is a songwriter's songwriter. The career has been small-ish, the talent outsized, the peer reverence very real. Waylon Jennings recorded nearly an entire album of his material. His songs have also been covered by the likes of Nelson and Kris Kristofferson.

From 1993 to 2000, Billy Joe teamed with his guitar-ace son Eddy while making five albums in the band known as Shaver. *Shaver's Jewels (The Best of Shaver)* cherry-picks 17 tracks from that era in which Billy Joe is the rough-hewn poet laureate at the mic while Eddy is the virtuosic country-rock version of Eddie Van Halen. They deliver melancholy acoustic ballads and full-tilt electric rave-ups. A number of cuts are magnificent. They are also heart-breaking. Eddy died of a heroin overdose in 2000 at the age of 38. This compilation stands as a reminder of a terrific talent cut short and the fruitful artistic partnership he forged with his father.

Billy Joe's best songwriting tackles his complicated past with a mesh of rural vernacular, confession, humor, and spiritual insight. He's a roadhouse firebrand, a rueful sinner that regrets his failures as a husband and father, a badass that cries, an aging son that yearns for long-gone ghosts. As Eddy unleashes blistering machine-gun riffs on the kick-ass country-rocker "Georgia On a Fast Train," Billy Joe's hardscrabble lyrics tumble out in a torrent: "I just thought I'd mention/My grandma's old-age pension/Is the reason why I'm standing here today."

Unfortunately, not everything here lives up to Billy Joe's gold standard. A stronger curatorial hand would have edited out the throwaway joke "Leavin' Amarillo." The father-son duet "Blood Is Thicker Than Water" addresses old angers but feels subpar and crudely drawn.

Thankfully, such sour notes are few, with the nostalgic ode "Tramp On Your Street" and a capella prayer "Son of Calvary" making up for any missteps. On "Live Forever," Eddy gently picks guitar while Billy Joe stretches into a poetic dream about eternal life. "I will always be around/Just like the songs I leave behind me," he sings in a muted, parched twang.

He's right. The song, along with the most memorable cuts collected here, comprise a timeless musical legacy. —**Chrissie Dickinson**



Photo courtesy of Atlantic

Donny Hathaway's voice was a commanding high baritone, and even though he had almost perfect control over that instrument, he used it to express deep vulnerability. While his work may not receive the same amount of crossover acclaim as some of his R&B contemporaries, Stevie Wonder, Curtis Mayfield, and Aretha Franklin have praised his brilliance as a composer, producer, and keyboardist. So have artists as diverse as Amy Winehouse and Herbie Hancock.

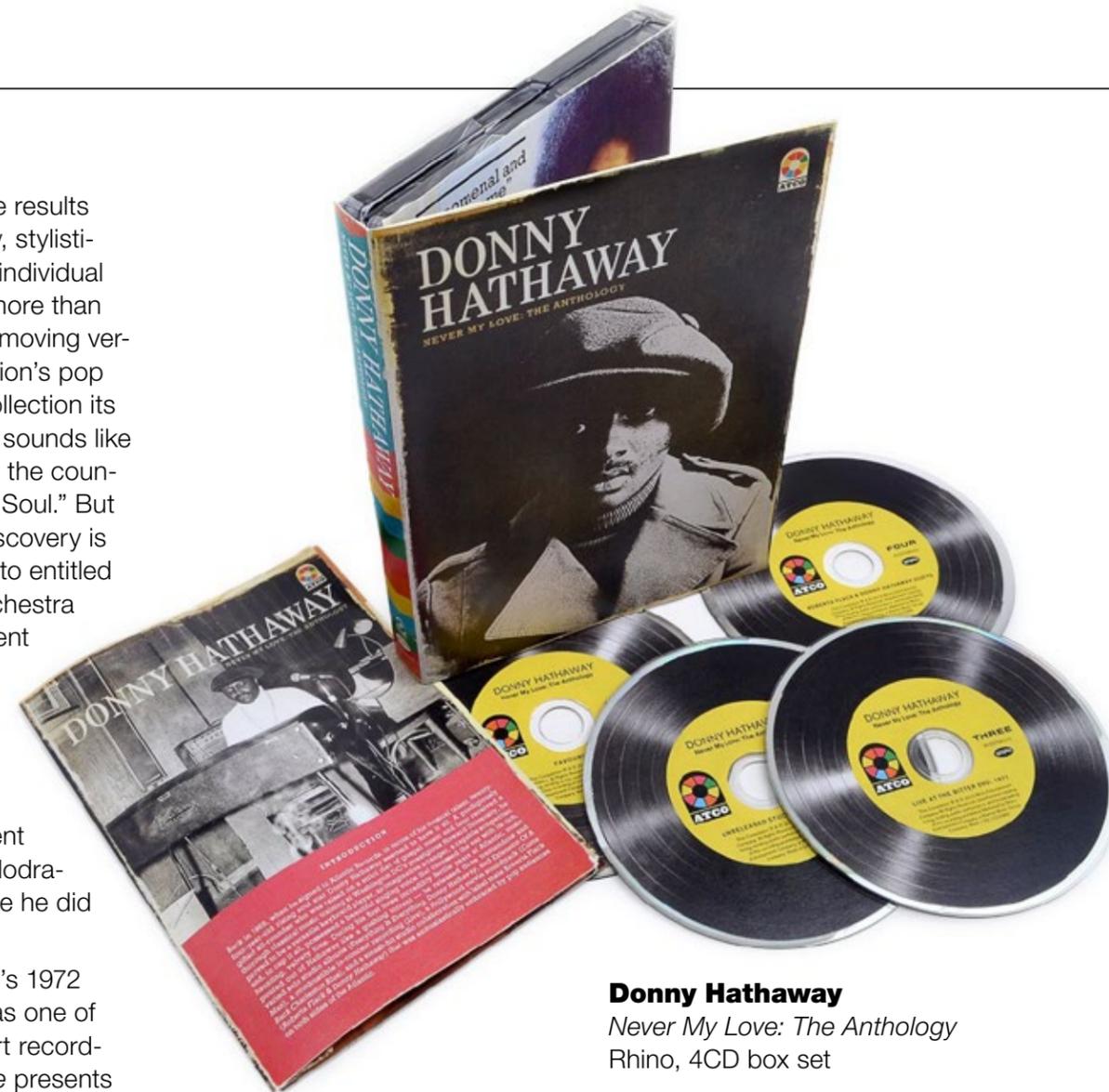
Had just Hathaway's scant recordings been collected in one box, it would have been a fine tribute. But the four-disc *Never My Love: The Anthology* goes further. It contains 13 recently unearthed studio tracks and an unreleased concert from 1971. A disc containing his more familiar songs presents them in acoustically superior mono mixes and singles' versions. The contents make this assemblage essential, even for fans that own all of his previous albums.

Hathaway's 1969 duets with June Conquest (songs he co-wrote with Mayfield) open the set as the first disc highlights his stunning creative streak when he was in his mid 20s. Written with Leroy Hutson, Hathaway's "The Ghetto" is a soul-jazz mini-epic built up from the bass line. His "This Christmas" from 1970 remains the ultimate R&B seasonal anthem. Constant December radio airplay has not dampened its warmth. While Hathaway wasn't the first to perform "A Song For You" and "Giving Up," his soaring gospel-trained voice still owns them.

The second disc, comprised of Hathaway's unreleased studio recordings, is fascinating, even as the reason why they've been left on the shelf remains heartbreaking. Crippling depression prevented the singer from completing albums throughout much of

the 1970s. While the results are, understandably, stylistically scattered, the individual performances are more than solid. He delivers a moving version of the Association's pop hit that gives this collection its title. Hathaway also sounds like he's having fun with the country-tinged "A Lot Of Soul." But the most striking discovery is a 20-minute concerto entitled "ZYXYGY." A full orchestra roars through different contrasting movements that glide between surprising key changes. As a conductor, Hathaway sounds confident enough to keep melodrama in check, just like he did as a singer.

While Hathaway's 1972 *Live* album stands as one of the key R&B concert recordings, *Never My Love* presents an alternate version. *Live* was pieced together from concerts that Hathaway and his group performed at the Troubadour in Los Angeles and Bitter End in New York during the summer and fall of 1971. This set presents other takes from the Bitter End, some of which are performed at a more moderate tempo. Slower pacing seems to highlight Hathaway's electric piano improvisations on his cover of Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On." His mournful tone adds a new dimension to Gary McFarland's "Sack Full Of Dreams" (not included on *Live*).



Donny Hathaway
Never My Love: The Anthology
Rhino, 4CD box set

And Hathaway's band sounds just as strong here. Guitarist Cornell Dupree answers the leader's vocal lines with the kind of bluesy fills he delivered on Franklin's *Amazing Grace* a few months later. Drummer Fred White and percussionist Earl DeRouen lock down the polyrhythms while Willie Weeks' solos redefine the bassist's role in R&B.

Of course, Hathaway was also a soul traditionalist, especially in his popular duets with Roberta Flack, which fill

the fourth disc. Their "Be Real Black For Me" is a plea; lesser singers would've turned it into a demand. Charles Waring's excellent liner notes include Flack's recent recollections of her reunion with Hathaway to record what became his final tracks. After their session on January 13, 1979, he fell to his death from a New York hotel room at age 33. *Never My Love* suggests his potential may have been just beginning.

—**Aaron Cohen**



Purple Snow: Forecasting the Minneapolis Sound

Numero Group, 4LP box set or 2CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

Chicago reissue house Numero Group seeks to unravel more of the connection. The 32-track compilation *Purple Snow: Forecasting the Minneapolis Sound* starts a few paces back from when Prince became a cultural force and looks at what happened with Minneapolis funk and R&B before, during, and just after Prince began starring in Hollywood films. Equally messy, sexy, loose, and groovy, the anthology celebrates a community—one that even at its most amateur is still beautifully freaky and weird.

Little-known gems abound, such as the Prophets of Peace's "Get it On" during which it sounds as if the whole town is invited to share in elastic grooves and a saxophone-inflected good time. Elsewhere, Quiet Storm's "Can You Deal With It" is minimalist guitar rap, a song that feels like an early blueprint even if its tone is that of a basement recording. Hardly a song goes by without some intergalactic keyboard work, be it squiggly, springy

A musical revolution doesn't happen in a vacuum, even when artist at its center is Prince. Like the Beatles and Liverpool or Nirvana and Seattle, Prince and Minneapolis constitute one of the few artist/city relationships where sound and location are intertwined. Paisley Park, First Avenue, Calhoun Square: Prince's catalog offers an aural tour of the city and its surroundings. And since the release of *Purple Rain* in 1984, a very distinct Prince mix of R&B, funk, and rock n' roll has defined the Minneapolis sound.

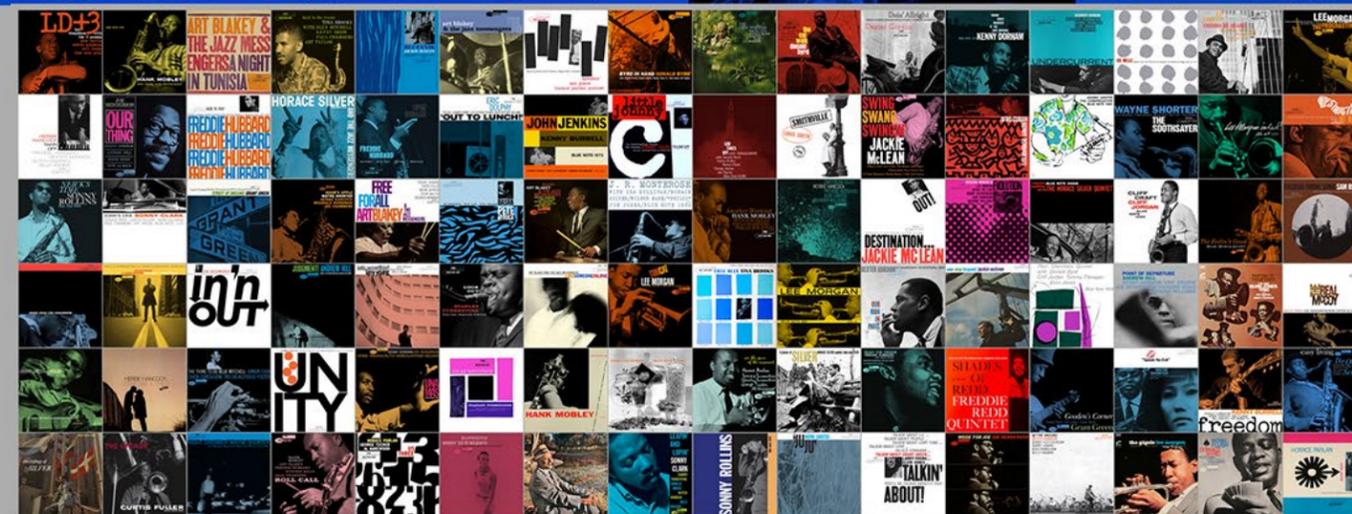
sounds of The Girls' "I've Got My Eyes on You" or the hypnotizing, repetitive alarms of the Styfle Band's "If You Love Me."

The enthusiasts at Numero Group are musical archeologists of the highest caliber (a 144-page hardbound book is included in the vinyl set), and many moments on *Purple Snow* show the early strands that would define numerous hits throughout the 80s—either from the Purple One himself or one of his star-making peers, such as songwriters Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis.

"Somebody Said," from a teenaged Andre Cymone, a one-time Prince collaborator, illustrates early invasions of synthpop on the scene while tracks from Flyte Time and Mind & Matter boast credits from Jam and Lewis.

Sure, a before-they-were famous curiosity is at play, but it's funk balladry and it swings. While it may be impossible to re-define a myth, Numero Group provides plenty of worthwhile music was simmering outside the Paisley Park gates. —**Todd Martens**

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ve



BLUE NOTE The Definitive 45 rpm Reissue Series
You listen, you look, you're there...



TONE MUSIC EDITOR BOB GENDRON'S TOP ROCK AND POP ALBUMS OF 2013

It's that time of year when music critics of every stripe pick what they consider the best records of the past 12 months. At *TONE*, we're no different. Here are the 25 studio albums from 2013 that Music Editor Bob Gendron feels you should hear again and again—and five big-name releases you should avoid.

25. Mark Lanegan *Imitations*
24. Pistol Annies *Annie Up*
23. Bad Sports *Bras*
22. David Bowie *The Next Day*
21. Savages *Silence Yourself*
20. Sky Ferreira *Night Time, My Time*
19. Rhye *Woman*
18. Neko Case *The Worse Things...*
17. Superchunk *I Hate Music*
16. Windhand *Soma*
15. Trombone Shorty *Say That to Say This*
14. Disclosure *Settle*
13. Kurt Vile *Wakin' on a Pretty Daze*
12. Mudhoney *Vanishing Point*
11. Chance the Rapper *Acid Rap*
10. Blood Orange *Cupid Deluxe*
9. Waxahatchee *Cerulean Salt*
8. Bombino *Nomad*
7. Richard Thompson *Electric*
6. Queens of the Stone Age *...Like Clockwork*
5. Daft Punk *Random Access Memories*
4. Mikal Cronin *MCII*
3. Kacey Musgraves *Same Trailer, Different Park*
2. Arctic Monkeys *AM*
1. Jason Isbell *Southeastern*

Year's Biggest Disappointments:

Flaming Lips *The Terror*
 Lady Gaga *Artpop*
 M.I.A. *Matangi*
 Nine Inch Nails *Hesitation Marks*
 Pearl Jam *Lightning Bolt*

2013

AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS
IN REVIEW

Déjà vu? You could say that. As they were years ago with the rollout of SACD and DVD-A, audiophiles were again introduced to new formats in 2013. Pure Audio Blu-ray joined several existing and new high-resolution streaming options in the race to see which could capture the lion's share of the market at a time when sonics-oriented technology and playback options keep getting better.

Ironically, a much older option, the vinyl record, seemingly continues to be the format du jour. In the interests of remaining politically correct, we won't name names, but several labels and services appear intent on forcing listeners to buy the same favorite record for the umpteenth time in their life. Others are more honest and dependable. Mobile Fidelity remains a paragon of extraordinary sonics, packaging, and production. Pulling no punches, the label walks its talk, and refuses to fib about its source material for the sake of profit. (Hence, the distinguishing nature between its Original Master Recording and Silver Label releases.) We wish other imprints would follow suit.

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.



AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS

By Jeff Dorgay

Sponsored by Music Direct

Lynyrd Skynyrd built the genre of Southern Rock, brick by brick, with clever songwriting, badass lead guitar playing (with three lead guitarists), and sheer grit. Legendary producer Al Kooper created a masterpiece here, and it finally gets the treatment it deserves.



Lynyrd Skynyrd

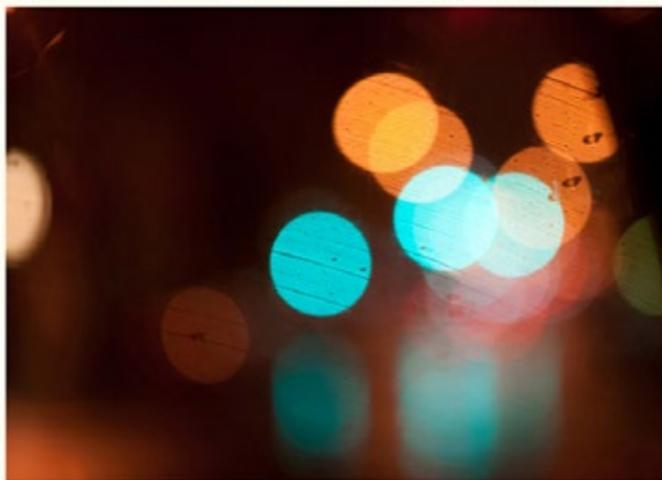
Pronounced Leh-Nerd Skin-Nerd
Mobile Fidelity, 180g LP

The gold band at the top of the record jacket, marked “Original Master Recording,” means the original master tape was used for the reissue. It only takes a cursory listen to an early MCA pressing, which sounds like a CD in comparison, to hear the increase in sound quality on this MoFi edition. Much like early Van Halen records, there is almost a non-existent bass line in the original, now replaced by a big, fat sound that anchors the rest of the rhythm section and provides a proper foundation. And yes, there’s more cowbell too.

It might have been easier to dismiss this band if listening to the poorer original, but with so many sonic treats liberated from the mix, it’s great fun finding all the tidbits you’ve never heard over the years. The bongos in “Gimme Three Steps” are but one example. The overall sound is so much more clean and dynamic, you just can’t turn this one up too loud. You haven’t lived until you hear the reverb-laden guitars on “Freebird” the way they were intended to be heard.

Get out your lighter and boogie. Do it.

meshell ndegeocello #10
pour une âme souveraine
 a dedication to nina simone

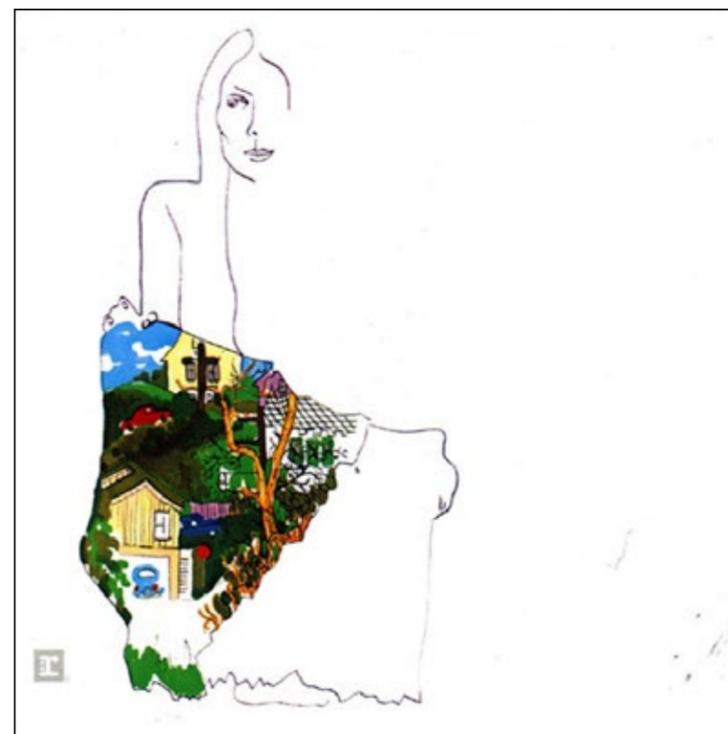


Meshell Ndegeocello
*Pour Une Ame Souveraine—
 A Tribute to Nina Simone*
 Naïve Records, 2LP

Meshell Ndegeocello's latest record pays homage to Nina Simone in a rather obtuse but nonetheless excellent way. Where Simone was always a fusion between jazz and blues, Ndegeocello explores a wide range of styles here. There's plenty of R&B, funk, soul, and gospel added to the soufflé.

Upon hearing the delicate rendition of the opening "Please Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood," it's tough to believe this is the same woman that wrote "If That's Your Boyfriend, He Wasn't Last Night." Female collaborators including Toshi Reagon, Valerie June, and Sinead O'Connor all add their voice to Ndegeocello's in tribute. The record is consistently good throughout, and "Nobody's Fault But Mine" is a standout. Ndegeocello exercises excellent taste in the company she keeps.

Sonically, the vinyl is much better than the CD (included free with the 2LP set) in every way, yet it the analog version sounds like a 24/96 recording mastered to LP. The recording is big and spacious, with great attention paid to capturing Ndegeocello's powerful bass playing. The giveaway: a hint of crunchiness on top and slight haze to the overall presentation that tells you it's not all analog.



Joni Mitchell
Ladies of the Canyon
 HD Tracks, 24/192 download

Joni Mitchell's first two albums are relatively tame and, depending on your musical taste, maybe a bit too folksy. On *Ladies of the Canyon*, Mitchell stretches out with a wider range of semi-shrieky vocals (which toned down by her career-topping *Court and Spark*) and a taste of the jazzy riffs that would soon become abundant in her material. A platinum seller, *Ladies of the Canyon* contains two of her biggest hits, "Woodstock" and "Big Yellow Taxi."

Other than the original Reprise vinyl, this record never

received a proper audiophile remaster beyond a very average Rhino edition a few years ago. The CD from the early 80s is relatively flat, like many period discs. The only other copies available are on cassette and 3 ¾ ips reel-to-reel tape, both of which are dreadful, yet the latter often fetches as high as \$100 on eBay.

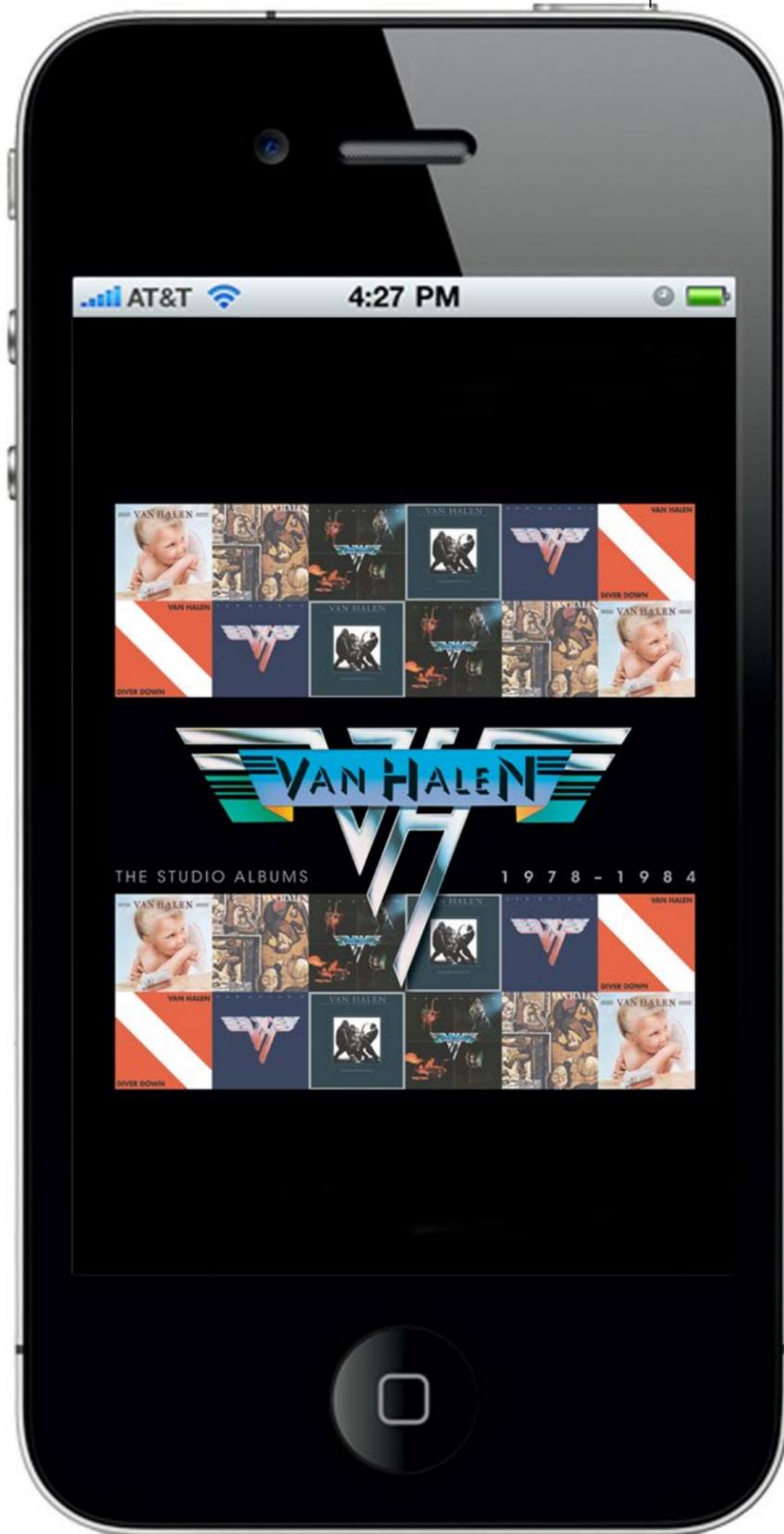
The HD Tracks version represents substantial jump in dynamics and overall tonality over the standard CD, with longer reverb trails and a fatter tone to Mitchell's voice. The solo keyboard at the beginning

of "Woodstock" has plenty of dimension and decay, coming out way beyond the speaker boundaries. Backing vocals also have more space and are easier to discern.

Mitchell's vocal histrionics, compressed on the original vinyl release, are liberated on the high-resolution file. It's difficult to tell whether this aspect is a result of the mastering here or the increased resolution. No matter, the HD Tracks file makes it much easier to appreciate her vocal style, and for now, sets the benchmark as the definitive version of this classic.

Van Halen*Studio Albums (1978-1984)*

HD Tracks, 24bit/192khz download



VAN HALEN

Finally, someone has done justice to the Van Halen catalog in the digital domain. Simply take “You’re No Good” from *Van Halen II*. Seconds into the track, the delay of the noise gate on the hi hat hints at a recovery of dynamic range lost on the original CDs and relatively squashed on the original LPs. We often forget that not everything released on vinyl is awesome.

Similarly, the first drum thwack in “Outta Love Again” sets the tone for what’s to come. This collection has punch, and if your system has the juice, you will find yourself turning it up to the point of pain, because it feels great. It’s a shame we had to wait until 2013 to hear one of the world’s greatest bands sound the way it should have all along.

Chris Bellman’s (from Bernie Grundman Mastering) prior analog treatment of *Van Halen 2*, *Women and Children First*, and *1984* let the cat out of the bag that there was sonic gold in these master tapes. The vinyl releases are fantastic, but for those no longer living in the analog domain, the HD Tracks versions are equally excellent. Like Bellman’s editions, these tunes now have a bass line, with weight and texture doing justice to the VH sound. The bass processing at the beginning of “One Foot Out the Door” authoritatively snarls in a way it never does on the originals, and underscores Michael Anthony’s creativity on the instrument. Each

one of these albums now has the proper anchor that the bass guitar brings to the rhythm section, giving the classic tunes a heavier, more demonstrative feel.

And that’s just the beginning. The extra resolution adds an extra dimension to Eddie Van Halen’s guitar virtuosity via layer upon layer of effects, overtones, and grit. You can now hear every bit of the fretboard-tapping magic that pushed Van Halen to the head of the guitar god class. The intro to “Unchained” rockets out of the left channel, well beyond the speaker, taking up the width of about three Marshall cabinets. Folks, this is big guitar sound. Even the studio trickery, with Eddie panning about the soundstage, bouncing between the distortion and clean channels on his amplifiers, is big and full of life. It’s easy to forget the engineer behind the control panel.

Where the original CDs sound like a ball of compression and distorted guitars, the high-resolution tracks have myriad treasure that’s tough to discern on the originals. The bottles tinkling on “Hot For Teacher,” David Lee Roth’s subtle smart remarks on “Dirty Movies,” and Van Halen senior’s clarinet playing on “Big Bad Bill is Sweet William Now” are just a few examples. Even the most loyal Van Halen fan will find tidbits previously buried in the mix. *(continued)*

VAN HALEN

While drummer Alex Van Halen still sounds slightly compressed, especially on the bass drum and snare, the cymbals and toms are opened up, with more space than before. Now, you can hear him pounding the drumsticks on the side of the snares between beats on "Hot For Teacher" as bottles tinkle in the background and roll down the floor, between the class talk and scrunching of paper. Much like his brother's guitar, Alex's drum set has a larger presence on this remaster.

Moreover, David Lee Roth's vocals are full strength, whether cooing on "Ice Cream Man," joking around on "And The Cradle Will Rock," or delivering

his signature histrionic screams on "Somebody Get Me A Doctor." Eddie and Alex's backing vocals are also much clearer and more prominent, adding depth to these recordings. Vide, Anthony's classic line "Come on Dave, give me a break" during "Unchained" is more comical. Even the couple of clunkers are much more palatable, thanks to the increased fidelity.

HD Tracks' Lisa Hershfield says, "all Van Halen transfers were from the original EQ production analog tapes," and after thorough listening and comparison to the originals, I have no reason to doubt her. The only odd decision is to release the records as

a full set, with a single collaged album cover, instead of breaking them up as individual albums with the associated covers. The latter can be done with a bit of extra effort, and will make it easier when navigating on your music server.

What is appreciated is the \$109 price for six studio albums in 24/192. 24/96 is also available, but why bother when the 24/192 files are so good? As David Lee Roth once said, "Get the maximum effort, get the full bug."



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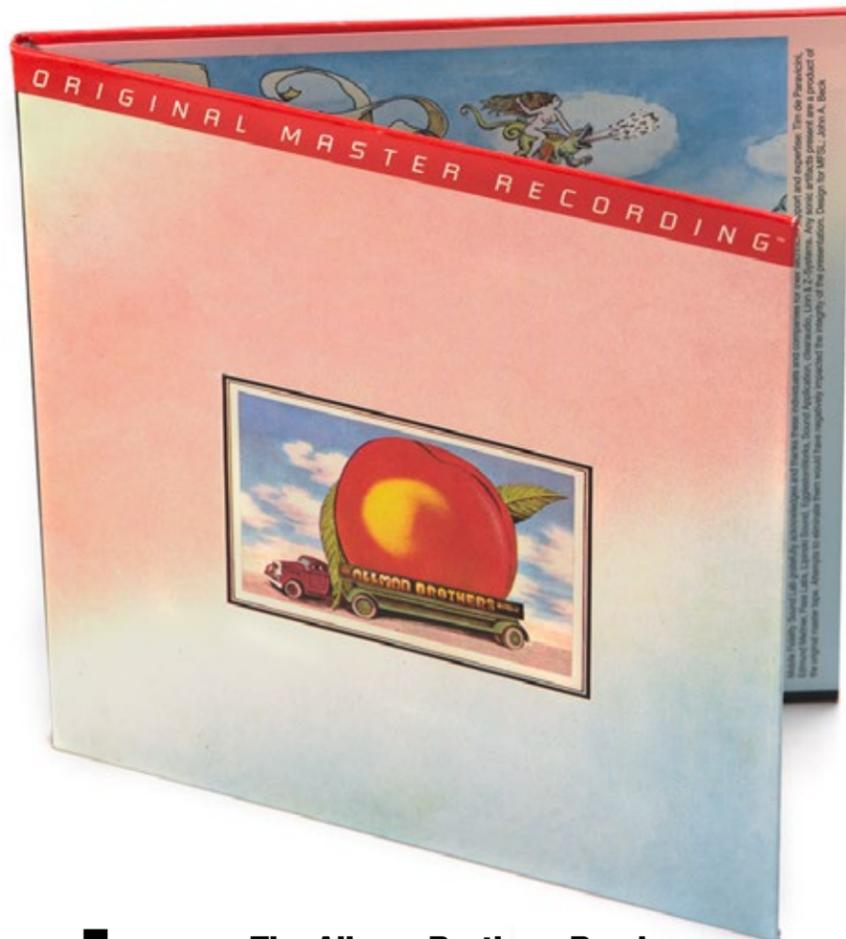
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The Allman Brothers Band

Eat a Peach

Mobile Fidelity, Hybrid SACD

Legendary rock photographer Jim Marshall once responded to the baited question, “Beatles or Stones?” by quickly replying, “Neither. Allman Brothers, that’s the best fucking band in the world.” And so it may have been in April 1972 when, not even a year after their highly successful *At Fillmore East* hit, the Allman Brothers released another double album—this time with two sides of studio tracks and the other two comprised of live material that didn’t make it on the Fillmore record. As bandleader Duane Allman met an untimely death on a motorcycle, he only participates on three of the studio tracks.

Staff collector Tom Caselli, who has practically every copy of *Eat a Peach*, candidly says: “This is not an audiophile recording. It’s not in the same league as the Fillmore record.” The first track of the Mobile Fidelity SACD, “Ain’t Wasting Time No More,” feels compressed, with moderate high-frequency rolloff. But don’t be discouraged. The rest of the disc possesses plenty of sparkle, depth, and dynamics. Delicate cymbal and percussion work at the beginning of “Les Brers in A Minor” instantly cues you in for what’s in store.

And you’ll either love or hate the thought of getting to hear “Mountain Jam” in its entirety without interruption. To Mobile Fidelity’s credit, the song now sounds considerably better than it does on the Capricorn pressing on hand here at the *TONEAudio* office. Whether you go to your favorite used record store, or eBay, one of these will set you back about \$15-\$20. Listeners with an SACD player will be pleasantly surprised. What’s more, the original MoFi version of *Eat a Peach* on LP currently fetches as high as \$200—a cost that should soon crash as hard as 2008 real-estate prices in Phoenix. MoFi will have the new vinyl version out by the time you read this.

Compared to the Capricorn version, the SACD has more inner detail across the board, and a warmer, stronger bottom end as well. Gregg Allman’s keyboard playing also comes through more clearly throughout. Boasting a very analog-like feel all the way through the program, this reissue deserves top marks.

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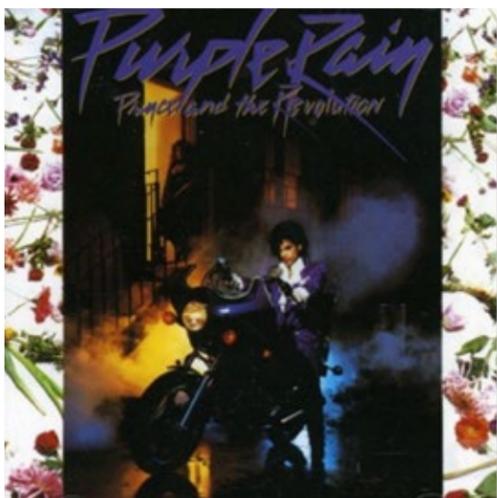
Donna Summer
Love To Love You Baby
HD Tracks, 24/192

Now that Daft Punk has ushered in a new era of disco, it only seems fair to go back to the source. Mobile Fidelity did a spectacular job about a year ago on KC and the Sunshine Band's self-titled release, and now, HD Tracks ups the ante via this album and *Bad Girls* from the Queen of Disco.

It goes without saying that the original LP sounds dreadful. Remember? Highly compressed and very shrill on top because, let's face it, no one was evaluating the sound quality while in a coked-out haze on the dance floor.

The masters used here are surprisingly good. The 24/192 files are full of air and life, with a much groovier and driving bass line. Donna Summer's trademark voice has more body and substance, but perhaps the best surprise arrives via the great funky guitar riffs previously buried in the mix.

Most hardcore audiophiles won't put their Patricia Barber albums down for this one, but you should.

**Prince**

1999
Purple Rain
HD Tracks 24/192 download

Listening to Prince let out one of the best screams in rock, at the end of “International Lover,” is all you need to be convinced that HD Tracks has produced a winner with Prince’s 1999. Both the original CD and LP are fairly flat in the dynamics department. And the early versions of the compact disc eliminated the track “D.M.S.R.” to fit the entire two record set on a single disc.

1999 and *Purple Rain* are the two best-selling efforts of Prince’s career, both featuring hits that got heavy radio and MTV play back when the Purple One was at the height of his popularity. Yes, the recent LP reissues, mastered by Bernie Grundman, are also fantastic. And while they get the nod for analog smoothness, these high-resolution digital files have slightly more punch and a lower noise floor to reveal more sonic gold.

When Wendy and Lisa coo, “I think we have to torture you now,” it will make the hair stand up on the back of your neck in anticipation of erotic moments to come. This is what Prince has been about all along, recent religious status notwithstanding. The highs are still congested due to the fact that there’s a lot more drum machine than real drums here. But everywhere else, these tracks are phenomenal. The HD files

also boast more weight in the bass line, giving you another reason to get up and shake your booty.

Both records now have a huge soundfield, taking advantage of the multitrack format, with small sound effects everywhere and floating between your speakers like a great (and tastefully done) surround mix. But the best improvement in these files compared to the original hard copies is the amount of life, air, and impact in Prince’s guitar playing. Somewhat subdued on the originals, he’s fully in charge here. It shifts the perspective more towards his blazing leads and tasty fills to the extent the CD now feels like a synthesizer album. As it should be; Prince remains one of the most underrated guitar heroes of his time.

Here’s hoping HD Tracks will be able to bring more Prince titles to its catalog, and that whatever source supplies the files takes as much care with the transfers as it did with these. It’s also worth mentioning that HD Tracks’ download times have decreased dramatically in the last month. Where 24/192 files used to take hours, a full album now downloads in 10-15 minutes with a high-speed connection. A nice upgrade that makes the process that much easier.

**Rickie Lee Jones**

Rickie Lee Jones
Mobile Fidelity, 180g LP

Back in the beginning of 1979, when this record made its debut, it became a demo staple in every hi-fi store. Even the original pressing sounded decent, and budding vinyl enthusiasts can usually find a clean copy for a few bucks about anywhere.

Both the original MoFi and the current MoFi remasters have more dynamics and quieter surfaces than the original WB pressing, and each will set you back about \$30. However, the current MoFi release exceeds its predecessor in every way but one: the “smiley face” EQ. (For those unfamiliar with this term, it means that the upper treble and lowest bass frequencies have been slightly boosted in the attempt to gain some listenability, more excitement, if you will.) Pressed on the original JVC “Super Vinyl,” the original is still a smidge quieter than the current pressing, which is excellent.

It’s up to you whether you bypass the first track, “Chuck E’s in Love,” since it was played to death on the radio and MTV. The rest of the record still holds up after all these years, with great arrangements and a stellar cast of musicians, including Dr. John, Tom Scott, Randy Newman, Jeff Pocar, and Neil Larsen, to name just a few.

Bass response is now sorted, there is more midrange palpability and ambience throughout, and the record now reveals a higher degree of low-level detail. Jones’ voice possesses more decay on all tracks, and those that have frequently listened to this record will notice more nuance from beginning to end. And, while this album has grooves going almost all the way to the center label, MoFi did a much better job of cutting this copy. The inner-groove distortion creeping in on the label’s original is eliminated, another bonus.



Todd Rundgren

Hermit of Mink Hollow

HD Tracks, 24bit/192khz download

Yeah, yeah, you never remember your first download. But this is one you should remember. If you're a Todd Rundgren fan, you know most of his albums sound lousy. Rolled-off highs and compression are the order of the day. Mediocre mastering values aside, Rundgren's records are always rife with lush, layered vocal harmonies and cool keyboard effects.

The HD Tracks version of *Hermit of Mink Hollow* finally reveals not only the true wizard that is Rundgren, but all the hard work that went into this record. Even on the sparse track "Lucky Guy," his vocal purity comes through loud and clear, with the piano no longer buried (especially the lower register of the piano) and a much bigger soundstage in all three dimensions.



Sly and the Family Stone

There's a Riot Going On

ORG Music, 180g 45RPM 2LP

On initial spin, if you think this record is not really up to audiophile standards, dig out your original and you'll be surprised at just how terrible the latter sounds. While this pressing still sounds somewhat hot on the top end (part of which might be the result of Mr. Ludwig's mastering), with distortion artifacts present, the new version sounds like butter.

Skip right to the single "Family Affair," and you'll instantly get the groove and see why this record topped the charts. The female backing vocal has much more presence, and more distance between it and Stone's heavy lead vocal. Cymbals still sound buried, but there is a bevy of groovy, funk-laden guitars out in the open. The other hit, "(You Caught Me) Smilin," is also well represented, with a much larger stereo image than the original Epic pressing.

The surfaces on this double 45RPM set are incredibly quiet, whereas the originals are awash in tape hiss and sound like an 8-track in comparison. Surprisingly, even though the LPs are cut at 45RPM, the tracks still only take up about a half of each LP side, respectively, so ultimate dynamics remain lacking.



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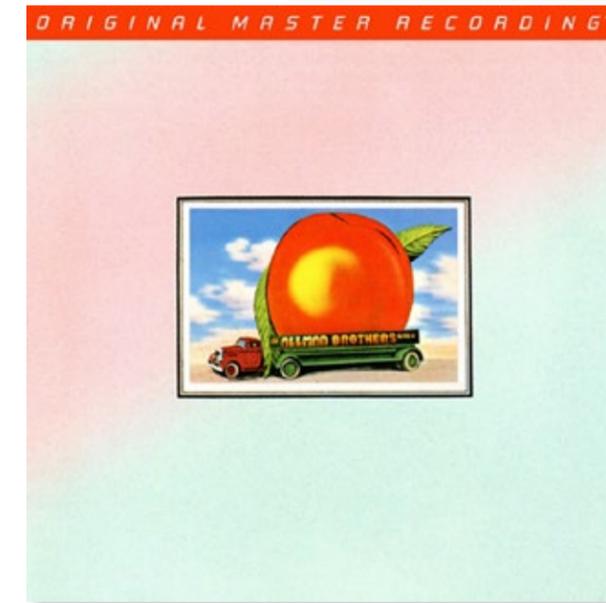
Carole King

Tapestry

ORG Music, 180g 45RPM 2LP

Another well-ridden audiophile warhorse, *Tapestry* has been remastered a number of times on multiple formats. Do you need this one? Not if you have one of the others cut in recent years. Classic Records' 33RPM single-LP still gets the nod for overall clarity and a stronger, more well-defined bottom end. However, the collector market pushed its price to as high as \$400 for an unopened copy.

Expertly mastered by Bernie Grundman and pressed at Pallas in Germany, this freshly minted edition is one of the better versions available. However, the loss of high-frequency information and smoothness makes itself known, suggesting that perhaps these tapes are ready for retirement.

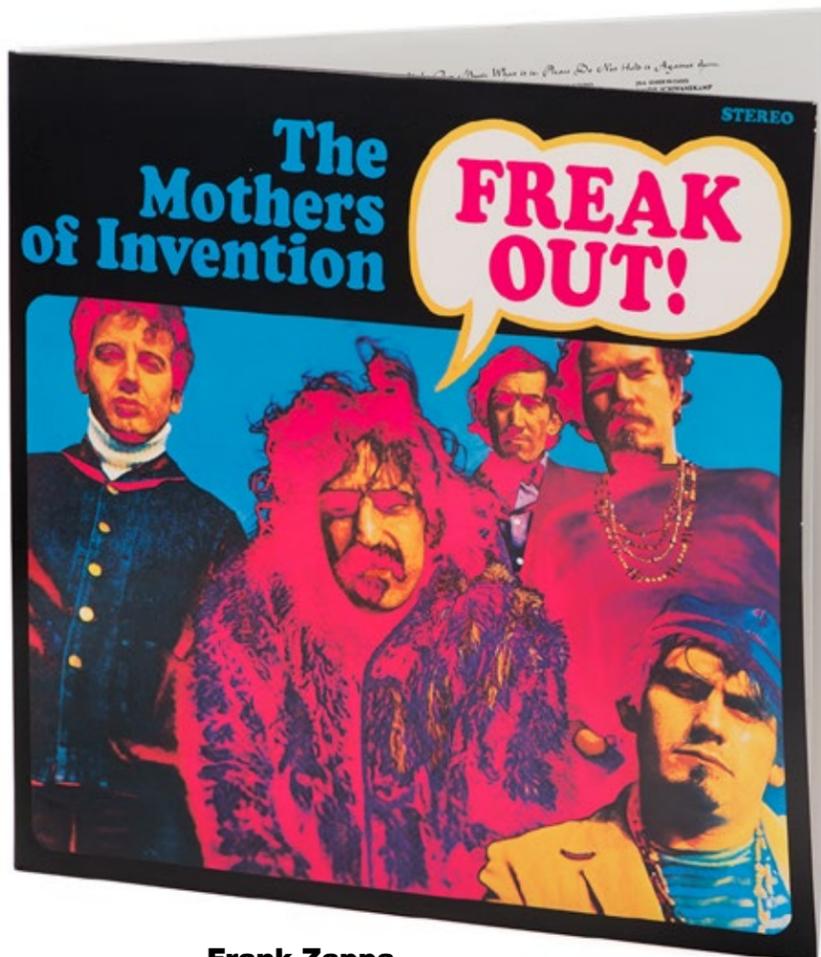


The Allman Brothers Band

Eat a Peach

Mobile Fidelity, 180g 2LP

We positively reviewed the SACD version of this album in Issue 54. All the same sonic attributes apply, but this one goes to 11. Whisper-quiet backgrounds, and thanks to an analog master tape, this classic sounds better than ever. We'll even argue that this is the definitive edition, save for the rare white-label promo.



Frank Zappa

Freak Out!

Barking Pumpkin Records, 180g 2LP

If you haven't visited Frank Zappa's legendary debut in some time, it's a road trip worth taking. Many of the familiar Zappa-isms are here and in full force, from the heavily layered vocals to the trippy time signature changes and tributes to doo-wop.

Beginning the journey with an original Verve pressing reveals slight compression and major midrange/vocal recession, resulting in a flatter-than-flat presentation. By contrast, this Barking Pumpkin remaster, while derived from the original stereo digital safety masters, is tastefully redone. It exceeds the original in every way except one: the extreme high frequencies on the original, all-analog pressing remain cleaner. However, the remaster wins the day in every other regard.

Bringing the level of the midrange up to par shows more sonic trinkets that Zappa always hides slightly below the surface of his recordings—a morsel of percussion here and a splash of xylophone there, along with freaky whispers that are now much easier discern. This classic is a tasty treat.

Power

Emotion

Soul



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THE SMITHS

**The Smiths**

The Smiths, Meat Is Murder
HD Tracks, 24/96 download

The Smiths' first two albums were as much an essential part of a record collection in 1985 as they are today, as they influenced a number of pivotal bands after the group's relatively short career came to an end. Revisiting the original slabs of Sire vinyl reveals these distinguished LPs recorded in a relatively lifeless manner. The drums are virtually lost in the background, unable to stand above the din of the mix. Morrissey's signature voice lacks any kind of tonal richness.

HD Tracks thoroughly resuscitates both records in every way, making it much easier to appreciate the craftsmanship on both. Starting with "The Headmaster Ritual," from *Meat is Murder*, Morrissey's singing finally has weight and body. The drums have a life of their own, and Johnny Marr's guitar texture resides slightly to the left of center, now claiming height, depth, and decay—as it should. Returning to the self-titled album, "This Charming Man" is much more beautiful to behold courtesy of Morrissey's lead vocal, now boasting its own space, as it does on the HD version of *Meat is Murder*.

So, give your old Smiths LPs to one of your young friends just discovering music on vinyl and let them spin away. The magic is in the high-resolution digital files this time.

**Devo**

Devo Hardcore: Volume 2
Superior Viaduct, 2LP

In the liner notes to Devo's 1979 release *Duty Now For the Future*, the spud boys from Akron instruct us to "add a third dimension to our 2-D world." Who knew we would have to wait until 2013?

Originally only introduced on CD, *Devo Hardcore: Volume 2*, a compilation of B-sides and unreleased outtakes, sounds like ass in digital. While tons of fun, it completely lacks fidelity of any kind. Calculated move or careless? We may never know.

Thankfully, Devo-tees can now enjoy their favorite band in full, trippy glory. *Devo Hardcore: Volume 2* is a sonic masterpiece in comparison to the original, as ironic as that might seem. Where the original seems recorded on a portable cassette recorder from Radio Shack, this vinyl release is full of life. Now you can hear the tape hiss on "Bamboo Bimbo," as well as the clever fretwork on the guitar. Mark Mothersbaugh's madcap vocals mix with maniacal synth riffs and bounce all over the soundstage, creating psychedelia in ways that the original can't muster.

There's more detail everywhere, but the biggest improvement is in the guitars. Whether the increased twanginess, in "Itchy Goo," or the additional layers available on "Fountain of Filth," it helps the listener further distill Devo's zeitgeist. And the early rendition of "Workin' in a Coal Mine" is positively precious, foreshadowing what would come much later on *Total Devo*.

The pressings are flat, surfaces quiet, and album art nicely reproduced. How could you ask for more? If you love Devo, grab this now, as *Volume 1* is already out of print.

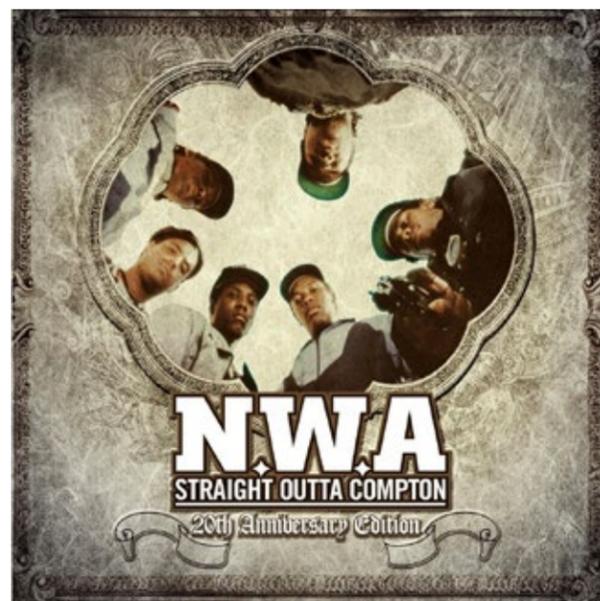


De La Soul
3 Feet High and Rising
 Tommy Boy, 2LP

Sounding like they were taped via a cassette recorder placed in front of an AM radio, the original digital and LP copies of this hip-hop classic sound positively dreadful, with not much useful information above about 5kHz. The new “re-mastered” version has to be better, right?

Wrong. It sounds even more lifeless and rolled off, as if someone recorded the original on a cheap tape deck, re-broadcast it on AM radio, and then taped those results on a cheap cassette recorder.

In short, this is the worst vinyl pressing we’ve heard in years, and a huge waste of thirty bucks. Pass.



N.W.A
Straight Outta Compton,
20th Anniversary Edition
 Profile, 2LP

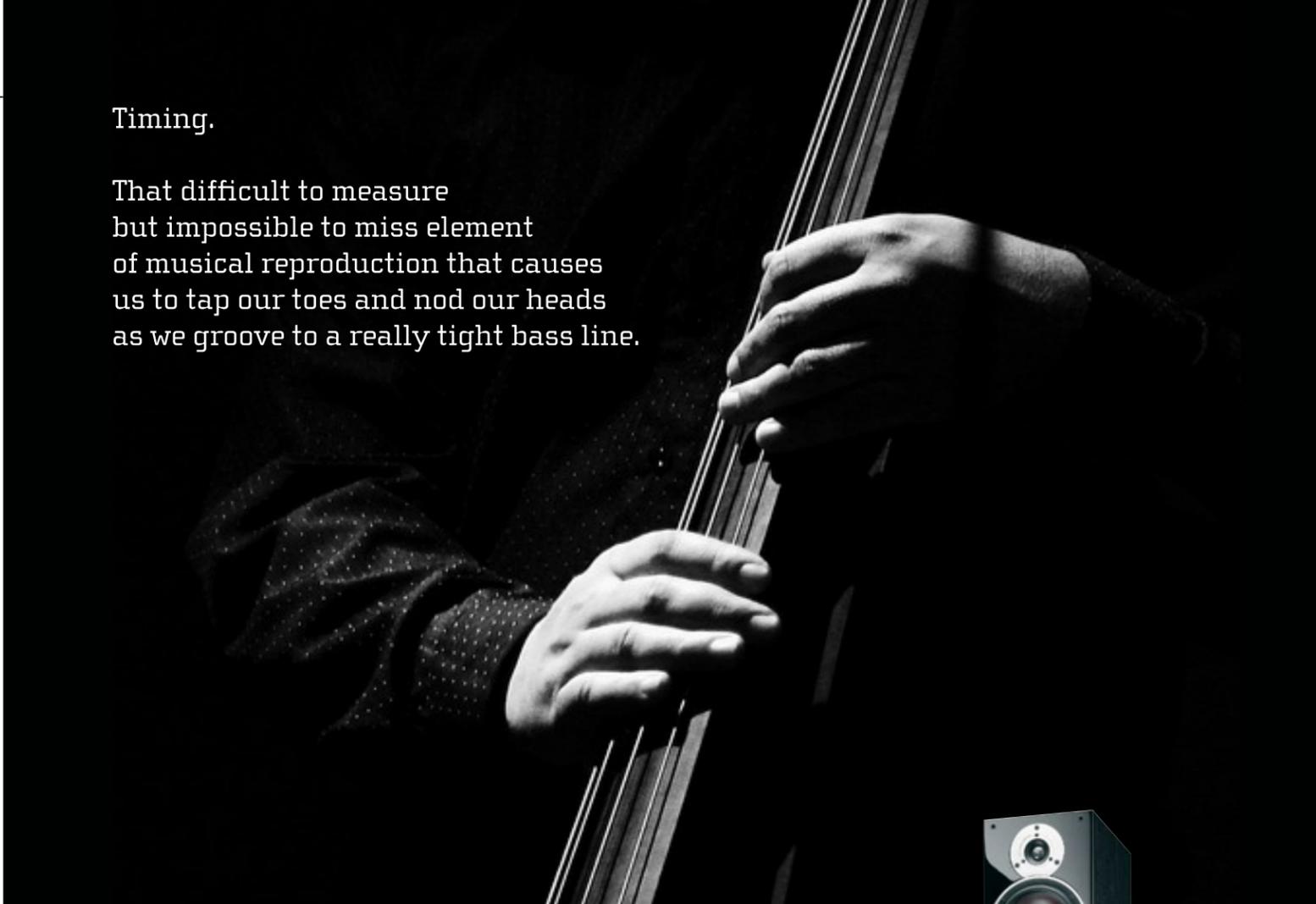
Ground zero for gangster rap, *Straight Outta Compton* set the tone and style for everything else that followed, with explosive dynamics and lyrics that stand the test of time 20 years later.

The original LP is one of the better early hip-hop records in terms of production, showcasing Dr. Dre’s skills even then. Those wanting more high-frequency extension and a bigger sound-stage will enjoy the original LP. By contrast, the CD is the only choice if you crave the maximum, hardest-driving beats; it has crushing LF energy.

The current remaster squashes most of the dynamic swing out of the record, and while the high frequencies aren’t terribly rolled off and the surfaces quiet, there is no punch, ultimately robbing the album of the energy it requires to get the messages across. The only saving grace is the fourth side, with bonus tracks from Bone Thugs-N-Harmony and Snoop Dogg, as well as a live version of “Compton’s in the House.” But you can get these tracks on the remastered CD, too.

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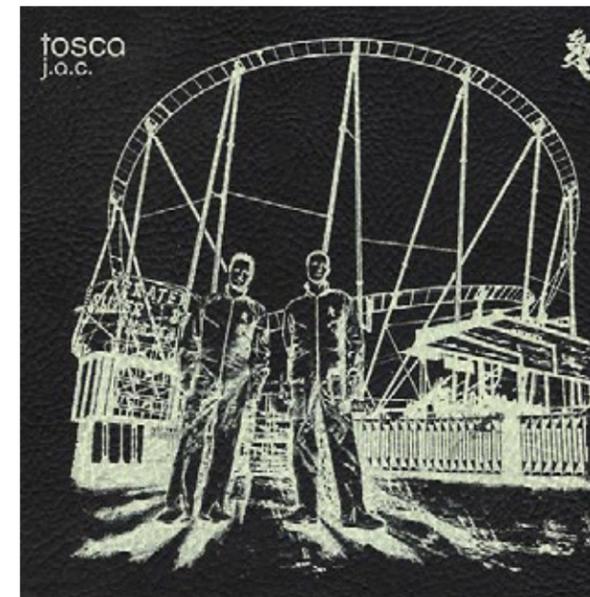
Snoop Lion

Reincarnated
RCA, 2LP

You can take the boy out of hip-hop, but you can't take the hip-hop out of the boy. Snoop's current record has more of a reggae flavor, but there are plenty of hard-hitting grooves here to keep loyal fans satiated. If anything, this album sounds like it was influenced more by Katy Perry than Bob Marley.

And much like his legendary *Doggystyle* (perhaps the most well-recorded hip-hop record in history), *Reincarnated* is brilliantly recorded, and mastered by Sterling Sound. Some care is put into this one.

Combining very quiet surfaces with an extremely solid bottom end, the LP outperforms the CD across the spectrum, with that same expansive soundstage that Snoop has always provided. You may not dig Snoop Lion's current direction; if you don't, you probably don't care about what formats are available. However, if you find *Reincarnated* to be your cup of tea, the LP is clearly superior to the CD.



Tosca

j.a.c.
K7, 3LP

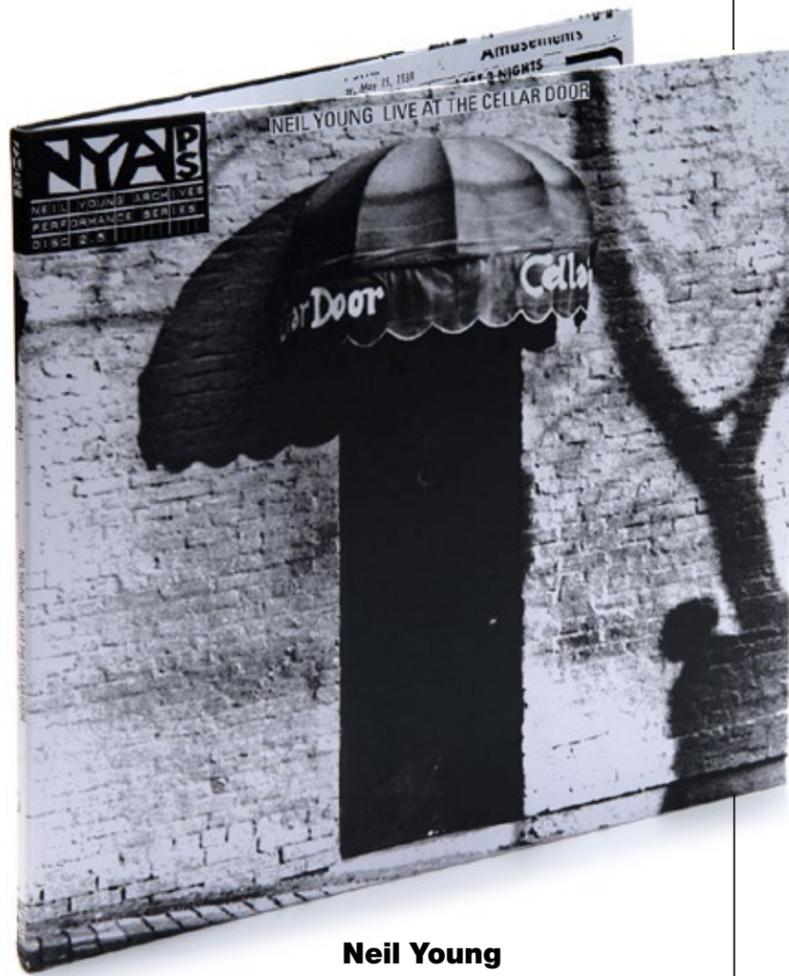
Richard Dorfmeister of Kruder & Dorfmeister is half of Tosca, and his influence on this record is clearly obvious, given its ethereal rhythms, heavy yet lazy bass lines, and a soundstage full of ambient effects that stretch way beyond speaker boundaries.

j.a.c. was mastered at Caylx Studios in Berlin.

Combining ultra-quiet surfaces and spreading the tracks out over three slabs of vinyl, this album breathes in a way the CD does not, and gives the music a much more open, organic feel. There is much dynamic range here; it begs to be played at club levels. The original CD is even slightly quieter, but feels more compressed through the midband and high frequencies, sounding crunchier and more digital on top.

Vide, "Zuri," with its opening percussion and cymbal play. Where the CD sounds lifeless and flat, the LP possesses a much more realistic timbre. When the acoustic guitar eases into the mix, it has a very distinct space on the LP. On the CD, it is decidedly vague, sounding almost out of phase. This is typical of the entire album, going back and forth between LP and CD, with the analog always getting the nod for palpability.

If you're a fan of *The K&D Sessions*, you'll want to add *j.a.c.* to your vinyl collection.



Neil Young
Live at the Cellar Door
 Warner Bros, 180g LP

Recorded at the Cellar Door in Washington DC over a three-day period from November 30 to December 2, 1970, the latest in Neil Young's "archives" series hits the record store shelves in vinyl format, lagging the CD by a few weeks. If you were patient enough to wait, you will be highly rewarded.

Music editor Bob Gendron gave the digital version of this performance a highly insightful review in Issue 59, but we did not have a vinyl copy at that time to comment on. I concur 100% with Gendron's assessment of the performance, and the sound quality of this vinyl version is outstanding. Mastered by Chris Bellman at Bernie Grundman's studio, it is easily the equal in fidelity of the *Live at Massey Hall* and *Live at The Fillmore* albums.

The epitome of sparse production, the tracks all feature Young on guitar or piano, and while a hint of tape hiss creeps in from time to time, his voice is vibrant, dripping with decay and overtones, in the way that only a magnificent analog recording can – warts and all. Fortunately, the warts are very few, and on one level, kudos to Young for leaving them in. If this were a Katy Perry album, it would all be pristinely pitch corrected.

Here's to a great glimpse into the past of such a great artist, and here's to hoping Mr. Young will pull a few more recent performances out of his vaults in the months to come.

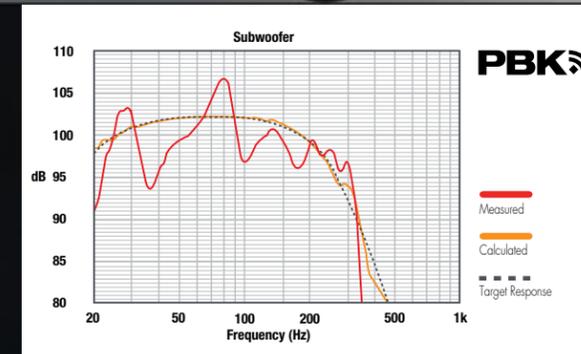
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Joni Mitchell

The Hissing of Summer Lawns
Don Juan's Reckless Daughter
 24bit/192khz Downloads, HD Tracks

In the three years that followed Joni Mitchell's most successful album, *Court and Spark*, she took a distinct about-face from the more straightforward singer/songwriter/folky style that put her on the map and charged down a more avant-garde path. Her next three albums – *Hissing of Summer Lawns*, *Hejira*, and *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* – all featured some heavy duty jazz cats; she even went on tour right around this time with Pat Metheny, Lyle Mays and Jaco Pastorius in her band.

History hasn't always been kind to Mitchell for these records, and HD Tracks has brought two of them back to life with stunning results. The original vinyl of both of these records is flat, lifeless and slightly harsh on top, but the 24/192 versions are fabulous.

Even though the distortion at the beginning of "The Jungle Line" is still there (but minimized), the rest of Mitchell's vocal distortions present on the LP are gone. This record now has a prodigious soundstage, where it was practically one-dimensional before. Layer upon layer of detail is now available to the listener, exposing more instrumental and percussion excursion. The bottom end is firmed up and extended throughout, giving the record a lot more weight and presence.

Cymbals at the beginning of "Edith and the Kingpin" are silky smooth, and Mitchell's keyboard playing as well as her multilayered vocals just float throughout the listening room. The rest of the record reveals similar treats. An equal improvement is available on *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*.

Jaco Pastorius' first bass note on "Jericho" resounds with far more authority than it does on LP, and this time-worn test track sounds more exciting than it ever has. The rest of the album is equally scrumptious sonically. While we might argue whether 24/192 is sonically superior as a format, or that it may just be the mastering – no matter, these two slightly off-the-beaten-path Joni Mitchell albums have turned out swimmingly. If they happen to be on your favorites list, they are a must to add to your collection.



Elvis Costello
King of America
 MoFi, 180g. LP

Mobile Fidelity continues their excellent job of remastering the Elvis Costello catalog with his tenth album. Never charting higher than #39 in the US, this record received more than its share of critical acclaim. Though it was not terribly successful for EC in terms of sales, it joined a string of quirky releases going forward, with only the 1989 *Spike* showing much chart activity (*Spike* would be Costello's last gold record of his career). This record is also pivotal in the sense that it features a bit more of a country groove, something else that he would dabble in going forward, including an interesting and somewhat eclectic rendition of the classic "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood."

MoFi is to be commended for taking this imprint much further than my original 1B Columbia pressing. It features more air and a wider soundstage throughout, with the mix more opened up, though it is still somewhat lacking in front-to-back depth. The only complaint with this one, especially in light of the fact that it is an "Original Master Recording," (which means MoFi used the original master tape in its production) is this: while dynamics are improved over the original, as well as overall tonality – especially the acoustic guitars – is that they didn't split this up into two slabs of vinyl as they did on *Get Happy*. ●

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Eat a Peach
Mobile Fidelity, Hybrid SACD,
180g LP

Sly and the Family Stone

There's a Riot Going On
ORG Music, 2-45 rpm LPs

Frank Zappa

Freak Out!
Barking Pumpkin Records,
2 LP, 180G

Tosca

j.a.c.
K7, 3LP

Bob Dylan

Blonde on Blonde
Mobile Fidelity, 3 - 45rpm
180g LP box set



20 Music Treasures to Savor from 2013

By Bob Gendron

Digital music sales may have surpassed physical sales for the first time in history, but that didn't prevent imprints big and small from issuing a number of shelf-worthy box sets and deluxe reissues to which listeners will want to return for years to come. Music-leaning bibliophiles also have reason to celebrate. Amidst a glut of flawed releases, a handful of books shed new light on their topics by enhancing our connection to and understanding of the artists, producers, and labels responsible for making enduring music. Without further delay, here are the 20 treasures that most stood out in 2013.



Jacques Brel *Suivre l'Etoile*

Serge Gainsbourg reigns as France's pop provocateur and lusty experimentalist, but the Belgian-born Jacques Brel remains the king of the chanson. His songwriting influence continues to range well beyond francophone borders while the quality of his voice and phrasing place him on a platform with the greatest singers in history. Completely remastered and available as an import from Canadian retailers, the numbered and limited 21-disc *Suivre l'Etoile* (Barclay/Universal) collects nearly everything he recorded and adds extras along with gorgeous packaging and informative French-language book. Quintessential. This is the 2013 box set to grab if space or budget limits you to just one.

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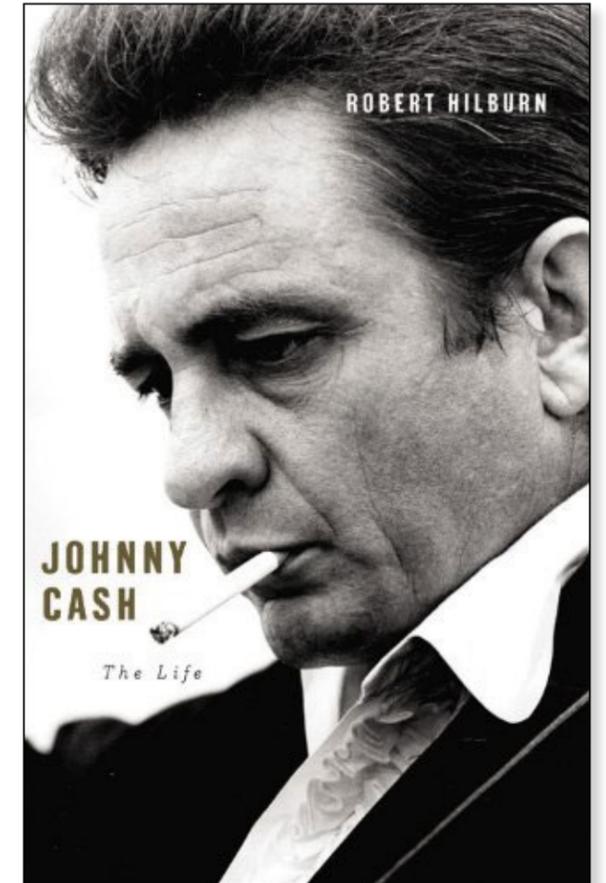
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MUSIC

Johnny Cash: The Life

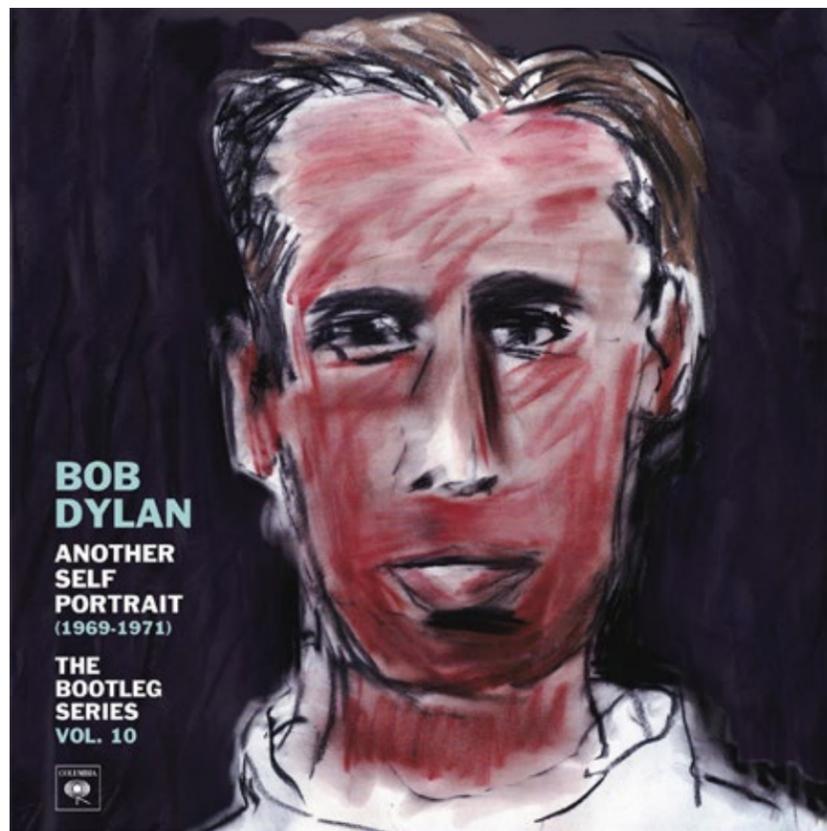
Written by Robert Hilburn, who spent three years researching and writing, the 688-page brick *Johnny Cash: The Life* (Little, Brown and Company) comes as near as the public will ever get to seeing an authoritative biography on the celebrated albeit conflicted country icon. The former Los Angeles Times music critic approaches his topic with requisite balance, accessibility, and context, exposing Cash as a human being and delving deep into his music. Along the way, Hilburn exposes popular myths and reminds readers there's no substitute for in-depth reporting, savvy editing, and comprehensive interviews.



The Clash Sound System

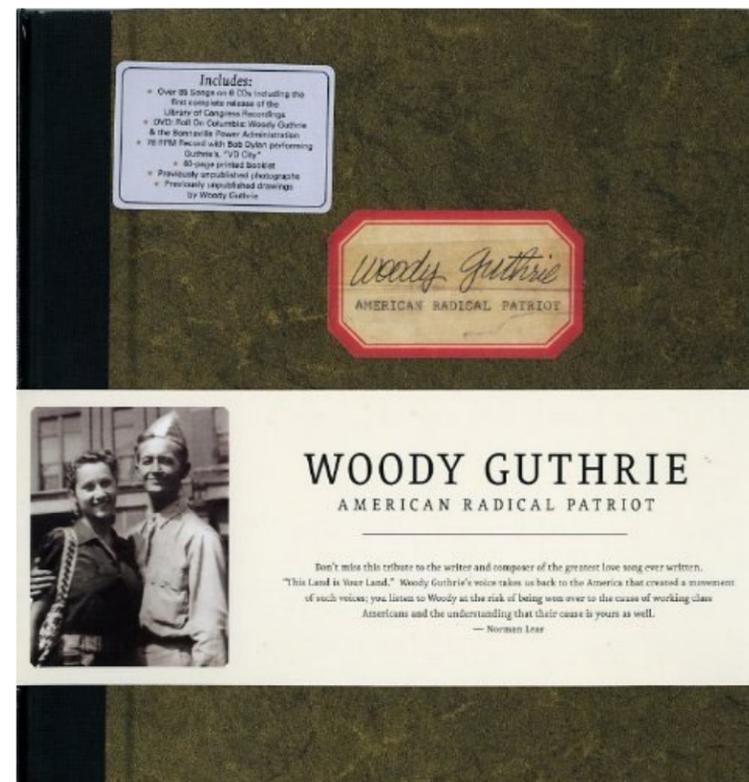
Designed as the end-all-be-all last word on the Clash, *Sound System* (Sony Legacy) collects all but one of the seminal English group's studio albums and adds several discs filled with outtakes, B-sides, demos, and live performances. Everything is newly remastered and packaged in a box that resembles a boom box. A smaller, more manageable and self-descriptive *5 Album Studio Set* is also available, but as *TONE* contributor Todd Martens concludes in his think piece on the 12-disc extravaganza in Issue 57, *Sound System* is the anthology that best makes the case for why the Clash still matters.



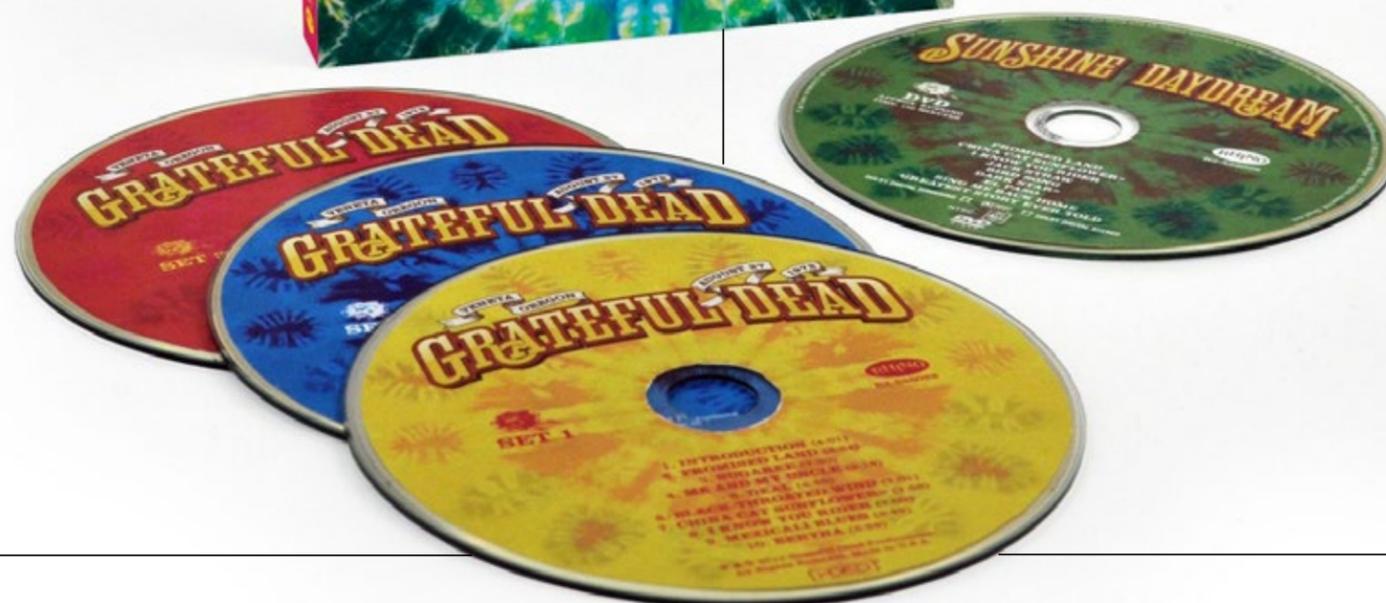


Bob Dylan *Another Self Portrait (1969-1971): The Bootleg Series Vol. 10*

Bob Dylan's latest Bootleg Series installment shows exactly why the Bard remains music's most confounding figure. Assembling outtakes, demos, and alternate versions recorded during the period when Dylan made the splendid *Nashville* and followed it with 1970's dreadful *Self Portrait* and mostly forgettable *New Morning*, *Another Self Portrait (1969-1971)* (Sony Legacy) unfurls with acoustic simplicity, charming intimacy, and stripped-down rusticity that advance the emotions of the songs with supreme sincerity. Why didn't he release what's here instead of committing self-sabotage? This two-disc compendium draws you closer to the educated guesses behind his rationale.

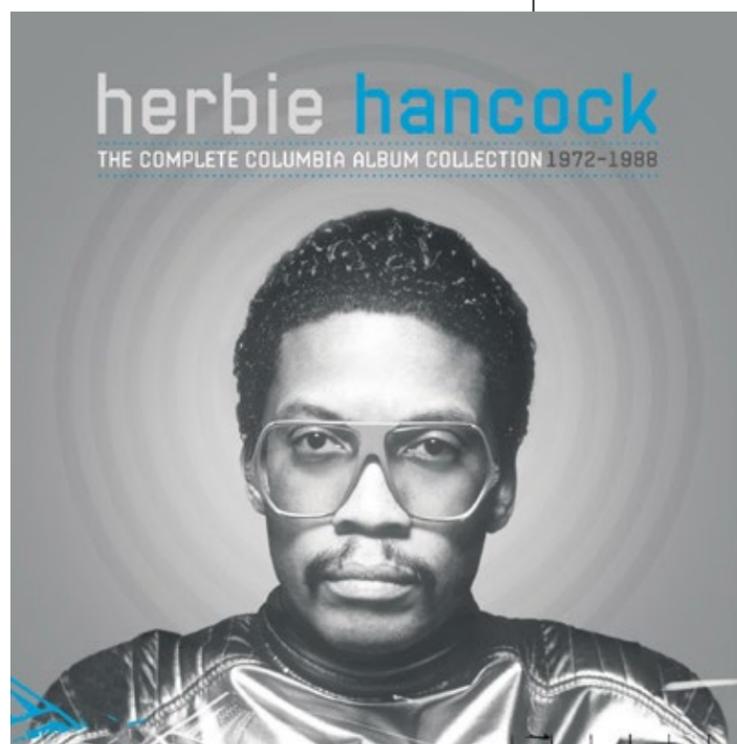


Woody Guthrie
American Radical Patriot (Rounder)
American Radical Patriot (Rounder) isn't the year's most ballyhooed "historical" box set. That designation belongs to *The Rise & Fall of Paramount Records, Volume One, 1917-1927* (Revenant/Third Man), for which \$400 gets you six LPs, books, 200-plus restored ads and images, an oak cabinet container, and access to 800 digital tracks. As scholarly items go, it's a veritable curiosity shop. Yet this six-disc offering of Woody Guthrie's first recordings—songs and interviews, many unreleased—for the Library of Congress and several government sponsors wins out by way of transcending niche markets and speaking to human conditions that resonate today.



Grateful Dead *Sunshine Daydream*

More than 20 years after the Grateful Dead began releasing archival concerts, the most-requested show from its canon finally emerged in the form of the sonically astute three-CD *Sunshine Daydream* (Grateful Dead/Rhino). Viewed by Deadheads as one of the five-greatest performances of the band's career, the August 1972 gig finds the San Francisco ensemble playing a benefit for the Springfield Creamery amidst record-setting heat in Oregon. Seemingly spurred on by searing temperatures that warp the tuning of its instruments, the sextet goes for broke and comes up roses. An accompanying DVD includes a concert film and slew of hippie nudity.



Herbie Hancock *The Complete Columbia Album Collection 1973-1988*

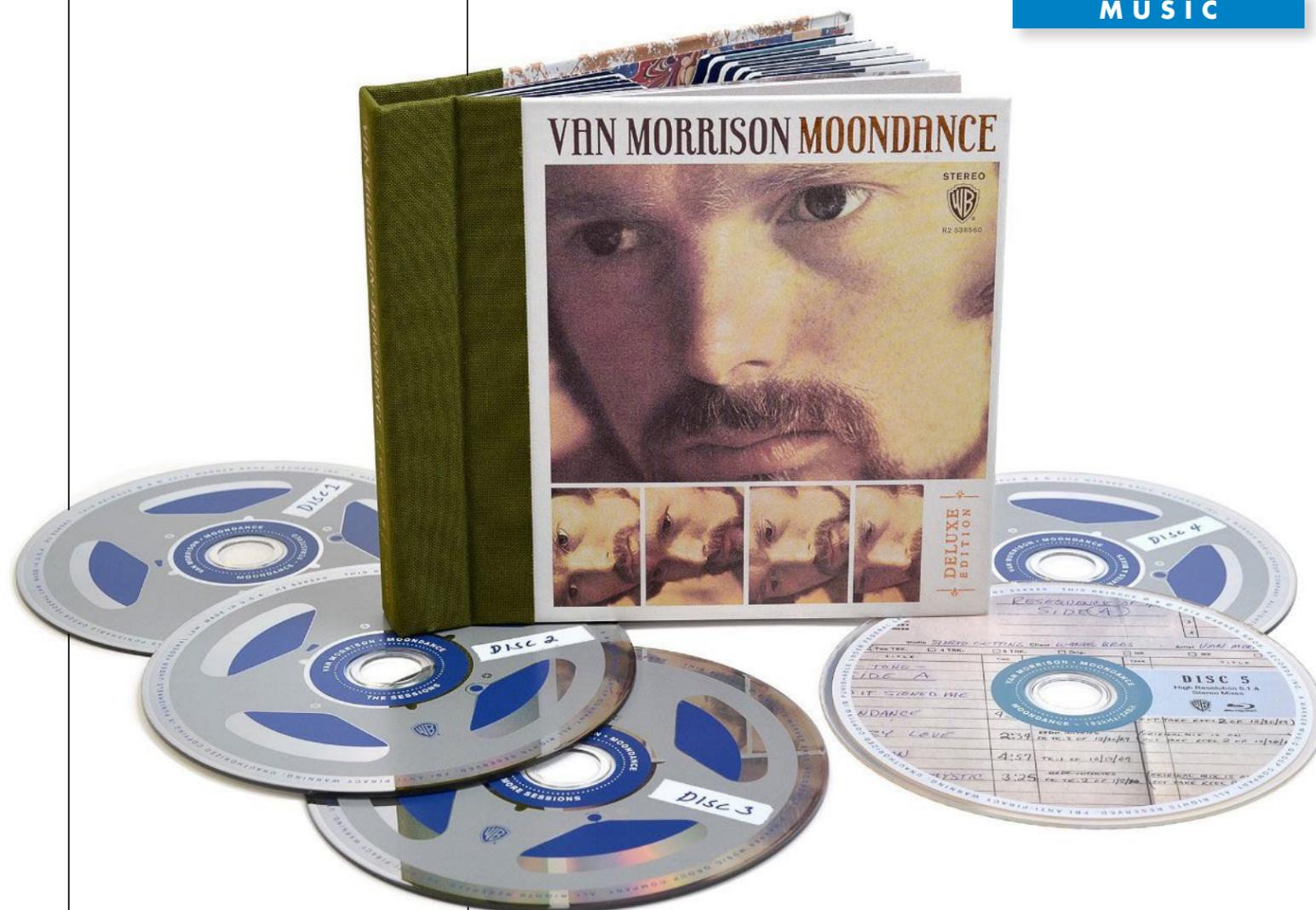
Caveat emptor: Save for hardcore Herbie Hancock devotees, anyone that listens to every note of the 34 discs in *The Complete Columbia Album Collection 1973-1988* (Sony Legacy) will undoubtedly find a few clunkers scattered amidst a wealth of creative genius. Such sense of discovery and wonder is part of the enjoyment afforded by this mind-boggling box set that holds 28 single albums and three double albums, eight previously only available overseas. Picking up where Miles Davis left off, Hancock surveys fusion, African music, funk, soul, and nearly everything in between on the way to charting a nonpareil career that eradicated limits and exploded possibilities.



Donny Hathaway

Never My Love: The Anthology

In his review of *Never My Love: The Anthology* (Rhino), esteemed TONE contributor Aaron Cohen notes Donny Hathaway never attained the first-name recognition of contemporaries such as Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye. Yet, as this smartly assembled box illustrates, the Chicago native belongs on the same pedestal afforded the familiar greats. Demonstrating why organization remains central to collections, the four-disc set showcases Hathaway as a six-tool player—an R&B hitmaker, bandleader, performer, musician, songwriter, and duet partner—by dividing his talents according to disc. Forget about crate digging for obscure soul treats; Hathaway is better than any local gem any reissue label could mine.



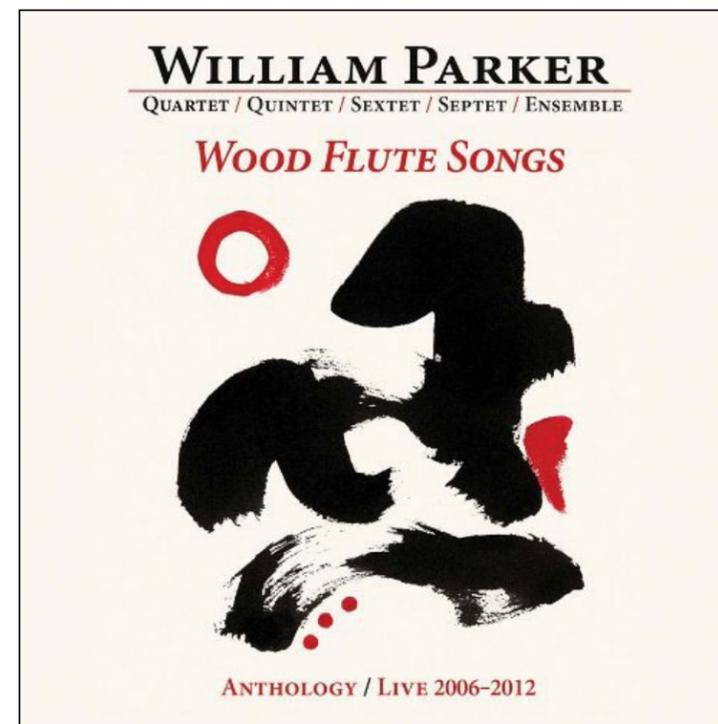
Van Morrison *Moondance: Deluxe Edition*

When an artist protests a label's decision to release an artifact, it's usually a sign that imperfections abound and that diehards stand to gain insight from the decision to raid the vaults. And so it goes with *Moondance: Deluxe Edition* (Rhino). Presenting the 1970 classic alongside 50 unreleased tracks, the five-disc set follows a tact similar to the Stooges' *Complete Fun House Sessions* and showcases differences—some minute, others significant—as the material evolves in the studio. A Blu-ray of *Moondance* whets audiophile appetites with high-resolution 24-bit/48k PCM stereo and DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 surround.



I Heard the Angels Singing: Electrifying Black Gospel from the Nashboro Label 1951-1983

From the tiny label that delivered the excellent *This May Be My Last Time Singing: Raw African-American Gospel on 45RPM, 1957-1982* comes another stellar find. Featuring gatefold-LP packaging, *I Heard the Angels Singing: Electrifying Black Gospel from the Nashboro Label 1951-1983* (Tompkins Square) functions as an overview of the Nashville-based Nashboro Label owned and operated by Ernie Young during a period when gospel resounded in all corners of America. Gritty, energetic, and explosive, the music shouts with conviction and stomps with soulfulness. A majority of the artists are obscure, but that doesn't take away from the potency.



William Parker *Wood Flute Songs: Anthology/Live 2006-2012*

At its core, *Wood Flute Songs: Anthology/Live 2006-2012* (Aum Fidelity) comprises six brand-new albums from the renowned composer and bassist. Yet the eight-disc set is more—a thrilling oeuvre of the boundless creativity, abstract thinking, and daring innovation erupting in the modern jazz world. Surrounded by drummer Hamid Drake, saxophonist Rob Brown, and trumpeter Lewis Barnes on every outing, and joined by an assortment of similar adventurers for other live performances, Parker chases breathtaking beauty across songs that demand close listening and reward with repeat excellence.

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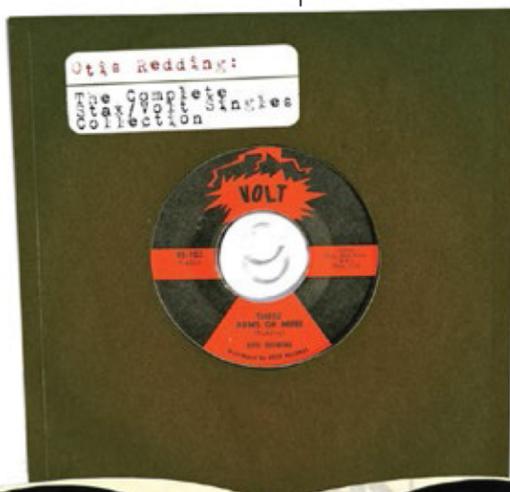
For more than one decade IsoTek has been producing some of the most respected power conditioning products worldwide. Based in the United Kingdom, IsoTek has built this reputation by creating products that follow a clear philosophic principle of isolation and simplicity based upon proper design. Depending on how sophisticated your audio system may be, IsoTek has created a product that will reduce the noise inherent in your AC allowing you to hear and see more of what your components are supposed to produce.

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Purple Snow: Forecasting the Minneapolis Sound

Reviewed by *TONE* critic and *Nirvana: The Complete Illustrated History* co-author Todd Martens in this issue, *Purple Snow: Forecasting the Minneapolis Sound* (Numero Group) should be a front-runner for the Best Album Notes Grammy Award. Augmented by a hardbound book and exhaustively researched 30,000-plus-word essay, the project documents the Twin Cities' funk scene during Prince's ascent in the late 70s. Spotlighting the Purple One's collaborators and songs from the bands of future chart-dominators Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis, pre-Time outfit Flyte Tyme, and numerous keyboard- and glam-soaked hopefuls, the four-LP (or two-disc) set contributes a worthwhile new chapter to America's ever-thickening soul history.



Otis Redding *The Complete Stax/Volt Singles*

On the surface, this three-disc volume borders on larceny—yet another repackaging job of material most listeners already own. And yes, most Otis Redding fans probably have every song here. But few, if any, possess it in mono sound that largely exceeds the fidelity present on any other Redding release, vinyl included. True to its name, the three-disc *The Complete Stax/Volt Singles* (Shout Factory) collects every A- and B-side single cut by the soul giant. Experiencing the music in its original, pure mixes parallels the impact made by *The Beatles in Mono* and Bob Dylan's *The Original Mono Recordings* sets. The sonics are comparably revealing, present, and lifelike, while the timeless songs define a style.

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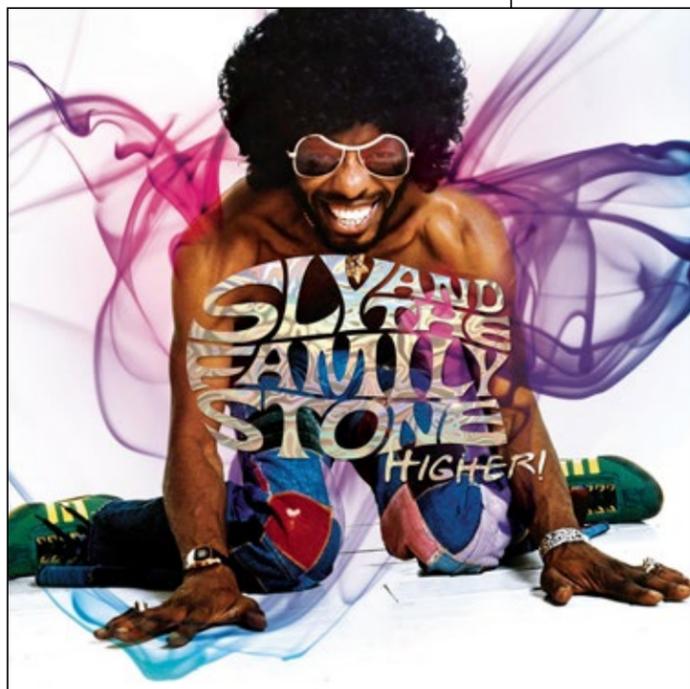
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Respect Yourself: Stax Records and the Soul Explosion

Author Robert Gordon realizes the secret to any good book is a fascinating story told spun with compelling prose and skillful narration. His *Respect Yourself: Stax Records and the Soul Explosion* (Bloomsbury USA) succeeds on both counts, ridding on the entire history of the Memphis label that birthed the raw soul style that countered Motown's splashier variety. While the 480-page book might be too involved for casual observers, Gordon wades into the promotional tactics and collective ethic that made the integrated Stax more than a label and an advocate for the racial and social changes that would later come.



Sly and the Family Stone *Higher!*

Miles Davis looked to Sly and the Family Stone when he began assembling the ideas that resulted in *Bitches Brew*, the epic 1970 double album that, for better or worse, stands as the signpost for jazz fusion. Indeed, as evidenced by this engrossing four-disc anthology of classics and a few rarities, the multi-racial and co-ed band blended funk, gospel, rock, dance, and soul elements in transformative fashions equaled by few before or since. *Higher!* (Sony Legacy) also contains a wonderfully annotated 104-page book that puts the group in proper perspective. As prominent scribe Andy Downing states in Issue 57 of *TONE*: "*Higher!* is a long-overdue reminder of why Stone deserved far better than his current standing suggests."



Paul Simon *The Complete Album Collection*

Provided the 72-year-old Paul Simon doesn't make another record, *The Complete Album Collection* (Sony Legacy) will endure as one-stop shopping for his sparkling solo catalog. Spanning 1965's oft-forgotten *The Paul Simon Songbook* through 2011's well-received *So Beautiful or So What*, the 15-disc pint-sized box adds a few extras and studio releases absent on 2004's Rhino-issued *The Studio Recordings 1972-2000*. A 52-page book and 37 previously unreleased cuts seemingly cover all the necessary bases. But, no: The lack of the original version of "Slip Slidin' Away" is inexcusable given the otherwise admirable breadth on display.

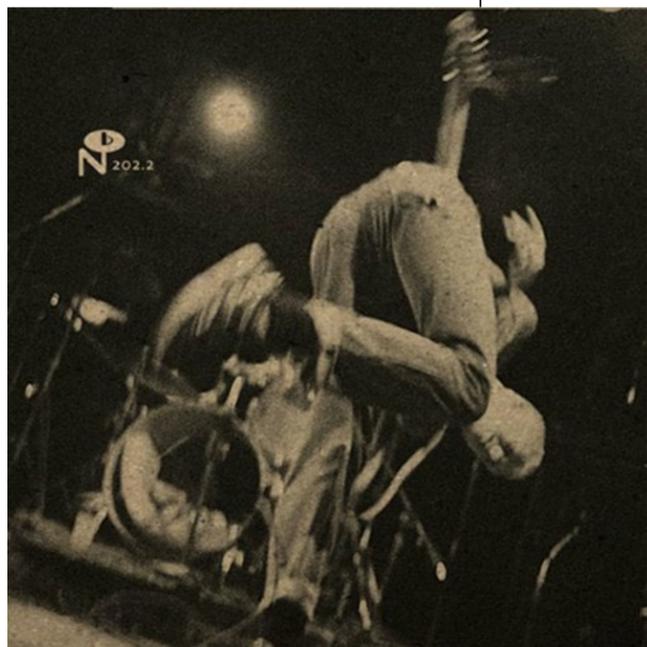


Smashing Pumpkins *The Aeroplane Flies High*

Reinforcing the original 33-song five-EP set with a whopping 71 new tracks, the recent deluxe edition of *The Aeroplane Flies High* (Virgin) is the latest head-turning entry in the Smashing Pumpkins' ongoing reissue series. Not only does the six-disc volume make the case that the group managed to release two first-rate double albums within the span of a year, the strength of most of the material and performances argues on behalf of the band outshining all of its contemporaries with a burst of creativity, ambition, and playfulness that now borders on extinction in an age when most artists can't even concentrate on delivering one single great album. Billy Corgan's track-by-track liner notes are honest, insightful, and humorous.

Unwound *Kid Is Gone*

Chicago-based Numero Group goes about reissues the right way. That is, the imprint aims for obsessive completeness or it doesn't do the project at all. How else to explain the decision to release four volumes chronicling the output of Unwound, a noisy band beloved by a cult following and yet off the radars off "alternative" stations during its decade-plus-long career. For the uninitiated, the three-LP *Kid Is Gone* (Numero Group) serves as a primer of the post-hardcore angularity, dissonance, and abrasion that epitomized Olympia's 1990s D.I.Y. sound. Radio broadcasts, basement recordings, 7-inch singles, cassette-only demos, and the band's debut occupy the series' initial entry, warehoused in a chipboard box.



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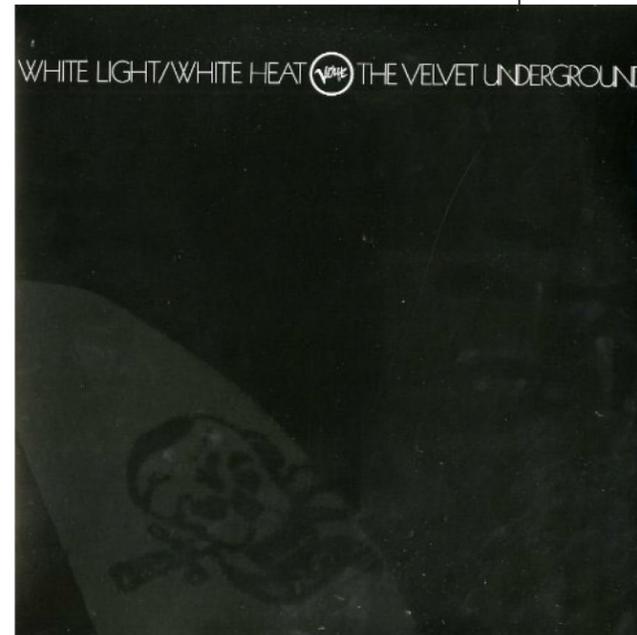
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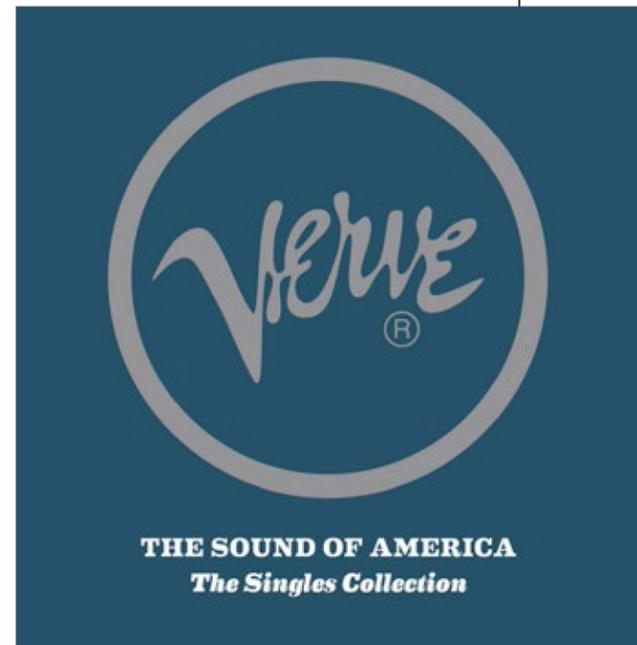
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Velvet Underground *White Light/White Heat*
45th Ann. Super Deluxe Edition

Lavish reissues of individual albums have become de rigueur in an industry desperate for new sources of revenue and eager to capitalize on nostalgia. The Velvet Underground's colossally influential sophomore record is one effort warranting such treatment. Developed with the cooperation of band members John Cale and the late Lou Reed, *White Light/White Heat 45th Ann. Super Deluxe Edition* (Universal) is available as both a two-LP set and three-disc collection. The latter wins out on the basis of its 56-page hardbound book, four previously unheard 1967 performances, and mono and stereo configurations of the original album. Run, don't walk, when presented with the opportunity to hear "Sister Ray" live.



Verve: The Sound of America

Make room on the coffee table. *Verve: The Sound of America* (Thames & Hudson), Richard Havers' 400-page plunge into Norman Granz' famed jazz label, is the kind of tome that encourages late-night listening sessions and extended explorations of catalogs. The home of Ella Fitzgerald, Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday, and dozens of other luminaries comes to life through exemplary photographs and memorabilia ranging from contracts to seven-inch singles to 78s. Artist biographies, annotated histories, and quotes supply journalistic substance to coincide with the sexy, visual-heavy presentation. Worth it alone to peruse the countless album covers reproduced in exquisite detail. ●

2013

THE YEAR IN JAZZ

No other genre continues to thrive while so much of the world remains deaf to the volcanic creativity and originality erupting from veterans and newcomers alike. To give clearer voice and sharper notice to some of the field's must-hear records, *TONE Audio* proudly welcomed DownBeat veteran Aaron Cohen into our mix. Whether it's a long-player by Gregory Porter, *Most Other People Do the Killing*, or an archival Keith Jarrett set, make sure you at least sample the jazz treasures we uncovered in 2013.

©Photo Jay Blakesburg

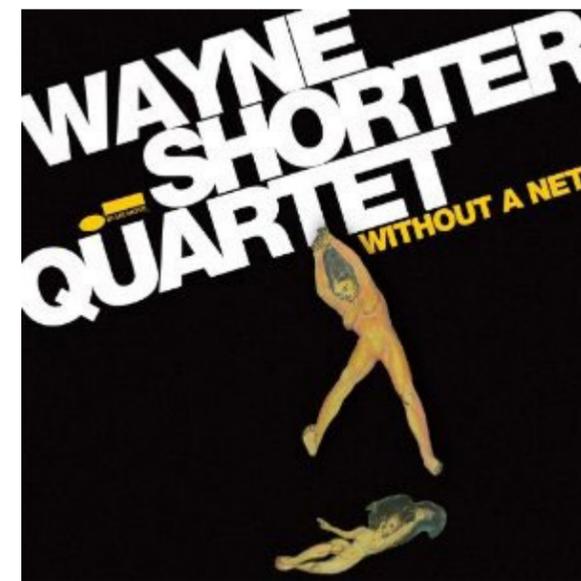
Joshua Redman

JAZZ & BLUES

We usually expect the level of eloquence to rise as artists move into their advanced years—refinement and judiciousness blend to elicit a certain grace. But some, like Wayne Shorter, are lucky enough to bring ferociousness along with them.

The kinetics and drama that dominate the saxophonist's return to the iconic Blue Note label, where he was responsible for a string of earthshaking records that began with 1964's *Night Dreamer*, are nothing less than disarming. Through a steady stream of the elliptical horn lines for which he's become famous, the 79-year-old Shorter and his squad wring a series of cataclysmic crescendos from these rich originals. *Without A Net* is recorded live, and it boasts the kind of ardor that immediately tickles an audience. Something wild is always going on.

This quartet is deeply dedicated to interplay. Pianist Danilo Perez, bassist John Patitucci, and drummer Brian Blade have proven their collective agility since their 2002 debut, *Footprints Live*. Their exchanges are playful but never glib; a perpetual seriousness hovers above these pieces. Part of it is architectural. Shorter is often cited as jazz's greatest living composer, and indeed, his fusion of structural savvy and melodic aplomb has few equals. From "Starry Night" to "Plaza Real,"

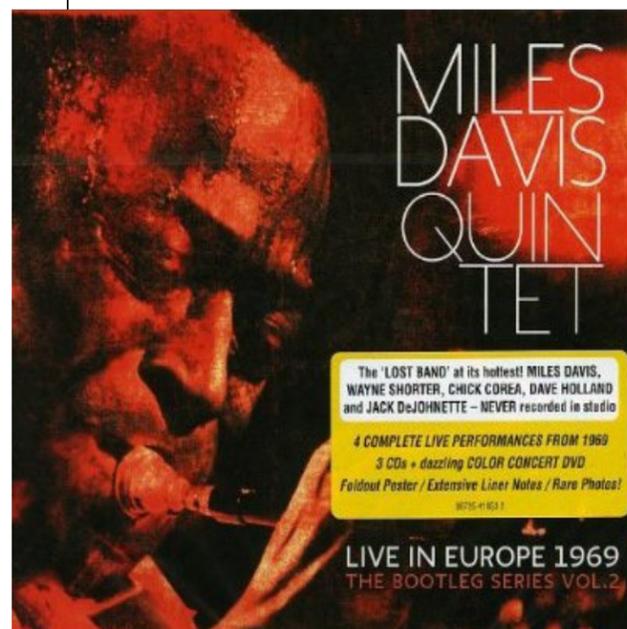


Wayne Shorter Quartet

Without A Net
Blue Note, CD

the four-way conversation embraces both the giddy and mysterious, and when the players invent a tune on the spot, like "Zero Gravity To the 10th Power," their skills at waxing mercurial are totally seductive.

An extended piece recorded live with the Imani Winds is sandwiched between the eight quartet tracks. The chamber work "Pegasus" reiterates the Shorterian method, full of swells that accommodate the constant darting of his soprano sax (there's a smidge of tenor on the album as well) and Blade's bombs-bursting-in-air approach to punctuation. It's certainly more static than its counterparts, but possesses its own idiosyncratic momentum, which is basically the DNA of this disc. In some way, the Imanis are rendered superfluous—present for color, not kinetics. As the quartet shows time and again, it's got everything it needs to spark a wealth of action on its own. —*Jim Macnie*



Miles Davis Quintet

Live in Europe 1969:
The Bootleg Series, Volume 2
 Legacy, 3CD + DVD

Seems like Miles Davis had but one request of his band when he bounced from Antibes to Stockholm to Berlin during the final summer of the '60s: tear shit up. And being some of the most audacious instrumentalists of the era—full of piss, vinegar, and boundless inspiration—they complied. The music on this essential four-disc box is loaded with kinetics, the kind of crackling tension-and-release maneuvers that let you know you're listening to the most animated declarations the band has in it.

Recorded live on tour after the sessions for the electric yet ethereal *In A Silent Way* and before the studio dates that yielded the electric and exclamatory *Bitches Brew*, the action here finds the trumpeter and his cohort of saxophonist Wayne Shorter, pianist Chick Corea, bassist Dave Holland, and drummer Jack DeJohnette in pivot mode. Older, more trad tunes like "Round Midnight," "Milestones," and "Footprints" share time with the latest offerings from Shorter and Davis.

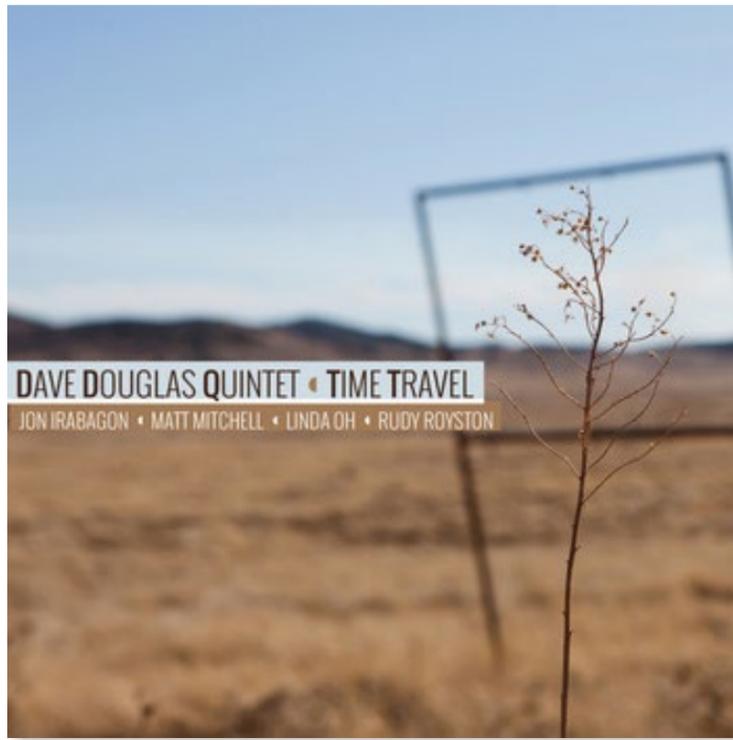


This particular outfit is often deemed "the lost band" because, as such, it never made a sanctioned disc for Davis' label of the time, Columbia. Bootlegs have floated around for years, regaled for the way the group lets the frenzy flow on stage. Now, with some of the sonics polished by Team Legacy, the ensemble's musical impact is unmistakable. There's not a moment that doesn't crackle with creativity.

One of the main revelations comes via the clarion blasts of Davis' horn. For such a ballad master, especially a ballad master whose signature was often a muted purr, the trumpeter comes out firing. His work on "Masqualero" from the July Antibes show is a series of fierce declarations—mildly screechy, fully impassioned, and loaded with

the swag that often fed his public persona. The other sparkplug here is DeJohnette, who applies grace but avoids subtlety. The vehemence that makes the music so vivid often stems from his drum kit.

The mix of swing rhythm, funk implications, and lots of free stretches translates to some of the most catholic music of Davis' oversized career. Hearing the Antibes romp through "Nefertiti" encompass all of the above and makes it seem like the band can do anything; being able to see the group pull off such feats on the DVD from Berlin proves equally edifying. With Davis sweating through the dreamy "Sanctuary," it's a reminder of the band's ardent attack. Once lost, now found. —*Jim Macnie*



Dave Douglas
Time Travel
 Greenleaf Music, CD

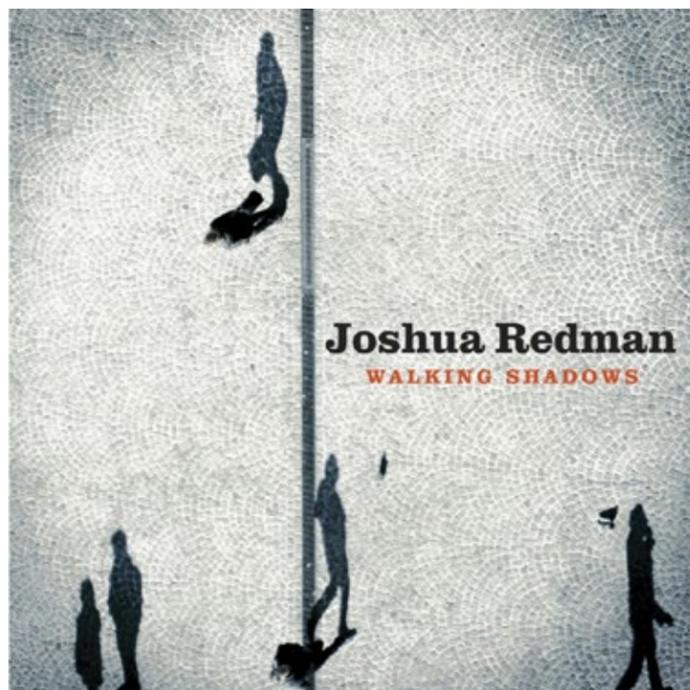
There are frolicsome moments on Dave Douglas' 2012 album *Be Still*; then again, there are frolicsome moments on all of the well-regarded trumpeter's discs. But in the large, the program is plaintive. The pieces his new sextet essayed are Protestant hymns chosen by his mom, who died the previous summer. She'd requested her son to play these particular songs at her memorial service, and aided by vocalist Aoife O'Donovan, Team Douglas performs them with a wistful tone. With an aura of elegy drifting through the entire record, the music is gorgeous, but bittersweet.



With the arrival of *Time Travel*, that aura wafts away. The new quintet outing (O'Donovan is gone) is the yin to *Be Still*'s yang, full of the jaunty, aggressive swing on which Douglas has put a personal spin for 20-plus years. It's also a delicious album on multiple levels. He's drafted a program of inviting melodies, he's corralled a handful of go-getters to juice the tunes, and he's put his keen ear towards the balance of audience-sating and envelope-pushing. Nothing radical takes place, but the squad—saxophonist Jon Irabagon, pianist Matt Mitchell, bassist Linda Oh, and drummer Rudy Royston—is about as modern as a mainstream outfit can be.

Front lines often define a jazz statement, and Irabagon's woolly explorations are a sweet match for the leader's darting horn lines. Douglas frequently enjoys episodes of polyphony (one of the benchmark maneuvers of his days with John Zorn's Masada), and the moments of ruckus he squeezes from his mates often make *Time Travel* erupt in irresistible ways. And any rhythm section with Royston at the center is bound to be explosive. Vide, the physical nature of the tunes—from "Garden State" to the title track—places the poetry of exclamation deeply in the mix.

A key Douglas strength remains his power to dispense joy. His bands usually sound like they're having a blast when they're in the middle of romp. "Beware Of Doug" and "Bridge To Nowhere" generate such collective giddiness here. The former sports a cartoonish melody (oddly, I'm seeing a city slicker trying to make his way through a field of cow patties) but the group has a serious grip on its playfulness. "Bridge To Nowhere" is all about coordination, with the collective shifting up and down with such subtlety that everything feels like it's in constant motion. That's the kind of magic that Douglas delivers on a regular basis. Having just turned 50 this winter, he's an artist with a wealth of experience behind him and lots of new ideas to test out. —*Jim Macnie*



Joshua Redman
Walking Shadows
 Nonesuch, CD

It's rather expected that jazz saxophonists make an orchestral statement at some point. The move has been in place since Bird swooped around in front of groups led by Jimmy Carroll and Joe Lipman at the end of the 40s. Gorgeous stuff has been generated in its wake, of course. I'd be lying if I said I'd never gotten goose pimples from Stan Getz's *Focus* or Joe Lovano's *Symphonica*. So Joshua Redman's new nod to this part of jazz tradition doesn't come out of left field. But the smartest thing about *Walking Shadows* is that the orchestra takes a breather now and then.

Redman is a thinker who knows about design. The orchestral tracks on the new disc—with arrangements by Brad Mehldau, Patrick Zimmerli, and Dan Coleman, who also conducts—define the program, but they're intermittently spelled by pieces sans strings. The approach makes each side of the equation that much more attractive. The transition from the stark (bass-only accompaniment) "Adagio" into the micro-fantasia of "Easy Living" is one of those memorable juxtapositions that stick with you for days.

Redman's rounded tone makes excursions through romantic themes like "Lush Life" and "Stardust" seem deeply natural. There's a fair amount of improvising, but he also milks the melodies of these ballads, and rightly so: His horn fits the scenery. Yet squalls aren't avoided in the name of sentiment. By the time The Beatles' "Let It Be" concludes, he's wrung the chorus dry.

The disc's quartet of pianist Mehldau, bassist Larry Grenadier, and drummer Brian Blade is comprised of old pals, and here, they work as one. On Wayne Shorter's "Infant Eyes," they wrap the string arrangement around them as if it were a flashy fur cowl. It's one of the disc's most compelling performances, as is Mehldau's "Last Glimpse of Gotham," which has a feel of prairie noir, and finds Redman waxing as lyrical as ever.

That said, the saxophonist's "Final Hour" is the most haunting piece at hand. At his best, Redman can make a plaintive meditation sound "orchestral" with just a piano and bass beside him.
 —*Jim Macnie*

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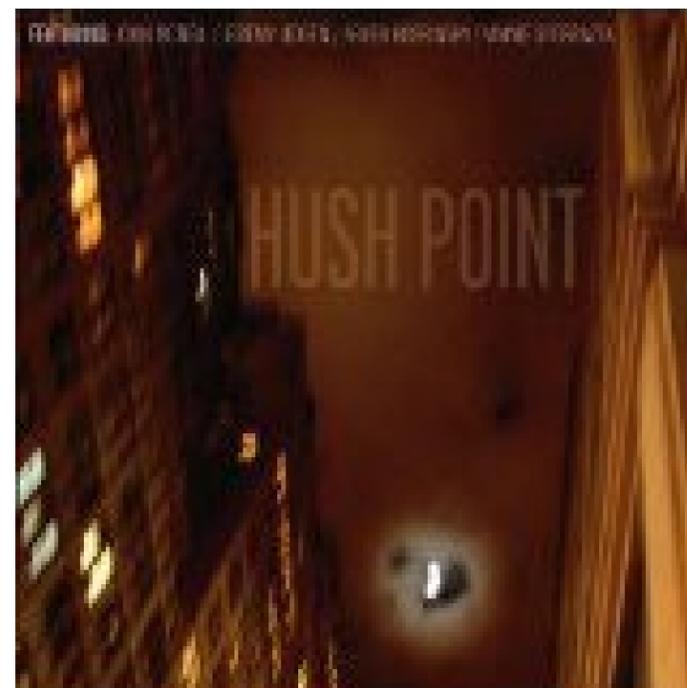


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Hush Point

Hush Point
Sunnyside, CD

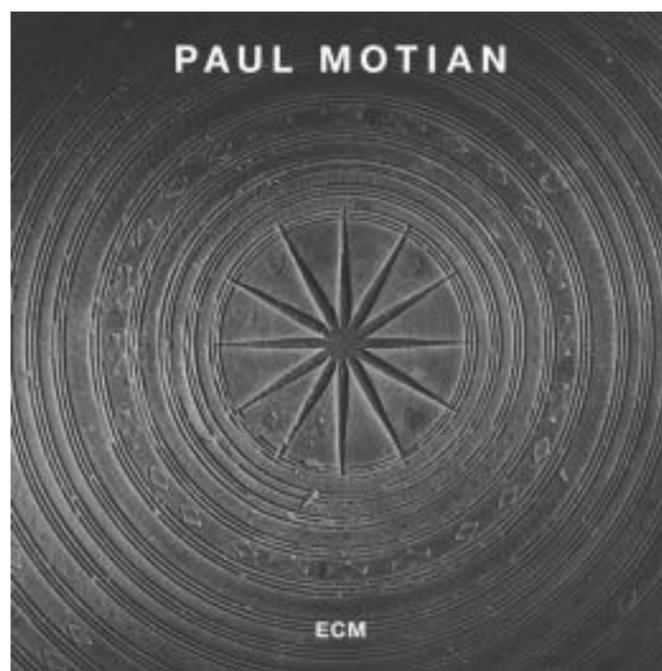
For the last several years, John McNeil has made records that play off of the cool jazz that dominated the West Coast scene during 50s. In his mid-60s, the trumpeter usually opts for clever designs rather than blazing chops and often finds a younger saxophone foil to accommodate his ideas and humor. Everyone from Bill McHenry to Noah Preminger to Allan Chase has stood shoulder to shoulder with him. Together, they've made a case for the calm and composed being as evocative as the blaring and expressionistic.

Hush Point, a new quartet that finds McNeil in a cohort of saxophonist Jeremy Udden, bassist Aryeh Kobrinsky, and drummer Vinnie Sperrazza, follows a path similar to its predecessors, but with a twist: The record is a bit more muted than previous discs. "Yeah, this is my quiet band," he told me in passing a few months ago. Indeed, from Stan Getz to Lee Konitz to Jimmy Giuffre, bandleaders that stressed a measured approach rather than a *cri de coeur* populated the 50s. On its self-titled debut, Hush Point follows suit. Each of its instruments revel in their own unique sound, and allow quiet to be a very effective fifth member.

Udden is a head-turner in this game (don't miss his recent *Folk Art*). His alto sax is arid, wise, and enticing, a la Paul Desmond. The less sound that surrounds him—the quartet arrangements occasionally find a member of the band disappearing, or at least, sitting quietly in the corner—the more impact his lines have. His alignment with McNeil is tight, and their agility helps shoot off sparks. On Giuffre's "The Train And the River," a pulsing classic from the cool jazz era, they parallel each other while still providing individual statements. The McNeil original "Get Out" works the same way, while benefiting from Kobrinsky and Sperrazza's nonchalant lift-off.

If the West Coast scene was always a tad too sunny, these guys manage to inject a shadow or two while still keeping its DNA intact. There's a curt cluster of gnarled interplay that punctuates the otherwise breezy "Peachful" that let's you know we're still in 2013, and though fleeting, it strikes a useful balance, lining a chipper tune with momentary tension without harshing its mellow.

—Jim Macnie



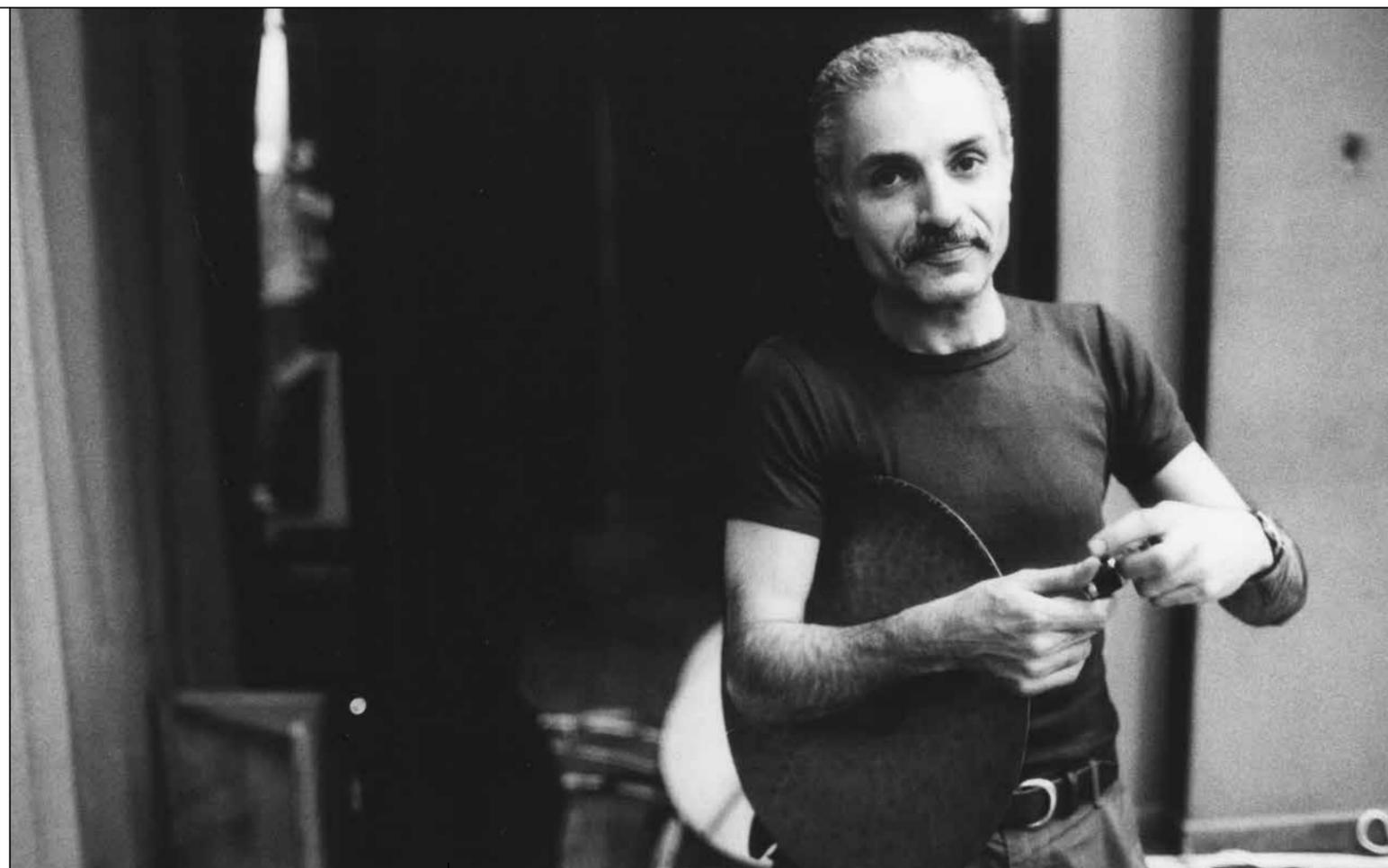
Paul Motian

Old & New Masters
ECM, 6CD box set

Jazz loves inspired eccentrics. So the fact that Paul Motian was a beloved figure for the last several decades shouldn't surprise anyone mildly familiar with the music. Not everyone knows his name, of course. The drummer/bandleader constantly performed, but wasn't the most high-visual artist around. In the years before his death in autumn of 2011, he worked in NYC exclusively (plane travel was a foe). If you wanted to see him create his decidedly idiosyncratic version of swing, you had to hit Manhattan.

This new six-disc box set unites the initial albums Motian made for the ECM label, his first dates as a leader after earning a rep as Bill Evans' drummer (he's key to the magic found on the 1961 classic *Sunday at the Village Vanguard*), and foil for Keith Jarrett (ditto for the equally classic *Fort Yawuh*, also cut at the Vanguard). A cagey improviser who knew a well-designed series of taps, rattles, and flutters could be just as potent as more established rhythm strategies, he figured out how to get a wealth of ensembles to maneuver through his somewhat folkish and often mysterious compositions. He liked mood, he liked sound, he liked aura. The music in this set makes that clear.

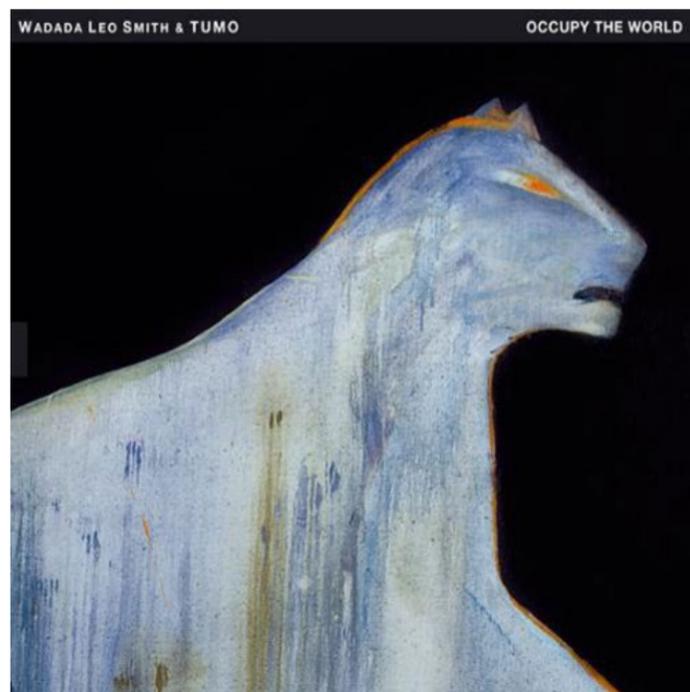
During this time frame, Motian kept his bands in flux. 1971's *Conception Vessel* stretches from plinking strings to trap solos to a duo exchange with Jarrett. Flute and violin make their way into the mix as well. By '74's *Tribute*, he'd found a way to blend two guitars with an earthy alto sax, and the exploratory grooves he refined with bassist Charlie Haden (in Jarrett's band) became some of jazz's most compelling. By '77's *Dance*, he connected with fellow traveler Charles Brackeen, a gritty reed player whose blues vocabulary is both immediate and spacey. Caprice is the through-line of Motian's ongoing approach. As somber as some of these performances are, whimsy drives their invention. The bandleader encouraged his groups to feel out the music and take the improvisations wherever the process suggested.



© Photo by Roberto Masotti

There are no truly extended excursions here, but even the four-minute "Kalypso" enjoys a rolling fluidity. Turn your back on it for a sec and it seems like it could spill on forever. By 1981's *Psalm*, the drummer found two key compatriots, guitarist Bill Frisell and saxophonist Joe Lovano. The quintet that makes the album's music has an orchestral flavor, perhaps due as much to Frisell's effects box as the leader's pen—and the signature Motian eeriness dominates the action as well. "Fantasm" may be born on terra firma, but it lives in the clouds.

By the time the drummer chips the ensemble down to a trio for the masterful *It Should Have Happened A Long Time Ago...*, one of the most unique band sounds in jazz history is up and running. Motian's brushes, Lovano's long tones, and Frisell's moonscapes nurture the group's dreamy nature. Like a modern version of the Modern Jazz Quartet, the players use grace as their calling card, even when they are raising the roof. Motian would go on to make many more records (don't miss his long stretch of pips on the Winter+Winter label), but this set shows that many of the ideas he wanted to test through his life were on his palette right at the beginning. —*Jim Macnie*


Wadada Leo Smith & TUMO

Occupy The World
TUM, 2CD

Exploration remains one of jazz's root elements, and Wadada Leo Smith doesn't pick up his horn unless points unknown are psychically circled in red on the road map. The 71-year-old trumpeter-composer's interaction with the TUMO orchestra (a one-time collection of Nordic improvisers gathered specifically to bring improvisational savvy to these five extended Smith pieces) is based largely on the investigatory vibe of Smith's charts.

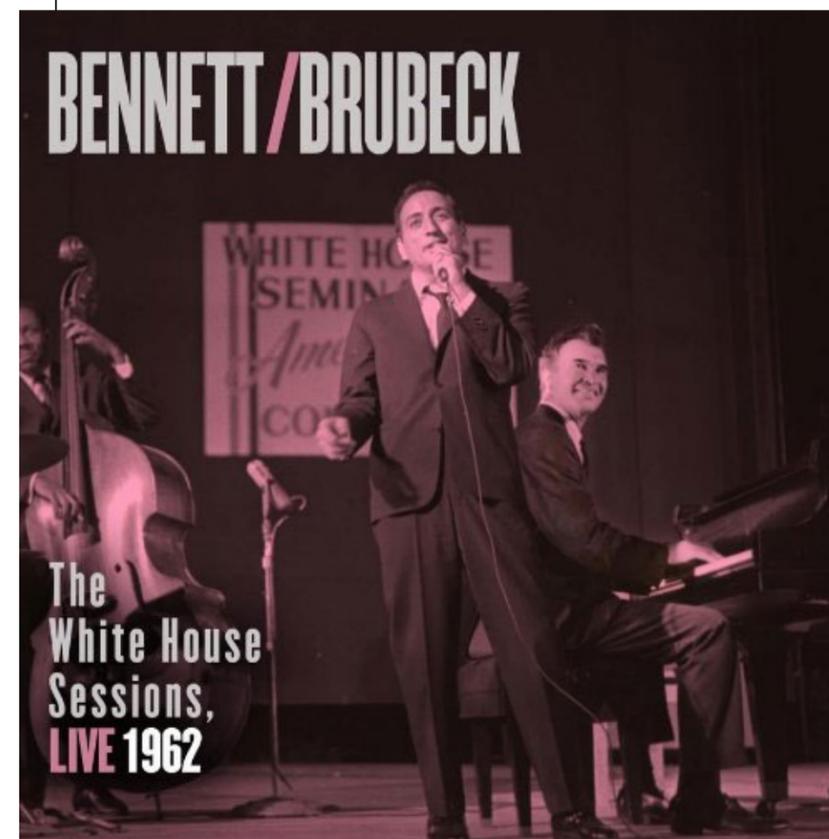
Occupy the World isn't pretty music in the luminous ways of, say, late 50s Miles & Gil. Indeed, it's provocative, dissonant, and ominous. Smith's roots as a member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians—the groundbreaking Chicago collective that brokered valuable iconoclastic ideas—are as strong as ever here. But “pretty” is just another term that's up for grabs in 2013. The more I listen to this double-disc set, the more I hear the sentiment at its core. “I do not believe in reducing the sonic field to a singular tonal spectrum,” Smith offers in the album notes. If you believe that sentiment contains extended moments of tumult, call it a victory for poetic agitation.

Take the Mississippi native's dedication to his pal Marion Brown, “Crossing On A Southern Road.” Smith has the 21-member TUMO cohort essay the rural South of his youth with a vibe that borrows from Bernard Herrmann much more it does Aaron Copland. Strings drone and percussion chatters; menacing crescendos dot the landscape. Smith's horn keens in sharp blasts. It's an apt bookend to Brown's 1970 pastoral abstraction, *Afternoon of a Georgia Faun*.

Smith gives his charges plenty to do. “Queen Hatshepsut” boasts percussion features, reed forays, and a flute digression. In several ways, this is TUMO's show as well. “The Bell-2,” an update of an early Smith piece first recorded

on Anthony Braxton's seminal *3 Compositions of New Jazz*, finds the trumpeter delivering his steely resounds. But a blend of electronics, guitar, and tuba shares the foreground with him.

By the time “Mount Kilimanjaro” arrives with an extended bass foray by longtime Smith associate John Lindberg, it's obvious the composer's palette contains innumerable hues (he's actually been showing us this since 1979's *Budding Of A Rose*, an overlooked large ensemble disc). From the intricate turbulence of the title track to the opening flutter of “Queen Hatshepsut,” the breadth of textures and design strategies are both coherent and compelling. —*Jim Macnie*


Tony Bennett and Dave Brubeck

The White House Sessions, Live 1962
Columbia/Legacy, CD

When lost jazz tapes are found, it can be like manna from heaven. Vide, after being mislabeled in the vaults for a half century, this recently unearthed date from two jazz masters arrives as an unexpected treat.

With JFK in the Oval Office, Tony Bennett and Dave Brubeck hit DC to bring their music to college students working in the city for the summer—an apt audience given the fact that Brubeck previously cut records at Oberlin and various other campuses. The vocalist and pianist hadn't previously played together, but were both in a strong spot. *(continued)*

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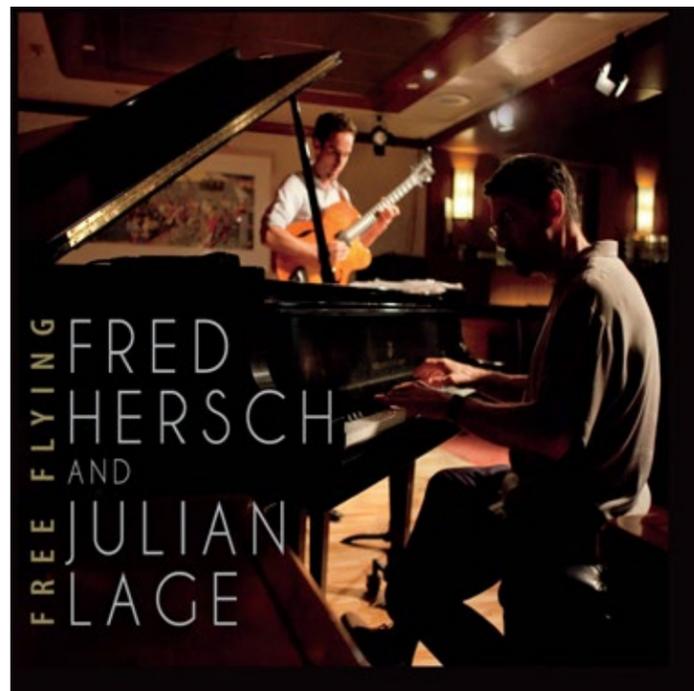
Bennett's soon-to-be-iconic single "I Left My Heart In San Francisco" had dropped two weeks prior, and Brubeck's groundbreaking *Take Five* exploded his visibility back in '59. Each led his own set at the Washington Monument's Sylvan Theater, and then, in an impromptu move, did what jazz musicians are wont to do: took a chance at playing together.

The four tunes that find the stars connecting are more overtly jazzy than the six Bennett sings with his usual crew (led by ever-reliable pianist Ralph Sharon). The Brubeck Quartet (saxophonist Paul Desmond sits out on the vocal sessions) was a keenly interactive outfit, and from the chattering "Lullaby Of Broadway" to the splashy "Chicago," Bennett and band have fun injecting the standards with plenty of élan. The hopped-up beat of "That Old Black Magic" liberates the singer and gives the pianist just enough rope to throw fancy lassos around his phrases. Marked differences exist between this set and that with Bennett and

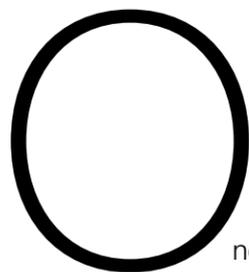
Sharon. A pop sensibility dominates the latter while, conversely, a caution-to-the-wind vibe permeates the air when Brubeck gets involved. Both participants sound ready to romp.

Four pieces offered up by the Quartet are equally intriguing. A palpable physicality marks "Nomad," a tune the ever-cosmopolitan leader introduces as being built around "simple Middle Eastern rhythms." Like the Modern Jazz Quartet, this group claims a distinct brand of precision that nonetheless offers plenty of elbowroom for interaction. Drummer Joe Morello puts true force into the piece's tom-tom opening, and Desmond generates ample liftoff for his swinging solo. Throughout "Thank You (Djiekujie)" and "Castilian Blues," the instrumentalists pepper each other with pithy ideas that make their mark and move on. Akin to tracks on which Bennett joins, the results are marked by an improviser's sense of play.

Earthshaking revelation? Not really. But lots of fun. —*Jim Macnie*



Fred Hersch and Julian Lage
Free Flying
 Palmetto, CD



One of the first records that secured my love of jazz was Jim Hall & Bill Evans' *Undercurrent*, a 1962 guitar-piano duet in which every note is insightfully placed and the rapport deepens as the interplay rolls along. It's the album I have on my mind while absorbing the music of *Free Flying*.

There have been other fetching guitar-piano sessions since: Pat Metheny and Brad Mehldau waxed a beaut, and Joe Morris' romp with Matthew Shipp should be searched out by any fan. But this is a date that just might make the subgenre's short list, an exchange where communication and poise conspire to create true brilliance.

Pianist Hersch tips the hat to Hall on "Stealthiness," a piece that overtly echoes the counterpoint that marks *Undercurrent* (and its mate, *Intermodulation*). In the press notes, 25-year-old guitarist Lage says that part of his goal for this live date was to "oppose" the lines his 57-year-old partner had just played. He goes about it in a captivating way. Whether waxing fluid, or dropping a series of jagged zigzags, the flurry of complementary gambits doesn't stop. Hersch, a modern piano master whose mainstream parlance is often peppered with leftie lingo, pushes boundaries as diligently as he genuflects to melody. The designs he steadily offers his partner are inviting and provocative.

Fireworks open the disc. "Song Without Words" seems stately, but there's a tempest in the fugue-like approach. A jaunty spin on Sam Rivers' "Beatrice" lets each player demonstrate some flash as well. By the time "Monk's Dream" closes the set, the dynamics have been established. Chemistry is paramount, and these guys finish each other's sentences like an old married couple.
 —*Jim Macnie*

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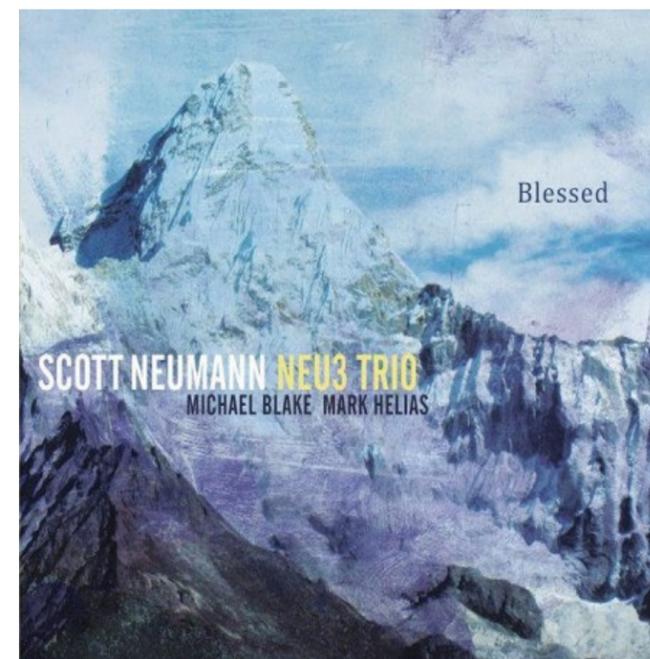
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MUSIC



Scott Neumann Neu3 Trio

Blessed

Origin, CD

Sometimes success is a byproduct of simple chemistry. The members of drummer Scott Neumann's Neu3 Trio don't boast the largest profiles in jazz. Neither do they arrive with lofty concepts about the way the music should change. Indeed, *Blessed* makes its mark by betting the farm on two of jazz's bedrock elements: grace and rigor.

Neumann enlists saxophonist Michael Blake and bassist Mark Helias for this date, and the loose-limbed trio seems juiced by the possibilities of freedom while nodding to the guideposts of composition.

Which means these New Yorkers grab a handful of blowing vehicles penned by the leader and squeeze them in all sorts of ways until something valuable emerges. That doesn't take long. While there's plenty of leash given to each soloist, the eloquence of their group interaction looms large. This music isn't overly preened, but the cohesion is remarkable. Everything—from the momentary eruptions to the nuanced fades—feels natural. It's remarkable when a band's teamwork is an album's defining trait.

Blake's horn shines throughout. He's a freebop kingpin and an expert on the subtleties of trio dynamics (check last year's *Union Square* with Ben Allison and Rudy Royston). Here, his game is all about balance. Low-register purring, pithy squalls, thoughtful long tone; he rides the mercurial grooves presented by Helias and Neumann with a wealth of good ideas. A nod to Dewey Redman's buzzy blues growl starts Roswell Rudd's "Keep Your Heart Right," and as the three players nudge each other into different directions, Blake proves a slow simmer can be as impressive as a vigorous boil.

Along the way, Helias makes a case for agility. His own Open Loose group works a similar territory as this band, and the pliability of his instrument becomes more and more articulate with each year. Neumann seems to know exactly how to tickle these guys. Whether feathering around or nudging the action forward, he makes a measured approach seem sage. Congrats to him for rounding up a crew that makes deep swing and personalized approaches carry the day.

—Jim Macnie


Gregory Porter

Liquid Spirit
Blue Note, 2LP or CD

During the past couple of years, Gregory Porter has become the jazz singer that jazz fans were anticipating. He possesses a commanding baritone, but never uses it for empty drama. Porter infuses standards with his own personality, yet is also a compelling songwriter. He started to receive attention in the jazz media around 2010 with the release of *Water*, an applause that kept building with *Be Good* two years later. Both discs are on the respected indie label Motéma, but with Porter's signing to Blue Note, the potential for a global audience has skyrocketed.

On *Liquid Spirit*, Porter keeps the same approach he took on his earlier efforts. He's held onto his working group and producer Brian Bacchus. Eleven of the 14 tracks are Porter's own compositions. Yet his phrasing keeps getting stronger, and time has made his band more cohesive.

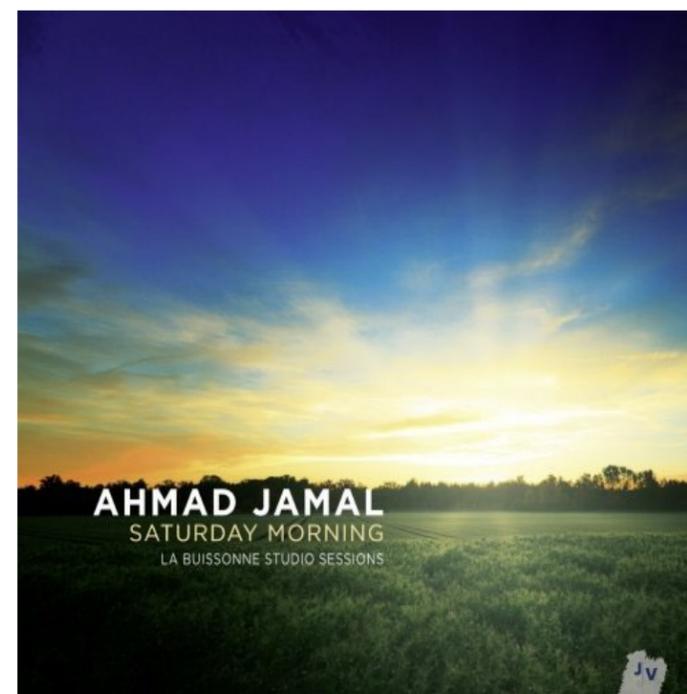
On the opening "No Love Dying," Porter's conversational approach matches the sense of determination in his lyrics. Only at the coda, on top of Chip Crawford's intuitive piano lines, does he delve into the gospel moans that were part of his early training. But on the title piece that follows, Porter has a more aggressive delivery, as if he's left the choir for the pulpit. Like Oscar Brown, Jr., he also uses the vernacular pronunciation—rhyming "drink" and "tank"—and makes it work. Aaron James' bass line provides an ideal melodic counterpoint. Porter's band also shines on its interpretation of Abbey Lincoln/Max Roach's "Lonesome Lover." Considering the source, drummer Emanuel Harrold sounds more prominent here. Alto saxophonist Yosuke Sato also emerges as more fully integrated into the group than he sounds on *Be Good*.

Porter's key strength may be his sense of restraint, like on the ballad "Water Under Bridges," when he waits until the coda to drag out the vowel in the word "burned," or how his voice conveys vulnerability in "Wolfcry."

He's just as convincing projecting defiance on "Musical Genocide." His sharp songwriting on the succinct "Hey Laura" and "Movin'" owe as much to R&B as jazz. Indeed, if radio programmers had the latitude and influence they held in the 70s, Porter could be marketed along the lines of one of his heroes, Donny Hathaway.

Of course, none of this takes away from his improvisation throughout *Liquid Spirit*. On "Free," he attacks the song's lines from different directions at an incredible pace. He expands on the Ramsey Lewis and Dobie Gray hit "The In Crowd" without resorting to pseudo-hipster jive, the unfortunate domain of other contemporary male jazz vocalists.

Liquid Spirit ends with a triumphant version of Sammy Cahn's jazz standard "I Fall In Love Too Easily." With just Crawford and James' accompaniment, Porter's deft use of space makes his sudden leaps that much more compelling. Minimalism suits him. —**Aaron Cohen**


Ahmad Jamal

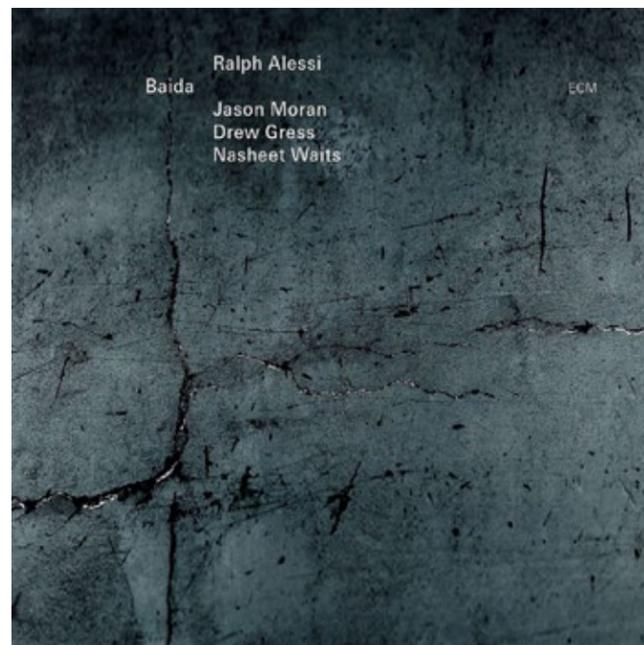
Saturday Morning
Jazzbook Records, CD

Songs within songs within songs within songs: For more than a half century, Ahmad Jamal has made his mark by peppering standards and originals with inventive asides. Rather than developing a theme and hurdling to some elaborate and emotional dénouement, he drills into a melody to further its features, basing his art on added value. Listening to the music on *Saturday Morning*, which finds the 83-year-old virtuoso typically leading a small ensemble, you get the feeling there are 50 or so tracks on the album. Each of the micro excursions Jamal takes within the 11 pieces seems elaborate and catchy enough to be its own song.

OK, that's a smidge of an overstatement, but it conveys the thoughtful design sensibility that guides Jamal's improv process. The songs themselves are ditties or mood pieces or riff tunes. The pianist seems to have little commitment to the starting point of these tracks. He's much more focused on what he gets to concoct along the way. And he's pithy about it. A double-time storm of notes here, a bouncy breakdown there. Idea after idea flies by. You never know where he's going to turn, only that the turning will be continual.

"One (Ahad)" is all about groove, with bassist Reginald Veal, drummer Herlin Riley, and percussionist Manolo Badrena setting up a glorious rhythm pattern and letting the boss use it as a toehold for all sorts of eruptions. There's a Morse code flavor to the rather astonishing flurries that leap from his keyboard. Even a warhorse like "I'm In The Mood For Love" gets shaken a bit. Jamal accents unexpected passages, reframes chunks of the original structure, and messes with the tune's emotional impact. Each of the flourishes is insightful, lasting just a moment, but long enough to add perspective.

—**Jim Macnie**



Ralph Alessi

Baida
ECM, CD

Trumpeter Ralph Alessi has played a crucial part in New York as a musician and teacher for more than a dozen years. He's worked alongside saxophonist Steve Coleman and pianist Uri Caine while also serving as founder and director of the non-profit School For Improvisational Music. But while his tone, resourcefulness, and educational initiatives have earned him his colleagues' respect, Alessi has yet to receive the wider recognition he deserves. That should change with the release of his ECM debut.

Here, Alessi keeps the same core group from *Cognitive Dissonance*, released on the Italian CamJazz label three years ago. The big change? The entire set is comprised of his own compositions. They sound written as if to give all the accomplished players in his quartet plenty of stretching room.



l-r Nasheet Waits, Drew Gress, Ralph Alessi and Jason Moran

The disc begins with the title track. (After a frustrating Google search for a translation of "Baida," the disc's press material reveals it's Alessi's infant daughter's term for "blanket.") Alessi's slurred notes hover faintly above drummer Nasheet Waits. Pianist Jason Moran builds from an initially delicate upper register as the group circles around him, Alessi gliding between an open and muted attack.

Seemingly, the quiet tone of "Chuck Barris" (named after the "Gong Show" host and "Palisades

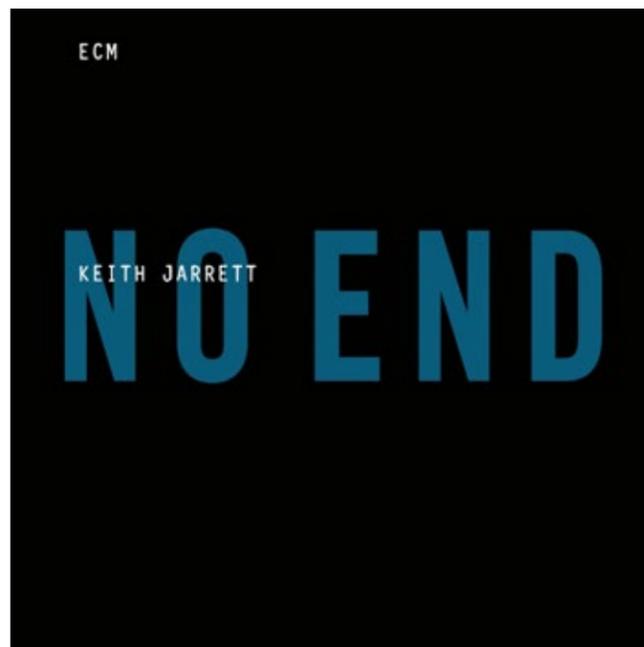
Park" songwriter) doesn't match the subject's persona. But even if Alessi refrains from overt gags (like Barris, or, for that matter, trumpeter Steven Bernstein), there is humor here: It's in how the band mates chase each other before Drew Gress' bass lines kick in, and the way Alessi's muted tone contrasts Waits' martial rattle before it all coalesces at the end. On "Gobble Goblins," Alessi and Moran's repeated staccato phrases sound as if the two are egging each other on. Alessi takes flight, Moran

doesn't. Moran then expands on the theme over subtle shifts from Gress and Waits. Likewise, the trumpeter makes astute use of adding such effects as growls and blending them into Moran's warm melodic lines on "I Go, You Go."

Alessi has done considerable work in refining such instrumental dialogue this year. He also released a strong duo with Fred Hersch a few months ago, *Only Many* (CamJazz). But on *Baida* he also revisits unpredictable trumpet and drum exchanges from the days

of Don Cherry and Ed Blackwell, contrasting upper register squeals with Waits' rolls on "11/1/10."

The group also excels on such slower pieces as "Sanity" and "Maria Lydia." On the latter, Alessi and Moran's facility with classical technique opens the composition, a tribute to Alessi's late mother, Maria Leone, an opera singer. No doubt she'd be proud.
—Aaron Cohen

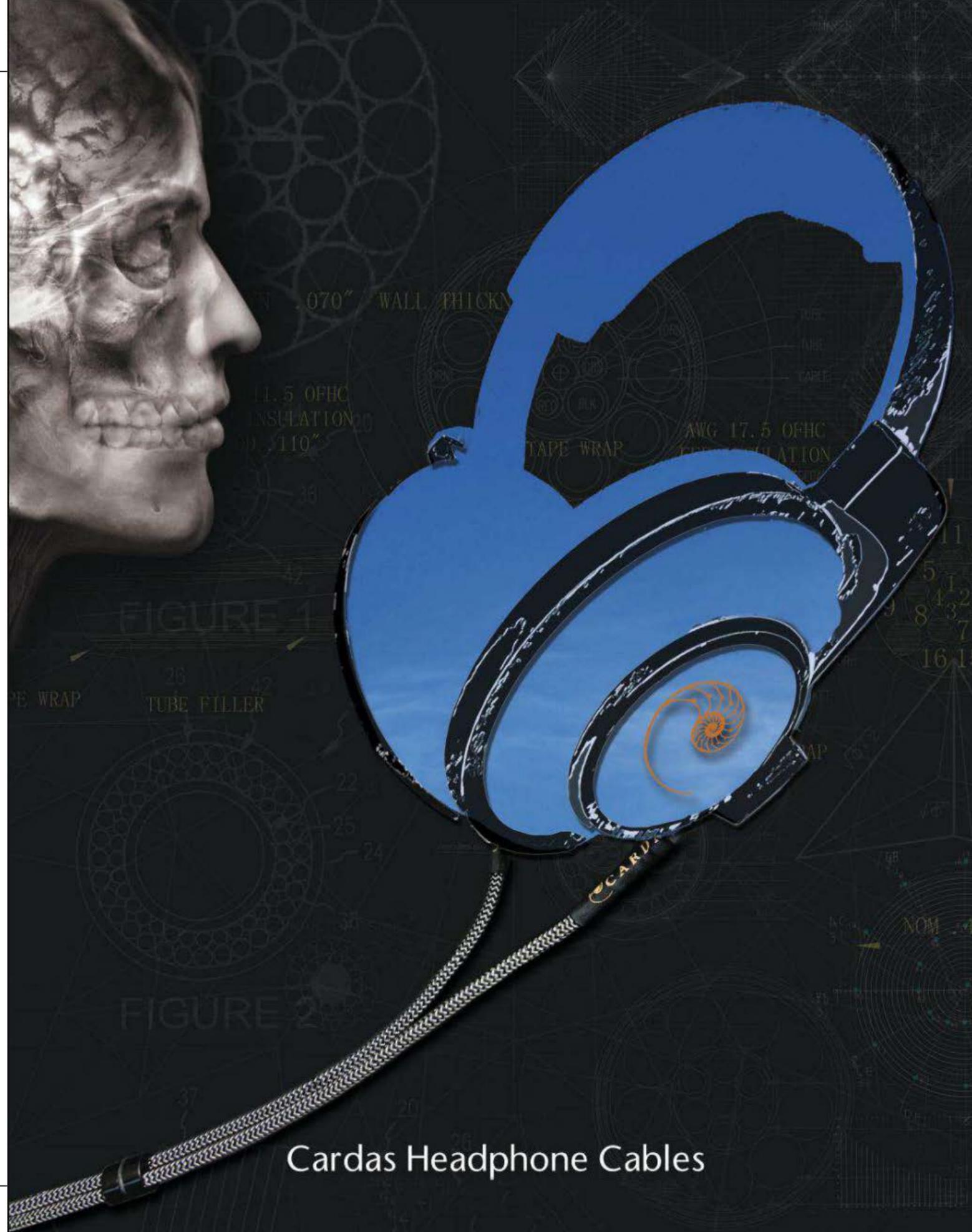


Keith Jarrett
No End
 ECM, 2 CD

Keith Jarrett has been known for always taking different detours—leaving aside even his unpredictable performances. But *No End* may be the strangest recording of the jazz and classical pianist's career.

The two-disc set documents home studio recordings he made in 1986. Jarrett overdubbed himself playing electric guitar, bass, and percussion. While there are no fully formed pieces as such, he assigned a Roman numeral to each of the 19 tracks spread across the collection. Only at the end of “X” does he include a piano. So for his legions of admirers that hang on his every touch of a keyboard, *No End* comes with a considerable caveat. And while this kind of project lends itself to some directionless noodling, more goes on here than mere self-indulgence.

In the liner notes, Jarrett explains “although I have a reputation for being in the acoustic world, I have always loved the electric guitar.”
(continued)



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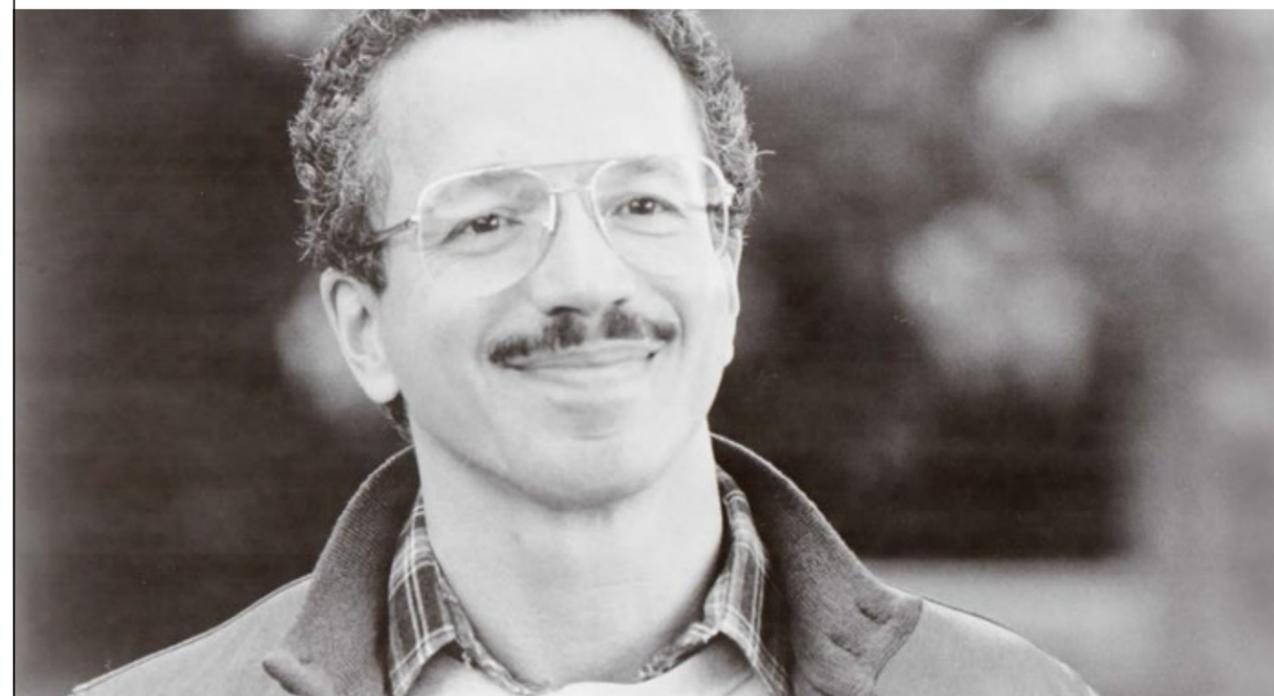


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Keith Jarrett (circa 1986)

©Photo by Toshinari Koinuma

He also traces his percussive compulsion to when he tapped celery sticks on the dinner table at the age of three (same age that he started his piano lessons). And Jarrett displays distinctive voices on these instruments, even if they're not as formidable as his main one.

Perhaps it's the drumming, the way Jarrett's notes seem to weave around the scales, or his background ululations, that make *No End* seemingly convey Middle Eastern tonalities, especially on "I" and "XI." Then there's "V," which sounds like an off-kilter calypso. Other tracks convey a propulsive sense of movement, especially via the way he uses cymbals on "IV." Even though Jarrett has never been a rocker, "III" sounds like if Creedence

Clearwater Revival jammed at the coda of "Born On The Bayou." He also gets surprisingly funky, like on "II." On "X," his strident piano chords buttress his sharp guitar lines.

A few tracks, like "XII," contain sketches of what could have become great compositions. (If they mutated into such on subsequent albums, he doesn't say so in the notes.) Likewise, the progression of tracks on the first and second disc doesn't convey a discernible arc. Then again, such a structure would contradict the nature of *No End*. Still, about 20 minutes of the package could have been easily cut to make it all fit on a single disc without any artistic diminishment.

"VI" and "XVII," in particular, could be removed without artistic compromise.

What may be more frustrating, however, is that this project indicates some missed opportunities. Listening to this recording today makes one wonder what a collaboration between Jarrett and, perhaps, Jerry Garcia and Mickey Hart would have sounded like. The notion isn't far-fetched—the Dead members jammed with Ornette Coleman and David Murray in the early 1990s. Say what you will about lengthy Grateful Dead jams. By the 1980s, they had become old pros at this sort of thing.

—Aaron Cohen



Mostly Other People Do The Killing

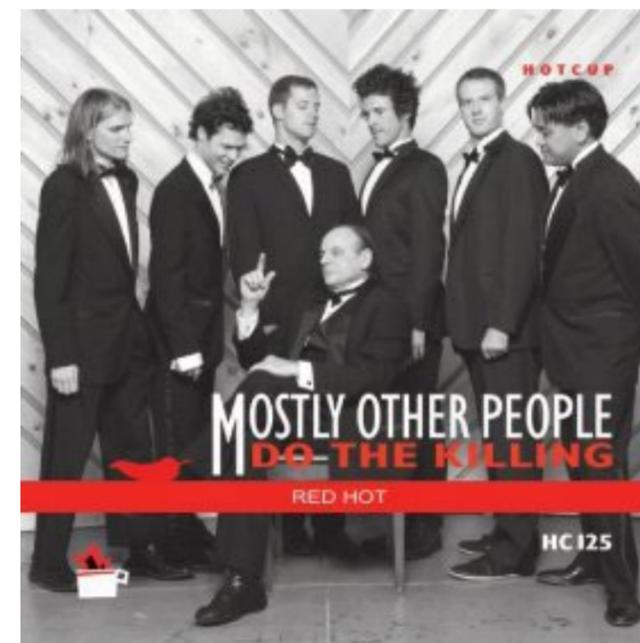
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odernist deconstructions of a trad jazz genre aren't exactly new, but in the right hands, they can still be a hoot. Such is the general vibe of these two unruly and dizzying albums. The joyous blare of free jazz is acknowledged by both acts, but it's used in support of overt swing rhythms that hark to the early days of King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, and other New Orleans outfits.

Mostly Other People Do the Killing (MOPDTK) has a lock on messing with accepted jazz designs. The quartet is made up of killer players who've earned a rep for blending sass and silliness. To some degree, the original tunes on *Red Hot* make hay by going too far over into the giddiness department. They milk the razzmatazz aspects of Dixieland while cranking out super-tight and ultra-witty solos. Augmented by banjo player Brandon Seabrook, bass trombonist David Taylor, and pianist Ron Stabinsky, the quartet sounds richer than it has on its previous five discs. Each newcomer proves an asset, bolstering the polyphony and bringing specific textures to the table.

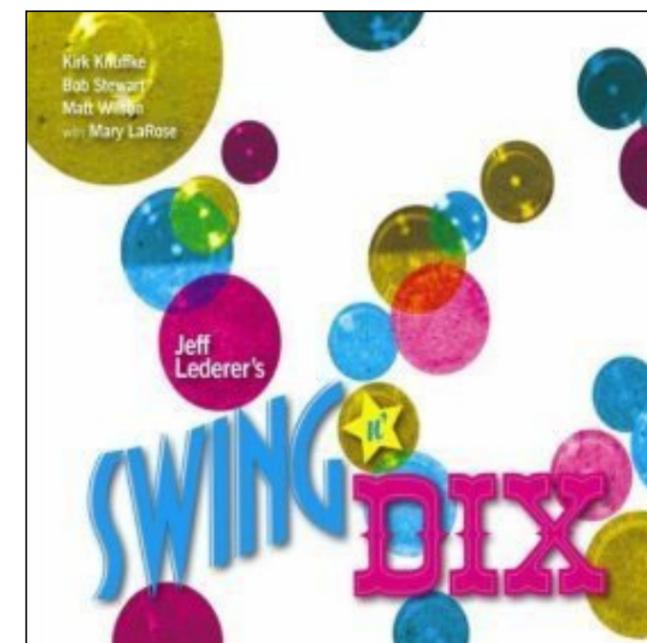
To a certain extent, the action plays like John Zorn's early Naked City experiments—genres get chopped and channeled quick. Stabinsky's "King of Prussia" solo conflates everything from Scott Joplin to Joe Jackson in the blink of an ear. Listen particularly to the intro nattering of "Turkey Foot Corner," which morphs into the melody with as much gnarly grace as anyone could ever expect. *(continued)*

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Mostly Other People Do the Killing

Red Hot
Hot Cup, CD



Jeff Lederer
Swing n' Dix
Little(i)Music, CD

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Kirk Knuffke, Bob Stewart, Matt Wilson, and Jeff Lederer of Swing n' Dix

The interplay on Jeff Lederer's *Swing n' Dix* is similar. The Brooklyn saxophonist grabs tuba pro Bob Stewart, drummer Matt Wilson, cornetist Kirk Knuffke, and singer Mary LaRose for a romp through tunes that hark to NOLA laments and Chicago stomps. An inverted "Honeysuckle Rose," a boo-hoo "Pee Wee's Blues," and a swaggering stroll around Duke Pearson's "E.S.P." all nudge animation front and center.

However, the group sounds most valuable when playing its own pieces. Wilson's "Nibble" lets the bandleader uncork a sweet clarinet rally, and Knuffke's "Silver Spade" is a funeral march that opens the door to an ethereal wail from Stewart. It's right around here that the smirks become secondary and the heart of the music emerges.

Indeed, that's the best aspect of these projects. As the music grows on you, the twain really does meet. It's hard to tell where the trad designs begin and pomo perspectives end.

—Jim Macnie



Robert Glasper Experiment

Black Radio 2

Blue Note, 2LP or CD

Pianist Robert Glasper took a successful turn with his 2012 *Black Radio* album. Calling his new group the Robert Glasper Experiment and delving into contemporary R&B, rap, and anthemic rock, he deliberately put his considerable skills as a jazz improviser in the back seat. Usually, the guest vocalists—rather than his technique—were front and center. What he retained from his jazz experience is the principle that tracks should be recorded live.



©Photo by Janette Beckman

Glasper repeats the plan on the sequel. He's also strengthened the project's core. The rhythm section—especially bassist Derrick Hodge and drummer Mark Colenburg—especially sounds more solidified. Most of the record is also comprised of Glasper's own, or co-written, compositions (except for the closer, a cover of Stevie Wonder's "Jesus Children"). However, the work ebbs and flows with the varying abilities of each guest.

Like with the first volume, several singers on *Black Radio 2* emerged during the 1990s' hip-hop influenced neo-soul movement, and some sound stronger here than they had when they burst on the scene a dozen or so years

ago. Brandy casually shows off a solid range and sharp rhythmic dialogue with Colenburg and Glasper's Rhodes on "What Are We Doing." Jill Scott improvises fine scatted lines on "Calls." Others, like Anthony Hamilton on "Yet To Find," tend to over-emote, but even here, Glasper's simmering lines provide a fine instrumental frame.

Rappers also show up on *Black Radio 2* to mixed results. Common delivers the consciousness-minded lyrics of "I Stand Alone" with usual convincing determination; Glasper's chords and Colenburg's accents provide astute commentary. Still, Snoop Dogg, as always, sounds somnambulant on "Persevere."

Sometimes, contrasting approaches within a given track works. Norah Jones' slow drawl on "Let It Ride" is set against rapid electronic beats, and the outcome gives *Black Radio 2* a needed jolt of energy. Interestingly enough, Jones is part of a similar dichotomy with the fast sitar lines on her sister Anoushka Shankar's new *Traces Of You*. Lalah Hathaway closes *Black Radio 2* by appearing on "Jesus Children." The singer's delivery so closely resembles her departed father Donny that can't she can't help but invoke chills. Glasper's understated piano lines add the right amount of accents and shadings.

When Glasper brought the Experiment to the Chicago Jazz Festival this past summer, his heavy reliance on the vocoder ruined the performance—the device makes singers sound like they're gargling with polyurethane. Casey Benjamin uses it sparingly here. Still, it almost derails "Baby Tonight (Black Radio 2 Theme)." And rather than an array of electronic effects and army of guest vocalists, *Black Radio 2* could have used a greater variety of beats. Aside from "Let It Ride," the tracks generally move along to a slow, or midtempo, groove. A frenzied appearance from someone like Janelle Monáe would have done wonders to shake things up. —**Aaron Cohen**

It's fun to hear jazz players careen off each other. The music's physical aspect is one of its most compelling attractions. But poise will always have a permanent place in improv. Grace is a blessing, whether it's tempering otherwise blustery maneuvers or acting as the dominant guide through a performance, as it does on this luminous ballads album by Jane Ira Bloom.

The soprano saxophonist has a plush tone, but it's the fluid way she crafts her lines that makes her music resonate with such warmth. Calibration is primary here; the well-considered weight she applies to each phrase reveals the amount of engagement she brings to her performances. That's what you hear on *Sixteen Sunsets*: it's the sound of deep equilibrium. The lineup—pianist Domenic Fallacaro, bassist Cameron Brown, and drummer Matt Wilson—provides a comfy background just as much as it does an assertive counterpoint. The players' role of serving the melodies also winds up enhancing Bloom's swooping horn trajectories.

In the large, this is a standards program. The saxophonist's long tones in "Out Of This World" and "Left Alone" parallel the well-known lyrics and milk the emotions at hand, whether joyous or forlorn. As Bloom's horn glides through this airspace, you truly get the idea that she's a vocalist of sorts as well. "The Way You Look Tonight" and, especially, the solo "My Ship" sing in their own unique way. Each feels like a soft caress.

Bloom's originals are snuggled into the concept, too. "Ice Dancing (For Torvill & Dean)" picks up the tempo but still resounds with the wise lyricism that marks the entire album. By the time "Bird Experiencing Light" closes the set, its gentility seems cut from the same cloth as the classics that precede it. Like the MJQ's most sublime moments, *Sixteen Sunsets* yields the kind of elegance that always sounds heartfelt.
—Jim Macnie



Jane Ira Bloom
Sixteen Sunsets
Outline 141, CD

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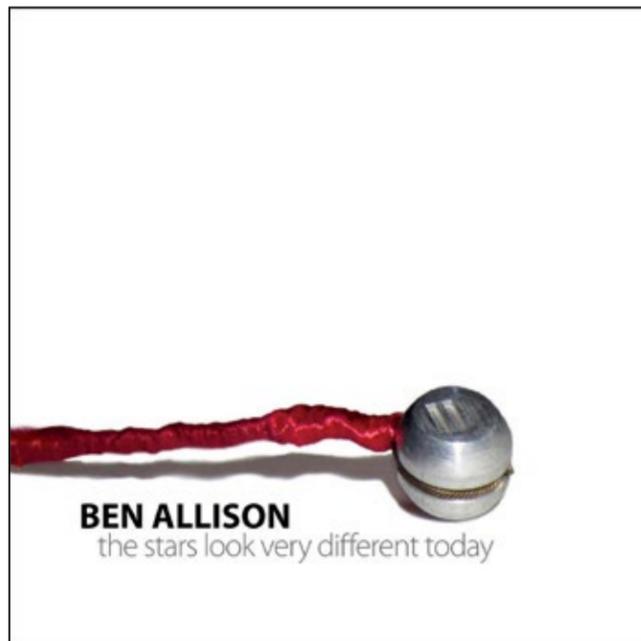


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Ben Allison

The Stars Look Very Different Today
Sonic Camera, CD

Ben Allison cribbed the title of his quartet's new disc from David Bowie, but the bassist's inspiration comes more from his own fascination with science and films (passions that the former Thin White Duke undoubtedly also shares). Those obsessions come out in the way the group uses studio-driven tape loops—especially on the closing “Improvisus”—or multi-layered mini-scores that nod to movie themes and characters. Yet there's nothing ethereal about *The Stars Look Very Different Today*: All the aforementioned ideas and effects serve Allison's immediately striking compositions and, after more than a year of heavy touring, his cohesive working band sounds just as spirited.

Allison's quartet features his longtime collaborator guitarist Steve Cardenas alongside Brandon Seabrook, who doubles on guitar and banjo. It's an uncanny lineup for a jazz group, and the band makes the most of its distinctive instrumental resources. Drummer Allison Miller, the most recent band member, is a subtle—and sometimes direct—powerhouse that holds tightly to her innate sense of swing.

The level of intuitive dialogue within the group adds

up to commanding dynamics, particularly in the way a piece like “D.A.V.E.” builds itself up. (Leave it to listeners to imagine how the piece connects to *2001: A Space Odyssey*.) Although Cardenas and Seabrook's solos are the ostensible focus on “Dr. Zaius,” Miller says just as much when her cymbals sound like they're changing the direction of the composition.

On “No Other Side,” an initially somber tone is offset with mysterious electronic effects, but the song

explodes when it sets up the two contrasting electric guitars. As Cardenas quietly holds down the melodic lead, Seabrook unravels the kind of fragmented twists on surf lines that echo how Robert Quine sounded alongside the late Lou Reed. Clashing guitars also provide a sudden divergence from the otherwise sunny melody of “Neutron Star.” Allison keeps a similar guitar stomp on “Kick It Man” from riding off the track while also inventing a different sound on the bass: twisting the strings that give it a buzzing similar to a jaw harp.

Throughout, Seabrook reaffirms he is not only reclaiming the banjo for jazz, but taking the instrument in directions that haven't been heard since Malachi Favors Maghostut brought it to the Art Ensemble Of Chicago. (Seabrook also has his own group, Seabrook Power Plant.) While his arpeggios take the lead in the spacious and loping “The Ballad Of Joe Buck,” he also holds his own on the stomping “Swiss Cheese D.”

Although *Stars Look Very Different* is Allison's eleventh disc as leader, it's his first mixing and producing. There's such clarity throughout the CD, it's a wonder why he didn't take on those jobs years ago.
—Aaron Cohen

Trumpeter Takuya Kuroda has traveled the world as an onstage foil and horn arranger for vocalist José James. The singer has now returned the favor and produced *Rising Son*, Kuroda's major-label debut. With most of their colleagues from James' working band onboard, it's reasonable to expect considerable musical connections to James' 2012 Blue Note album *No Beginning No End*. And there are a number of affinities, including a shared appreciation for contemporary R&B and generally relaxed tempos. But Kuroda also proves he has a voice of his own.

That voice mainly comes through Kuroda's solid composing. He wrote six of the disc's eight tracks; the other two are interpretations of soul-jazz forefather Roy Ayers. Like Ayers (and, for that matter, James and Robert Glasper), these pieces often sound centered around deliberately paced Rhodes or synth lines. The relaxed vibe and repeated melodic themes of the title track are clear examples. Yet Kuroda turns things around and shows off influences that have not shaped his contemporaries' work.



On "Afro Blues," Kuroda brings in ideas from when he played in the New York Afro-beat ensemble Akoya. While the smooth results sound far removed from the righteous anger of, say, Fela Kuti, the quick rhythmic changes provide a revitalizing energy. Guest guitarist Lionel Loueke sounds especially invigorating. His percussive lines challenge bassist Solomon Dorsey and drummer Nate Smith, who are more than up for the

match. Smith also tempers his forward attack by shifting around patterns more subtly, particularly on "Piri Piri."

James' sole performance here arrives when he sings the group's rendition of Ayers' 1976 hit "Everybody Loves The Sunshine." As on his own records, he sounds laid back, singing way behind the already slow beat. It's effective, but this tune could have also worked as a vehicle for Kuroda to take bigger impro-

visational risks—especially considering his band includes the inventive keyboardist Kris Bowers. On the other Ayers cover, "Green And Gold," Bowers' solo sounds simultaneously busy and low key as he plays off of Smith's patterns.

The group's most direct connection to the R&B tradition comes via Kuroda and trombonist Corey King's tightly choreographed lines. Even here, however, there's

a twist: Without a saxophone, the bottom sounds heavier than in a standard horn section. The two of them also worked together in the planning stages, both being credited for the lyrical arrangement on the slightly edgy "Sometime, Somewhere, Somehow." Since they move mostly in unison throughout the disc, it would have been interesting to hear how King and Kuroda would sound in heated soloists' exchanges.



Takuya Kuroda
Rising Son
Blue Note, CD

When Kuroda does solo, his muted tone comes through within a sparse number of long-held notes. He sounds especially strong when set against Smith's rapid drumming on "Mala" and Bowers' synthesizer on "Call." Kuroda conveys the impression of continuously building tension seeking an inevitable release, which is all the more reason to anticipate his follow-up. —**Aaron Cohen**

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