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THE YEAR
IN MUSIC 2014

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Slack-Key Artist
MAKANA
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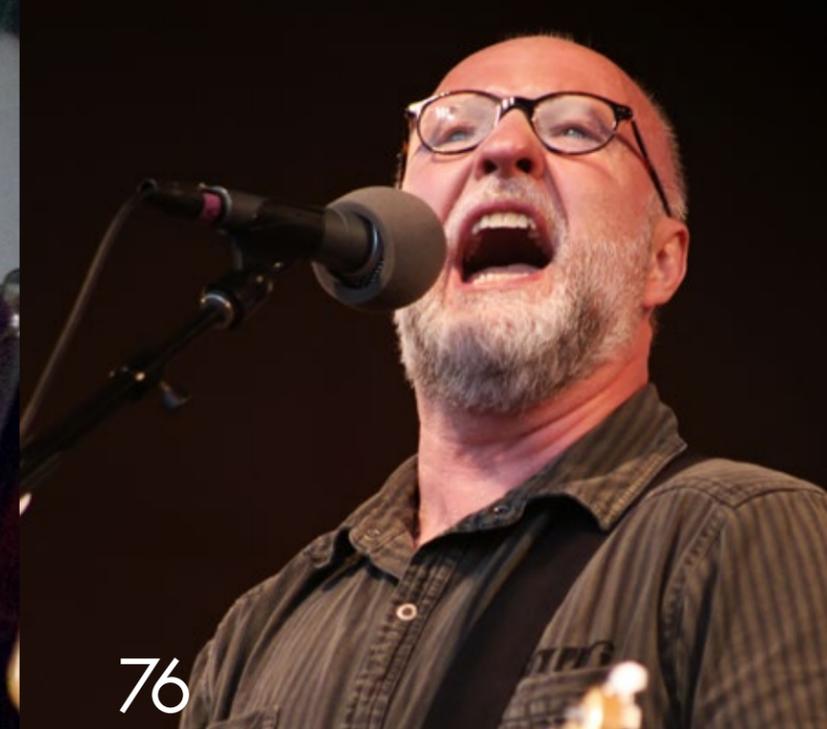
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PUBLISHER'S LETTER

Last year's consumer electronics show was a yawnfest, with the most noise being made about DSD downloads, and as I predicted, this would prove to be no big deal – and it hasn't been. While it was great to see everyone in our industry at the show, catch up and see some of their newest models, there wasn't a lot of mind bending stuff. A few things really stood out, Devialet has a few new things up their sleeve, Boulder has a great new DAC, as well as dCS, and the enormous MartinLogan Neolith that made its debut in Munich is getting ready to launch, so count on some reviews that I hope you'll find interesting in the near future.

Just when I thought it was just going to just be a couple of pleasant days in Las Vegas with nothing earth shattering to report, I was exposed to something new in the world of digital delivery. The bad news is I can't tell you about it, as I'm under NDA.

But I'll tell you this much, forget everything you know about interacting with your music collection. Forget every bit of hardware and software you've seen masquerading as a music serving platform. This is going to be so far beyond what we have now, you will be able to be intimate with your present and future music collection in a way you've never even dreamed of.

Yeah, it's that awesome. And if you've been a long-term reader of *TONEAudio*, you know it takes a lot to really get my heart pumping. The good news is that it's going to arrive in the next few months, so if you're planning on making any kind of move in the direction of computer audio, I highly suggest that you put your plans on hold until you see and experience this.

The good news is that all the music on your hard drive, no matter what format is *not* obsolete, and the best news is that this will not be an expensive thing to purchase, so damn near everyone will be able to have access to it, if they choose to accept it.

But one thing is for certain; whatever you are using now to deliver your digital music library sucks. Prepare to be amazed. And you will read about it here first.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'JD', located at the end of the publisher's letter.



MAKANA

Alberta Rose Theater
Portland, Oregon
November 11, 2014

Text and photos by Jeff Dorgay

Sitting backstage, Makana is a picture of island chill. He's dressed in a vest and a pair of slacks that he calls "vintage Fleetwood Mac." After a quick sip of whiskey, the veteran performer takes the stage to a nearly sold-out house of Portlanders braving unseasonable cold and trying to stuff a little bit of Hawaii inside their North Face jackets before heading home.

Makana does not disappoint the crowd's wish to be transported across the Pacific. His two-hour-plus show is part performance, part party, and part education in the ways of Hawaiian history and the art of slack-key guitar, an instrument on which he currently reigns as king. It's a natural progression. Makana's 25-year career began when slack-key masters Bobby Modero Jr. and the late Uncle Sonny Chillingworth took a then-enthusiastic 11-year-old under their wings and made him their protégé.

Every slack-key guitarist has a personal relationship with his or her instrument, and Makana is no different. He brandishes his humble and well-worn Takamine acoustic, producing a signature fusion of slack-key, rock, raga, and blues. Utilizing a mixture of standard and unique tunings, Makana claims his guitar "really just plays itself" and that he simply acts as a vehicle for its music. Whoever—or whatever—he channels, Makana's virtuosity becomes instantly evident as he moves his fingers with lightning speed up and down the fretboard. He seemingly wrings every possible note out of any chosen passage, yet no more than the tune requires. No wonder contemporary guitar gods like Joe Satriani and Kirk Hammett remain highly impressed with the Grammy-nominated performer.

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LIVE MUSIC

The first half of Makana's set consists of traditional Hawaiian fare passed on from the masters and enhanced with his own spin. Involving a vintage microphone, piano, and sparse stage with the excellent acoustics of the Alberta Rose Theater, the performance soon transcends that of a concert and takes on the feel of sitting in on an intimate recording session.

Throughout, the audience enjoys lessons on the music's precise history as well as what the songs personally mean to Makana. He balances reverie for his predecessors with a great sense of humor. During a track that bears resemblance to the style of Jack Johnson, he flashes an impish grin and confesses he wrote the song on the fly while trying to impress a woman. He then admits he spent the evening trying to impress her with his guitar skills, only to hear her ask, "Don't you know any Jack Johnson songs?" And thus a new Makana tune was born.

Like his most recent record, the appropriately titled *25*, the show's second half comprises originals and intriguing covers of rock, folk, and blues material. Makana takes full command of the latter, especially when venturing into bluesy lines with a level of simultaneous density and dexterity that leaves most modern blues practitioners in the dust. Before ending with a Pete Seeger standard, Makana dims the lights for a birthday dedication of Joe Cocker's "You Are So Beautiful" and reduces the female recipient to tears.

Such poignancy is the biggest surprise about witnessing Makana in person. While his studio recordings are highly competent, they do not capture the sheer intensity of the man onstage. Makana is an artist whose beguiling instrumental command and vast vocal range can only really be experienced live, where he is truly in his element. ●



NEW MUSIC IN 2014

WOMEN SOUND OFF

Even if you only got your music fix from mainstream sources, you could easily deduce that big names such as Nicki Minaj, Taylor Swift, and Azealia Banks helped make 2014 the year of the woman in music. Befitting their oversized pop personas, the high-profile figures leaned on (ahem) their personal assets to fuel their image-driven celebrity and cause media sensations that celebrated just about everything but their music. Swift stood as the only musician in 2014 to sell more than a million copies of an album in an era in which record sales nudge ever so closer to meaninglessness. Her decision to move away from the candy-sweet style she laughably deemed country and fashion herself as a garden-variety pop singer only reinforces how vapid the pursuit of commercial stardom is in an age where the elimination of traditional music-industry boundaries continues to open up incalculable creative possibilities. Thankfully, dozens of artists that couldn't care less about staging publicity stunts or turning their names into a generic brand proved both individuality and originality still have an important place in the cultural conversation.

Annie Clark, Sharon Van Etten, Kelis, Lydia Loveless, Angel Olsen, Lucinda Williams, Merrill Garbus, Courtney Barnett, Miranda Lambert, and Perfect Pussy vocalist Meredith Graves are just a few of the enterprising women that took

advantage of a situation unimaginable a few decades ago when an influx of independent-minded females (PJ Harvey, Kathleen Hanna, and Courtney Love among them) assisted in changing how we thought about music. Swift and her brigade of marketing pros can tout sales numbers and inane Grammy nods until they turn blue in the face. Yet as music lovers continue to turn to streaming and discover vibrant sounds ignored by conventional stations, the days of anyone but label executives and egocentric stars caring about platinum records are waning about as quickly as U2's relevance.

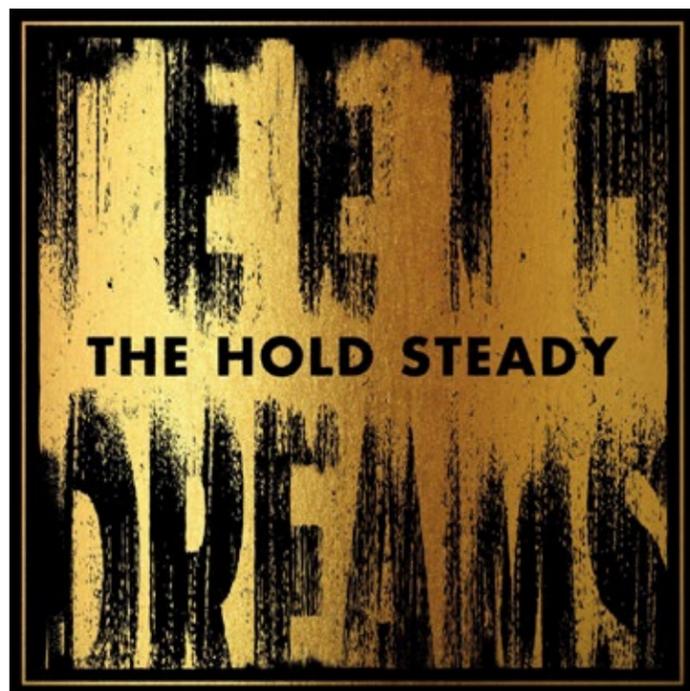
With such shifts in mind, *TONEAudio* believes we best serve you as an honest, dependable, and timely filter. No single outlet can come even close to reviewing all the new albums that compete for your attention. With rare exception, we think you can easily get the lowdown on artists like Swift and Co. from other places. We rather focus on giving credence to new records you might not otherwise hear and those that demand a deeper look often not provided from today's quick-hit media. Context, fairness, and authoritativeness remain our guiding principles—as does the notion that, like us, we imagine you'll want records you buy now to age well into the future. In that spirit, enjoy reading about many of 2014's standout albums. Turn 'em up and play 'em often.

©Photo by Michael Wilson



Lucinda Williams

NEW RELEASES

**The Hold Steady***Teeth Dreams*

Washington Square, LP or CD



©Photo by Danny Clinch

The Hold Steady personifies the problems exacerbated by the contemporary music scene. Such challenges aren't exactly new, but they're different and more difficult to solve. Independent of trends, significant changes in how people are exposed to and acquire music have made survival for even critically acclaimed bands a daunting proposition. Factor in the increasingly unfiltered morass of mediocre new music and simultaneous race by countless bloggers caught in a self-gratuitous circle-jerk to hype the next best thing, and any potential clarity achieved by authoritative reviews or strong word-of-mouth recommendations becomes muddled.

Indeed, for all the talk of major record labels getting what they deserved after the shifts in distribution and buying habits, fans intent on sticking it to the proverbial man have hurt the very musicians they profess to love. Lower-tier artists dependent on selling albums—whether at brick-and-mortar stores or merchandise booths—have been forced to find alternatives to try and recoup some of the money they've lost to downloading and streaming (illegal or legal). The continued analog upswing no doubt helps, but the sales spike falls far short of making up for the thousands of fewer units moved due to listeners opting to hear via Spotify or Beats Audio, sound quality be damned.

Such vexing circumstances are enough to force a veteran group like the Hold Steady to re-think its existence, which guitarist Tad Kubler recently admitted the quintet contemplated. Deservedly anointed as a breakthrough contender nine years ago after releasing two superb indie efforts, the Brooklyn-by-way-of-Minneapolis quintet owned up to its promise by delivering 2006's *Girls and Boys In America*, a cohesive thematic opus stabilized by catchy melodies and smart lyrics. (continued) Head-and-shoulders above the year's rock class, it generated vibrant buzz and elevated the concert-favorite band to mid-level club status. (continued)



©Photo by Danny Clinch

Frontman Craig Finn secured his place as a beloved, forever-smirking extrovert willing to intelligently speak on any topic, be it religion, drunkenness, or sex.

But mainstream success proved elusive. Then, things got worse. The Hold Steady's secret weapon, keyboardist/backing vocalist Franz Nicolay, departed after 2008's inconsistent and overly polished *Stay Positive*. The group's sound dropped off, and its follow-up, 2010's *Heaven Is Whenever*, felt tired and bloated. Finn subsequently issued a low-key solo

album—often the precursor to a band's death knell—and halted any momentum the Hold Steady managed to preserve from its beer-soaked, seat-of-the-pants run as indie upstarts. In 2014, where does a rock n' roll band that did everything it was supposed to do go from there?

In navigating this still-uncharted territory, the Hold Steady answers with an intrepid response. Rather than call it quits, the group invests what sounds like everything it has left to give in *Teeth Dreams*. With touring member Steve Selvidge

permanently added to the fold, the Hold Steady now touts three guitarists. It's returned to a stripped-down, more muscular and sinewy-tough approach that echoes the raw zeal of its first two records. Finn, too, assumes his comfortable position back at the pulpit—in his case, a stool pulled up beside a well-worn corner bar with buck-fifty drink specials, a cathode-ray television, and the inviting intimacy of the type of townie establishment quickly fading from mid-America.

From "Big Cig" to "Runner's High," he holds court telling

conversational stories revolving around relationships and anxieties. Delighting in each subject's dynamics, chemistries, ironies, disappointments, half-truths, and chess-moves gamesmanship, Finn remains more participant than preacher. His sharing of vulnerabilities, guilt, and errors grant his lyrical observations a broader depth and well-meaning sincerity than those belonging to his peers. And, as it was at its inception a decade ago, the Hold Steady's greatest asset remains its convincing ability to sending up such honesty, opti-

mism, and humor up with arena-based power chords, crunchy guitar riffs, and surging hooks that celebrate struggles, forgive weaknesses, and praise never-say-die spirit even as sinister undercurrents dwell in the background.

Such acumen is alive and well on the focused *Teeth Dreams*, whether on the encouraging "Wait A While" or surf-tinged power-pop washing throughout "The Only Thing," on which wordless vocal bridges fight off melancholy and frustration, common realities in the band's universe. "Waking up with that American sadness," Finn relays on "On With the Business," during which haunting vibrato lines highlight a dark underbelly that also surfaces on the acoustic-based "Almost Everything." In its own way, the latter song's title is a metaphor for both the Hold Steady and this, its sixth studio effort.

Yes, the band's ambitions, dreams, and boldness still run hockey-goalie-sweater-size big. For evidence, just look to "Oaks," a cinematic epic that extends the tradition of brilliant Hold Steady closing tracks and comes on akin to a seasick journey in which death, preservation, and hope compete as survival hangs in the balance.

Since this is the Hold Steady, there's seemingly a happy ending, yet the conclusion isn't as clear-cut as it would've been five years ago in the band's career.

More mature, and slightly more serious, the Hold Steady acknowledges the youthful exuberance of its past while wisely refraining to repeat it on *Teeth Dreams*. Yes, the record falls a bit short of the group's superb 2004-2006 releases. Yet the inspired songwriting and solid performances roar with a noise of refreshing victory in the face of fickle tastes and innumerable here-today, gone-tomorrow bands. Besides, disappoint goes hand-in-hand with courage—and, it's curable.

As Finn notes on the rushing "Spinners," "Heartbreak hurts but you can dance it off." Here's a soundtrack for doing so.

—**Bob Gendron**

Spike Jonze's Oscar-nominated film *Her* presents a vision of the near-future that's strangely sad. Part romance and part cautionary tale, the Joaquin Phoenix drama raises questions about the increasing intersection of the technological and the personal. If our devices aren't yet capable of the human-like emotions explored in Jonze's film, there's no denying our time is more and more devoted to connections of the artificial sort.



EMA
The Future's Void
Matador, LP or CD

Such topics are also on the mind of Erika M. Anderson. Her second album and first for Matador Records, *The Future's Void*, puts her all-on-the-line vocals and digitally maligned guitars in near-panic-stricken sci-fi settings. Songs warn of NSA-level spying, characters trades "selfies" as if narcissism is a currency, and blonde-haired pop stars are lined-up one-by-one as if dropped off an assembly line. "You wanna love her, hate her, you don't know," Anderson sings in "So Blonde," as if identities and opinions no longer belong to an individual but a collective.

A former member of the noisy, experimental indie-folk-rock act Gowns, Anderson went solo on 2011's *Past Life Martyred Saints*, an album that isn't an easy listen—even for its supporters. With a vocal style that's breathy and desperate, and an approach to guitar playing where the riffs are thin, lacerating, and

feedback-drenched, the dramatically personal tales on the record sound as if they were trying to give a soundtrack to acts of personal torture. While *The Future's Void* doesn't utilize much more than guitars and synths, it's altogether fuller, harder, and more urgent. Guitar-based orchestrations are anthemic in a cyber-punk sort of fashion.

"So Blonde" is built around fuzzy guitars and washed-out vocals, a sound that wouldn't have been out of place on alt-rock radio in the mid-90s (think Veruca Salt), while "Solace" is techno-blues that becomes all echoes, loops, and frantic beats. "When She Comes" is dirtied-up folk rock on which Anderson and her pals "terraform" the night. But there's little partying on this record. "Smoulder" makes like Dr. Dre with repetitive, high-pitched synths only to find "empty rage" once the neon pinnacle is reached. "We wanted something timeless,"

Anderson explains on "Dead Celebrity," a song that unfolds like a hymn for our quickly disseminated pop-culture world.

Where, exactly, our culture is heading a big topic, and one with which Anderson grapples throughout the album, often with lyrical curtness. The tone is reflective on "100 Years," in which a lost-in-space piano touches on a century of engineering feats and flu vaccinations, insinuating all that's gained could be lost in a flash. Anderson's "Satellites" and "Neuromancer" could have been lifted from *The Matrix*. "Cthulu" is even grander, with gospel-like overtures cutting in amid guttural, rave-like synths.

"I get way down," hollers Anderson, as emotion trumps solutions. It all makes for compelling, William Gibson-inspired theater.
—Todd Martens



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The War on Drugs

Lost in the Dream

Secretly Canadian, 2LP or CD

You could make worse wagers than betting that War on Drugs leader Adam Granduciel spent countless hours as a teenager in his room absorbing and memorizing every hi-fi attribute on aurally immersive albums like Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*, My Bloody Valentine's *Loveless*, and Mercury Rev's *Deserter's Songs*. A detail-obsessive throwback to an era when most artists cared about how their records sounded, Granduciel crafts stunning sonic temples on *Lost in the Dream*, throughout which music is presented in geometric dimensions and across countless layers of instrumentation, treatments, atmospherics, and vocal reverb.

It's the kind of work that demands to be experienced on a full-range stereo or, at the least, via a great pair of headphones. No streaming service or MP3 file can come close to presenting the architectural expanse that stretches out on the hour-long affair.

For Granduciel, the only full-time participant of a collective that once counted guitarist Kurt Vile as a member, the perfectionist-minded effort follows up 2011's breakout *Slave Ambient*. Like its predecessor, *Lost in the Dream* is designed to be digested as a whole. While devoid of a narrative concept, songs unfold in a manner that suggests a progressive transformation and soulful awakening. Save for the unnecessary instrumental "The Lost Isle," War on Drugs avoids full-on excursions into what borders on art-house film music. Not that the band isn't tempted to dabble with moody cinematic passages.

Whether it's the extended ambient exit of "Under the Pressure" or sprawl of the album-closing "In Reverse," one of Granduciel's only flaws is knowing when to recognize the moment when to fade a track out to its logical conclusion. A majority of compositions run well beyond the five-minute mark; three break the seven-minute barrier. The lengths occasionally blunt momentum and damage continuity. But sporadic editing oversights quickly give way to palatial music sculptures that intersect at electronic and organic angles and merge hallmark 80s synthesizer washes with spacey, guitar-spiked dream-pop. Demonstrating increased confidence, Granduciel lessens the textural density surrounding his singing, and vocally, more frequently comes out from behind the curtains. He primarily operates in the abstract, but most



©Photo by Dusdin Condren

lyrics are comprehensible, and some deliveries are performed sans effects.

Such directness is manifested on the relaxed, folksy comfort of the jangling title track and cohesive, country-spiked chime of the acoustic-anchored "Eyes to the Wind." On both songs, Granduciel expresses nervous albeit committed personal resolve and channels Bob Dylan by nasally emphasizing sentence-finishing syllables. Thematically, the tunes contrast the turbulence coursing throughout the swelling "An Ocean In Between the Waves," during which subtle tempo upticks, propulsive bass lines, and crunchy guitar riffs underscore the

uncertainty and distance marking the album's first half.

Similarly inviting musical blends reoccur, giving songs textural shapes and rhythmic devices that correspond to Granduciel's emotions. A purring melody, spare piano notes, and lonely echo-glazed guitar fills complement the melancholic "Suffering," in which spiritual gospel accents drift by like translucent fog. Snappy percussive beats, milky synthesizers, and a baritone saxophone push the dance-groove momentum on "Red Eyes," sent up with a catchy chorus and murmuring mysteriousness.

On the latter tune and anthem-

worthy "Burning"—as well as several other fainter places on *Lost in the Dream*—the War on Drugs seemingly uses Bruce Springsteen's 1984 smash "Dancing in the Dark" as a template, tears it apart, and rebuilds it anew, utilizing syncopation as a foundation, roots elements in the background, and modern production devices as a blank slate. While many of Granduciel's indie contemporaries continue to essentially replicate 80s synthpop to ho-hum effect, he's found a way to take the Me Decade's dominant sound and make it feel modern, vital, and triumphant. —**Bob Gendron**

Neneh Cherry recorded and mixed *Blank Project*—her first solo album in more than 16 years—over the course of five days with producer Four Tet. That sense of immediacy bleeds into the raw, intimate tracks populating the record.

Opener “Across the Water,” constructed of little more than minimalist drums, comes on like futuristic beat poetry, the Swedish avant-pop singer/rapper switching between spoken-word cadence and soaring, melodic vocals. The fiery title track is similarly percussive, though denser, and Cherry matches the more complex beat with her subject matter, detailing the various conflicts and victories that come to define a marriage. “Does my ass look big in these new trousers?” she sings atop buzzing synths that harken back to *Maxinquaye*-era Tricky. “I hate you. I hate you. I love it all.”



Neneh Cherry
Blank Project
Smalltown Supersound, 2LP/CD or CD

Despite opening amidst a clanging metallic beat that conjures images of a break-dancing robot skeleton, “Naked” gradually evolves into one of the album’s more fleshed-out tracks, piling on warm layers of synthesizer and Cherry’s harmonic vocals, which bear some influence owing to Qawalli singers like Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. The dingy “Weightless,” by contrast, is anything but, building around fuzzed-out, earth-shaking guitars and clanging cowbell that mimics a train signal—a fitting accompaniment to a song that moves like a massive locomotive.

While the music reflects the immediacy of the recording sessions, the lyrics often sound born of a lifetime of frustration, joy, angst, love, and heartache. Cherry sings of financial hardship (“Weightless”), her fears for mankind’s future

(“422”), and those often-overlooked interactions that come to shape our lives (the clattering “Dossier,” which sounds like it could have been recorded in an industrial centrifuge). Even when the music seems tossed off —“Everything,” for one, could pass for an instrumental junk drawer with its assortment of odd-fitting parts—Cherry’s words offer a level of intrigue. “Time is morphing in me,” she rhymes as the track undergoes a similar change. “Clock is ticking...”

And clearly, the musician doesn’t want to waste a second of her time with base frivolity. Even when pop singer (and fellow Swede) Robyn turns up for a guest spot “Out of the Black,” Cherry hews to the shadows, the two countrymen trading verses about the meaning of desire.

Throughout, Cherry, who in

1989 became a sensation due to the smash “Buffalo Stance” and disappeared from view just years after, drops lines that hint at her long absence from the music industry. “Good things come to those who wait,” she sings on a handful of the tracks, and there’s a clear sense she wouldn’t have returned if she didn’t have something meaningful to say.

Fortunately, Cherry refrains from preaching or centering her songs squarely on Big Ideas. Instead, she focuses on minor intrigues, injustices, and intimacies that, taken together, offer some perspective on the larger picture. So, on *Blank Project*, even during those moments where the music sounds robotic and machinelike, there’s never a doubt a human heart beats at the center of it all.
—**Andy Downing**



Eagulls
Eagulls
Partisan, LP or CD

With unemployment and under-employment rates holding still well above average, college costs soaring past the reach of all but the well-heeled, and a large majority of people born after 1980 starting to recognize they won’t ever attain the quality of life afforded their parents, the Millennial Generation seems to have good reason to be infuriated. Yet current youth-centric music trends belie that any such discontent lurks beneath the surface.

From tidy, Abercrombie and Fitch-styled Americana (Mumford and Sons) to vapid soft-rock (Imagine Dragons) and toothless modern country (Florida Georgia Line), the dearth of grit and dissatisfaction in today’s popular sounds mirror the castrated flavors that dominated the mid-80s mainstream while Ronald Reagan sacked middle-class jobs in the name of greedy corporations and stockholders.

The self-titled debut by Leeds-based Eagulls isn’t likely to break the stranglehold on factory-line pap and benign 80s-minded nostalgia. No matter. The British quintet’s guitar-driven agitation and spiteful cynicism resound with veracity, confrontation, and conviction—particularly in an environment increasingly favoring those in power and those with ample resources. Howling with sandstorms of whirling distortion, propulsive bass lines, shoegazer guitar haze, *Eagulls* comes on as a feverish screed against the growing divides between the haves and have-nots, between open opportunity and being forced to settle for scraping by on spirit-dimming scraps. Absent self-pity and fortified by disillusionment, songs attack with savage melodies, sardonic wit, and brash vocal deliveries that take the form of strident wails, snarls, and shouts.

“There’s a pain in my neck,” yelps frontman George Mitchell on “Footsteps,” which builds in tension until the band can no longer hold back the surge. Health ailments and lingering aggravation fester throughout, the compromised conditions conveyed by musical tones and song titles. Diseased afflictions on the jogging “Never Endings” (punctuated by a memorably clever “can’t find my end” refrain) catchy “Possessed,” murky “Yellow Eyes,” and hail-spitting “Amber Veins” are complemented by cold industrial tones, garbage-disposal noises, and heavy phase effects. Mitchell frequently sings as if he’s scratching a persistent itch that won’t stop, the irritation growing to the extent he sounds like he wants to jump out of his skin.

Indebted to Joy Division, early Cure, and very early U2, the Eagulls’ post-punk leanings manage to vent and protest without relying on claustrophobic repetition or mind-numbing preachiness. Songs even have a little bit of breathing room. Not that the group ever lets up or arrives at comfortable middle ground.

“I never/I never/I never feel fine,” stutters a yowling Mitchell on the aptly coined “Soulless Youth.” Here’s betting nationalized health care isn’t enough to cure what plagues him.—**Bob Gendron**



The Coathangers

Suck My Shirt

Suicide Squeeze, LP or CD

With rock in the midst of a synth-obsessed, digitally enhanced period, Atlanta's Coathangers are simplifying. On album number four, the quartet has become a trio. Gone, for those paying attention to the evolution of this indie punk group, is the keyboard. In its place is more guitar snarl. *Suck My Shirt* is a loving ode to mouth-off-and-worry-about-it-never rock n' roll.

"Follow me!" the band hollers, until everyone's voices are hoarse in the album's opening song, but maybe don't get in line. Seconds later, the mantra changes to "Shut Up." The guitars are a little leaner—shaved-metal sharp rather than the swampier feel favored by the introductory tune—but the venom on par. Yet the Coathangers aren't about hate. After all, the title of the album comes not from a kiss-off, but how the band responded to spilt tequila during a recording session.

By now, you likely know whether you're in or out on the Coathangers without hearing about the police-sirening panic of "Springfield Cannonball" or call-and-response stomp and dead-eyed backing vocals of "Ad-derall." On a whole, *Suck My Shirt* lacks some of the wackiness of the band's early work, but those diversions were often keyboard-driven. Here, the Coathangers take a more revered approach to the coarse, beer-soaked minimalism defined by likes of the Stooges and Minute-men.

This is not, for instance, just an excuse to get tough and dirty with the guitar (although "Love Em and Leave Em," for the record, does that rather well). "Merry Go Round" uses all sorts of vocal bird calls to enhance the melody, "Zombie" locks into a Sleater-Kinney-like groove between the bass and drums, and "Derek's Song" shows there's some beauty in the Coathangers' backing harmonies should the group ever want to explore them.

In fact, the threesome shows off its lighter side on "Drive," a chirpy pop ditty punctuated by cymbal snaps and glistening guitars. Parting evidence, lest anyone need it, that the Coathangers take this stuff seriously.

—Todd Martens

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Drive-By Truckers

English Oceans
ATO, 2LP or CD

In his excellent new book *I'll Take You There: Mavis Staples, the Staple Singers, and the March Up Freedom's Highway*, veteran critic Greg Kot discusses the harmonic blend of styles that distinguished the late 1960s/early 1970s era Muscle Shoals sound from every other locale in America. (Full disclosure: Kot is a colleague of mine.) While multiple musicians gained notoriety for playing on records for the likes of Stax and Atlantic, few enjoyed more acclaim than the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section (also known as the Swampers), which performed on sides from artists ranging from Etta James to Aretha Franklin.

While journalists occasionally note the connection, Drive-By Truckers frontman Patterson Hood seldom publicizes the fact his father, David, was an esteemed member of the celebrated session band.

Such heritage and modesty come full circle on the Georgia collective's twelfth studio album. Soulful undercurrents inform a majority of Drive-By Truckers' works over the past decade, yet the group's link to the region's classic past has never been more obvious. A stripped-down intersection of gospel, rock, and country—and corresponding raw, loose, on-the-floor analog sonic character—bolster thirteen narrative-based songs rippling with dynamics, moxie, and fluid grooves.

In several ways, *English Oceans* finds the quintet returning to its roots by abandoning grander arrangements and honing more compact, primal structures. Given the members' ages, the effort unsurprisingly forgoes the reckless, punk-fueled mayhem of the group's youthful early albums and largely avoids the harder-rocking terrain pursued during Jason Isbell's tenure in the band. But the concentration of songwriting and vocal duties solely among co-founding mates Hood and Mike Cooley results in a laser-sharp focus and colloquial unity that have been somewhat wanting since Isbell departed in 2007. Just as important, there's considerably less sprawl and hopscotching between personalities. A retooled, scaled-down lineup translates into superior balance and rejuvenated chemistry. Departed bassist Shonna Tucker, whose contributions didn't always jive with the band's overall studio temperament, isn't missed.



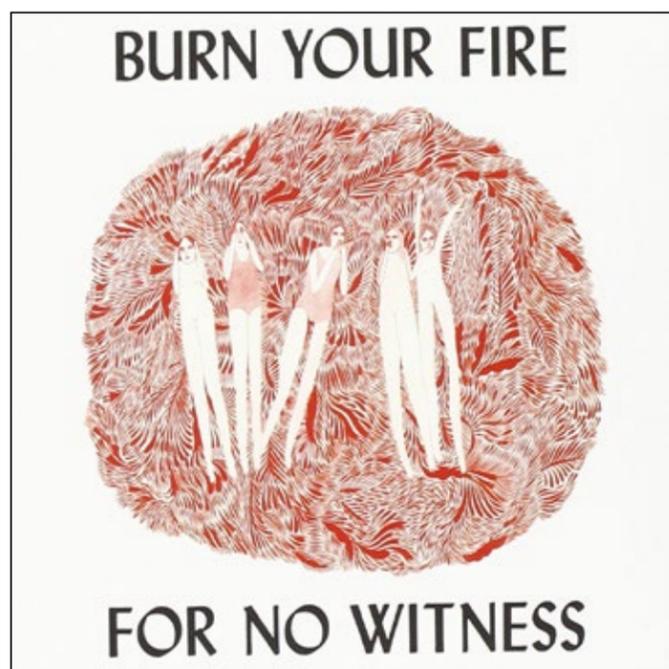
©Photo by David McClister

As always, the Truckers' fundamental strength relates to the quality of their character-driven songs and barroom-born edginess. Longtime fans will note Cooley penned six tracks—double his normal output—and, for the first time, sings a Hood tune. The duo's lyrics remain grounded in unvarnished truths and everyday realities: situations and insecurities of working-class stiffs, personalities behind deceptively simple circumstances, pointed reactions to modern political episodes, loving tributes to deceased friends, painful discords and bittersweet compromises of relationships. Cooley slings wise-ass humor,

local accents, and clever one-liner wisdoms as if they're breakfast eggs; Hood serves tough-minded optimism alongside relatable tragedies. Few songwriters capture the kernel of mid-America with sharper detail, deep-seated sympathy, rugged dedication, and non-judgmental understanding.

Equally punctuated by greasy rhythms and treble-ringing clarity, *English Oceans* swings with R&B- and jazz-like purpose. The cozy, relaxed sway of the warm, piano-driven "Natural Light" and punchy, talk-out-the-side-of-the-mouth pulse on the gritty rave-up "Shit Shots Count" qualify as two of the best Cooley songs in the

Truckers' canon—as well as two of his finest vocal performances. Hood's half-stepping, in-the-sticks country-soul "The Part of Him" and buzzing, free-flowing "Pauline Hawkins" straddle a tenuous equilibrium constantly under threat of tension that, on the latter track, finally bursts in the form of a ram-bunctious outro. From the yapping honky-tonk licks sparking "Hearing Jimmy Loud" to the delicate acoustics of the whistling "Hanging On" and rolling-hills contours of the momentous farewell "Grand Canyon," the Truckers haven't sounded so unforced, effortless, and fluent in years. Papa Hood should be proud. —**Bob Gendron**


Angel Olsen

Burn Your Fire for No Witness
Jagjaguwar, LP or CD

Angel Olsen doesn't make it easy on potential suitors. Right from the start of *Burn Your Fire for No Witness*, her second proper album, she turns up the pressure. "I quit my dreaming the moment that I found you," she sings on the opening song. With one sentence, Olsen turns a love song into an eulogy, pinning the death of her fantasies on another human being. And the insular drama is just beginning.

Olsen's sound is intimate—often just guitar and voice—and recorded in such an un-fussed manner that every crack, mumble or hollered scratch of either her guitar or voice is theoretically captured in the raw. Over the course, for instance, of the two minutes of "Unfucktheworld," the pace gradually quickens, and the feel is more of an emotional reaction than a careful arrangement. By the final act, hopeless romanticism is revealed to be a delusion and Olsen is left alone, repeating, "I am the only one now." The last syllable comes with an ever-so-slight quiver, and is less a statement of fact than a realization of disillusionment.

So, exactly who is the Olsen left standing? Already embraced by the Pitchfork set, the Midwestern-raised singer/songwriter doesn't take too big a step out of the kitchen-recorded music of her past. There's a small band, but the standard-issue rock combo really only lets it rip on "Forgiven/Forgotten," on which optimism is hinted at but ultimately denied amid a whole lot of violent guitar buzzing and Olsen's upper-register prowess. Having gone solo with an EP and an album after working with ambitious folk troubadour Bonnie "Prince" Billy, *Burn Your Fire for No Witness* ups the overall energy, although, arguably not enough.

Yet Olsen's voice remains the unpredictable secret ingredient. She flirts with operatics on the poppy "Stars," tackles the sparse "White Fire" like an Appalachian ballad, opens up her falsetto on "Windows," and sings "Dance Slow Decades" like Patsy Cline narrating an episode of "Girls," complete with dramatic pauses and spine-tingling sharp guitars. There's lots of heartache here, but it's hard to call *Burn Your Fire for No*



©Photo by Zia Anger

Witness a breakup record as Olsen seems to sing of wanting and not wanting intimacy with equal reverence.

"If you don't believe me, you can go ahead and laugh," she sings conversationally on "Lights Out," only to follow the sentiment up with the line "If you've got a sense of humor, you're not so bad." Olsen doesn't seem burned, but there are songs, such as "Iota," where her voice appears in danger of fading into a mumble. And she doesn't seem angry, even if there are songs, such as "Hi-Five," that boast a saloon-ready piano and feel like a dirtied-up riff on the

Everly Brothers.

On the first few listens, a scene from "High Fidelity" sprung to my mind—specifically, the moment where John Cusack's romance-obsessed Rob muses that "only people of a certain disposition are frightened of being alone for the rest of their lives at the age of 26." But that doesn't seem fair to slap on Olsen compositions. For one, the artist is older by a year or two, and secondly, *Burn Your Fire for No Witness* places a much greater importance on figuring out why we let ourselves be defined by others, and even embraces the idea that it's OK to be selfish.

"I heard my mother thinking me right back into my birth," she sings on "White Fire," one of the most eloquent vocal moments on the album. However, listen (or read it) carefully, and the tune is ultimately about living inside our heads. It's a place where Olsen still seems most comfortable, as one too many songs play out like a diary entry. Yes, there's a sense Olsen is just getting started, and as she wishes for a voice to "scream the stars out of our universe," we're left wanting for her to scream. —**Todd Martens**

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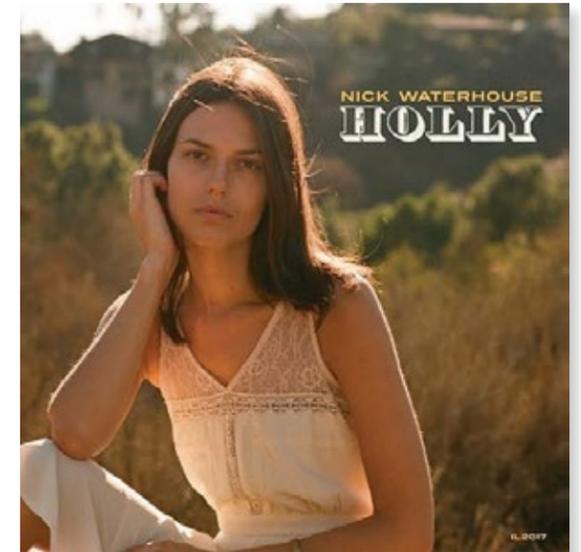
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MUSIC

Nick Waterhouse emerged in 2012 sounding as though he'd time-traveled here direct from the 1950s. In an interview shortly after his debut's release, the Los Angeles retro-soul man defended his throwback tastes, saying, "Tons of people think I'm some weird, role-playing Luddite, but my music isn't role playing. This is actually how I sound."

Rather than retreating or retooling on his sophomore LP *Holly*, Waterhouse digs in further, crooning through 10 songs that come on as if they could have been laid to tape decades ago. The musician laces his vocals with reverb throughout, as though he and his backing singers were forced to huddle around a single vintage microphone. Similarly, the tracks are spiked with horn arrangements that could have been culled from classics by the likes of Solomon Burke and Sam and Dave.



Nick Waterhouse

Holly

Innovative Leisure, LP or CD

Even the singer's lyrics sound like the product of another time. When gunshots ring out on the title track, for example, they do so "two or three at a time," rather than in the rapid-fire bursts expected from modern weaponry.

But while instability reigned on 2012's *Time's All Gone*—the soul man sounded on the verge of coming unglued on rumbling cuts like "(If) You Want Trouble"—there's a creeping coolness on much of *Holly*. A handful of tunes reference some vague darkness lurking within, Waterhouse singing: "Come close and see/ Something's moving in me"; "It comes from way inside/Where the people's little demons go to run and hide."

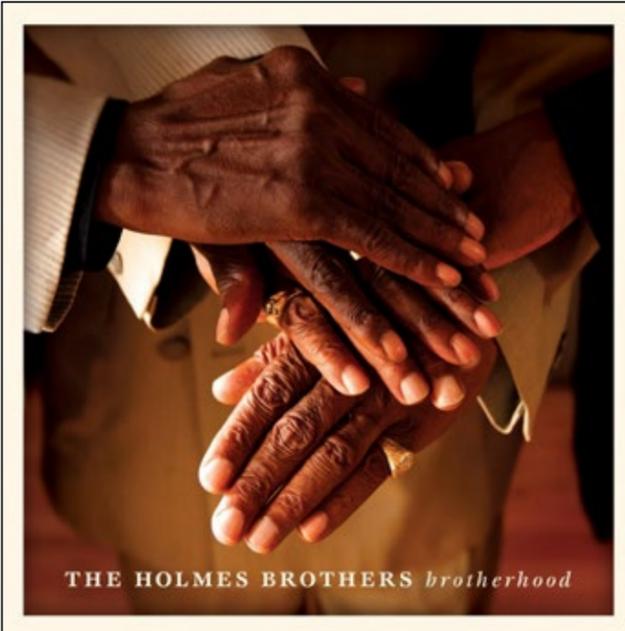
Songs such as "Hands on the Clock" and the eerie "High Tiding" take musical cues from these words, building around simmering

backdrops that suggest something more ominous buried just beneath the surface. Occasionally, if rarely, this inner-beast breaks free. On "This Is a Game," for one, Waterhouse sings of impending violence ("Ain't saying it's do or die, but either way you're gonna get killed") atop a swinging backdrop of soul organ, syncopated stabs of grungy saxophone, and loose-limbed guitar riffs that fall somewhere between surf-rock and hard-edged blues.

Elsewhere, Waterhouse sounds content to lay back. On the swooning "Let It Come Down," the musician sings about being overcome by grief while showered by the gentle downpour of tremolo-laden guitar, somber piano, and female backing vocals that attempt to cushion his fall. The cryptic "Dead Room," in turn, builds on percolating organ, slap-

dash drums, and an urgent sax line that sharply elbows its way to the front before again retreating. Even the title track sounds somehow restrained; the mariachi horns that rise up two-thirds into the arrangement only briefly manage to disrupt the somber atmosphere.

"I had an idea, a grand design," Waterhouse sings on lounge-y album closer "Hands on the Clock." Time and again on *Holly*, however, these plans appear to fall to pieces. Even the optimistically titled "Well It's Fine" sounds more like the musician's attempts to convince himself of this truth. That he can't quite do so is of little consequence. In trying to lift his own damaged spirits, Waterhouse has crafted a bruising album destined to buoy the mood of those that come into contact with it. —**Andy Downing**



The Holmes Brothers

Brotherhood
Alligator Records, CD

For more than 30 years, the Holmes Brothers' glowing three-part harmonies have transformed songs from any part of the musical spectrum into their own kind of homespun spiritual odes. The results can be as transcendent as they are surprising.

One example: About seven years ago—on *State Of Grace* (Alligator)—Wendell and Sherman Holmes, along with honorary sibling Poppy Dixon, recast Cheap Trick's power pop hit "I Want You To Want Me" into a slow romantic hymn. But on *Brotherhood*, the group focuses on a few core elements: mostly blues and gospel with a few hints of R&B. Still, this group never had to rely on a diverse repertoire to sound inspiring. Although three different veteran producers (Glenn Patscha, Chris Bruce, and Hector Castillo) are at the helm, all have the aesthetic sensibility to stay with stripped-down arrangements that keep the emphasis where it belongs.

With the Holmes Brothers are sticking to their roots, *Brotherhood* also emphasizes Wendell and Sherman Holmes' own songwriting.

Eight of the 14 tracks are by one of the brothers; their compositional skills are another source of the trio's strength. Wendell Holmes' "Stayed At The Party" is built around rapid gospel-fueled drumming and organ lines, even if the lyrics celebrate debauchery. Another original, the country-inspired ballad "Loving You From Afar," is a lovely showcase for a duet with his daughter Felicia (rising jazz star Catherine Russell sings background here and on several other tracks). Sherman Holmes,

meanwhile, continues his ascendancy as a modern blues composer on "Passing Through" and "Last Man Standing."

Among the six covers, all but one are a mixed group of lesser-known blues and R&B gems. Bruce's acoustic guitar lines and Patscha's subtle piano/organ ideally frame the Brothers' contrasting ranges on Ted Hawkins' "I Gave Up All I Had." And while Dixon's voice is the center on the group's version of William Bell's Stax-era tune "My Kind Of Girl," the song becomes

an upbeat celebration of doo-wop era dynamics.

Brotherhood ends with the Holmes Brothers' version of "Amazing Grace," and the group puts its own stamp on the centuries-old church favorite. Sounding subdued on top of Bruce's sparse electric guitar, Dixon's sudden falsetto leaps hit in all the right places. That this ensemble's clear joy and energy remains this strong after three decades is enough to affirm a higher power lending a hand.
—Aaron Cohen



©Photo by Stefan Falke



Dum Dum Girls

Too True

Sub Pop, LP or CD

Dum Dum Girls albums are generally svelte affairs: 10 or 11 songs, guitar riffs front and center, and the rebel-without-a-cause vocals of Dee Dee Penny. But tragedy resides behind the brevity. The band's last full-length effort, 2011's superb *Only in Dreams*, is shrouded in an even a hazier pall than the group's all-black-all-the-time concept would suggest. Recorded after the loss of Penny's mother, its tone is emotionally woozy, its ballads heart-achingly striking, and its uptempo songs all leather-jacket escapism.

The blood sweat for *Too True* is more professional, as Penny has spoken of two years of on-and-off writer's block and her vocals having being "destroyed." Things got so low, Penny writes in promotional materials, that she endured multiple nights of "drunken loneliness" at West Hollywood's Chateau Marmont.

Fine, so maybe nights spent alone in an \$800-per-night hotel aren't exactly tragic, but Dum Dum Girls don't lack for drama. Perhaps it's why the band's sound—subtle updates and variations on time-honored traditions set forth by the Velvet Underground and Siouxsie and the Banshees—still sounds fresh.

More or less a Penny solo project, Dum Dum Girls records are recorded not with the live band but studio technicians such as Sune Rose Wagner of the like-minded Raveonettes and Richard Gotteher, a Dum Dum Girls spiritual guide whose resume includes songwriting/production work with 60s girl groups and Blondie. Here, songs are fleshed-out with more mechanical rhythms, as almost synth-like heartbeats constantly push songs forward. The obsessions remain the same—lust and solitude, draped in a vampire-like romanticism—but the tone is more cult-like, an almost fetishism of living in the shadows.

"Lost Boys and Girls Club" is a near-mission statement, with Penny's vocals echoing and every slow-motion quiver of the guitar string conjuring mountains of static. "Evil Blooms" gets more direct. "Why be good?," Penny asks, when you can be "beautiful and sad," her voice rich in class as she shifts among lower-register tones for a stylishly fuzzy two-and-a-half minutes. "Rimbaud Eyes" touts a more celebratory, night-at-the-Goth ball tone, while "Are You Okay?" and "Too True to Be Too Good" find the band's gloom-pop sweet spot. Details abound, be it the round-and-round carousel twinkle of former tune, guitars that feel as if they're being slowly shaved by razor blades on "Trouble is My Name," or the left-right rhythmic swings of the explosive final moments of "Little Minx." Just as the song is coming down, Penny lets the listeners know what hit 'em.

"What a vivid sound," she whispers. Then it all fades to black. —**Todd Martens**

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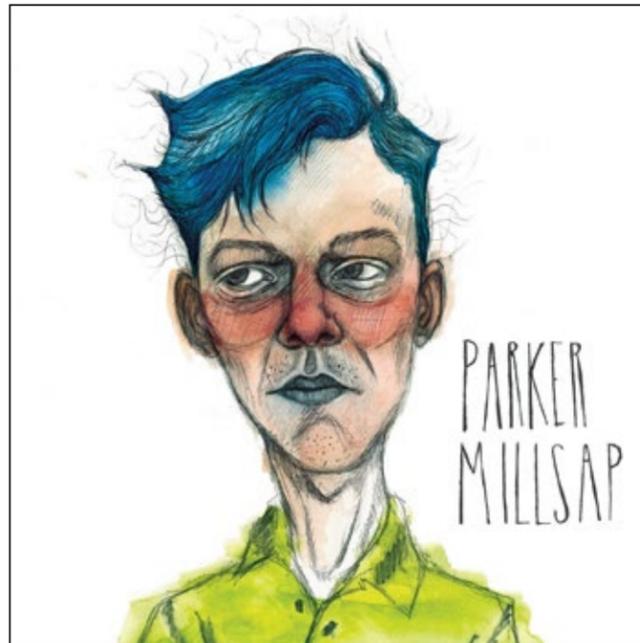
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Several remarkable up-and-coming songwriters—including Lindi Ortega, Anais Mitchell, and Lydia Loveless—are helping swell the Americana ranks. Make room on that list for Parker Millsap, a young roots musician with a genuinely dazzling debut. The 20-year-old Oklahoma native writes with such maturity and depth, it's a little difficult to believe he's not yet of legal drinking age. A keen wordsmith skilled with the unexpected turn of phrase, Millsap writes with the power and sensitivity of an old soul.



Parker Millsap

Parker Millsap
Okrahoma Records/Thirty Tigers, LP or CD

Much of country music is built on the tension between Saturday night sinning and Sunday morning salvation. Raised in the Pentecostal church, Millsap has lived that clash firsthand. Whatever his own personal feelings are about a childhood steeped in evangelical rhetoric, it certainly pays off in terms of grist for his artistic mill.

The specter of religion drenches many of his songs while conflicted, twisted characters stomp through the narratives. Delivering a bracing stream of words that tumble out at auctioneer speed, he brings to life the Bible-thumping evangelist of “Truck Stop Gospel” by singing: “Just want you to love my Jesus/Gonna make you a true believer/Just wanna modify

your behavior/Just want you to love my savior.” The lyrics arrive at pitch before Millsap erupts into a rockabilly scream.

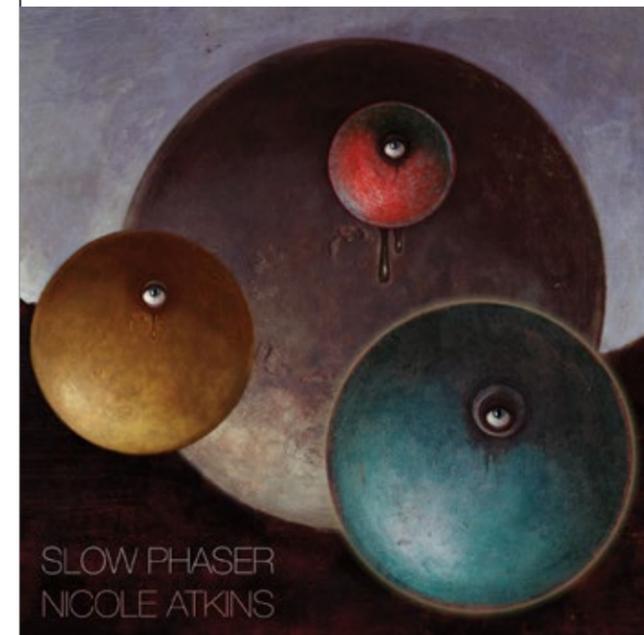
In “Forgive Me,” a sinner on his knees grapples with his dark side. Millsap presents straight, no smirking allowed. With shivering strings and moody horns, it's the kind of epic country-politan self-flagellation that George Jones would have taken to the top of the charts. Relationships get the same unflinching treatment. “I don't want to be the man that lifts you up and helps you stand/Then holds you high and drops you to the floor,” he sings in “The Villain,” a mournful dissection of dysfunction, failure, love, and self-loathing.

A strong guitarist, Millsap is accompanied throughout by bassist Michael Rose and fiddler Daniel Foulks. They move easily between spare country, folk, rockabilly, and blues. “Quite Contrary” pulses along like a stripped-down Doors outtake; the Tex-Mex swing of “Disappear” conjures a border-town escape. On the opposite spectrum, “At the Bar (Emerald City Blues)” comes on as an ethereal number that imagines “The Wizard of Oz” characters as broken dreamers in a dive bar.

“I'm as happy as the daytime is long,” Millsap sings. “But in a melancholy melody/That's the place I belong.” That sentiment, like this outstanding debut, deserves a hearty amen. —**Chrissie Dickinson**

Here are a couple quick tidbits to know about Nicole Atkins' *Slow Phaser*, her third album and first to be funded and released outside the major-label system. She recently told an interviewer that she once dumped a guy for trying to force French author/essayist Marcel Proust upon her, and she cites the words of David Byrne for inspiring her to go it alone and start her own label.

The takeaway, for the purposes of a record review? Atkins is musically adventurous, with a lack of pretension. When it comes to love, she can sing, with bluesy-eyed seriousness, that “it's only chemistry,” and pull off folksy, down-home sentiment with plucky instrumentation, cautiously rosy gospel keyboards, and call-and-response vocals that behave like a Greek chorus. There's just enough happening to heighten but not quite oversell the drama.



Nicole Atkins

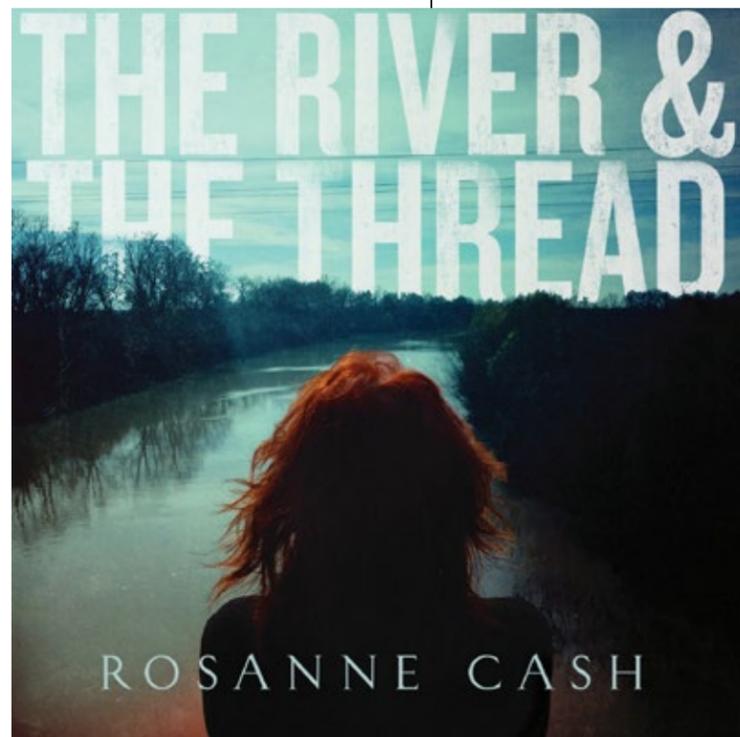
Slow Phaser
Oh'Mercy Records,
180g LP or CD

While Atkins has spoken of *Slow Phaser* as a light concept album about losing and finding yourself, it's appeal resides in the way songs effervescently dabble in disco, touch on propulsive albeit subdued synth-driven grooves, and detour into frisky and fleetingly amorous rock n' roll—all without losing Atkins' underlying sense of pop classicism. As she's regularly compared to everyone from Roy Orbison to Janis Joplin, *Slow Phaser* captures in full explorer mode a singer/songwriter with a deep love of tradition.

Hence, the false promises of “Who Killed the Moonlight?” have a step-ladder-like build, as guitars and effects capture a femme fatale as filtered via Stevie Nicks. “Girl You Look Amazing” could easily be a dance pop hit in the hands of Pharrell Williams

even if not everyone in the Top 40 world would get the joke of the ridiculous come-ons. “Gasoline Bride” is three mini-songs in one, capturing Atkins' penchant for big-vocal 70s rock, a slinky, danceable beat, and colorfully psychedelic guitars.

Atkins can work in lyrical extremes, which is not always an advantage. Her takedown on religion, “Sin Song,” is Western church silliness; the wispy “Cool People” ultimately feels petty; and “Above as Below” ends the album on a downer of lost-at-sea poetry. But when she splits the difference—such as on the beguiling, slithering “Red Ropes” and the weeping “The Worst Hangover,” a poignant take on a trashed, post-hurricane Jersey shoreline—Atkins proves she's managing just fine without Proust. —**Todd Martens**


Rosanne Cash

The River & the Thread
Blue Note, 180g LP or CD

Rosanne Cash's last name has likely been as much of a burden as a benefit. But the eldest daughter of the titanic Johnny long ago forged a path as a critically respected artist in her own right.

Born in Memphis, raised in California, and now a longtime resident of Manhattan, Cash, 58, has created an enviable body of work since her early years as a progressive country-pop hitmaker in the 1980s. Over the years, she has released a series of sophisticated and introspective albums. She also survived vocal polyps and brain surgery, and continues to flourish as a recording artist and author—vide, *The River & the Thread*.

Akin to 2009's Grammy-nominated *The List*, Cash's first album in more than four years is steeped in memory. Cash says the album was inspired by a personal journey through the south. Along with her husband, collaborator and producer John Leventhal, she revisited many of the landmarks and cities that figured into the lives of her father and family. She also traveled to Dyess, Arkansas, to assist with the restoration of her father's childhood home.

Although those were meaningful journeys to Cash, it's highly unlikely a listener unaware of the backstory would glean it from the songs themselves. Her lyrics are filled with poetic couplets and arresting images. Yet, taken as a whole, they are often abstract rather than a concrete narrative. *The River & the Thread* contains an impressionistic group of songs, some of which obviously reference signifiers of the south. Others, not so much. The overarching sense of a journey through time, and with many arrivals and departures, remains loose.

That's not to say what's here isn't lovely. The funky, steamy "A Feather's Not a Bird" is filled with soulful organ and chorally dynamic

backing singers. "A river runs through me," Cash sings as she references a trip that weaves from Florence to Memphis to Arkansas. She then touches on the impact of returning to one's physical roots. "There's never any highway when you're looking for the past/The land becomes a memory and it happens way too fast."

Indeed, memory often makes for a foggy roadmap, which is exactly how the album unfolds. The songs suggest the ways in which geographical locations can touch us emotionally, and how the mere sight of a place can open the psychic floodgates to the past. You can almost hear the wind whistling down the empty corridor in "Night School," where an old house conjures memories of a young couple and is now an abode where "hungry ghosts still tap the walls."

Mood and memory dominate the themes. The Civil War story song "When the Master Calls the Roll," one of the few straightforward tunes, recounts the death of a young soldier and the bride he leaves behind. The achingly pretty and gently arranged "Etta's Tune" concerns a relationship, but details regarding the identity of the lovers or Etta remain unclear.

However, Cash has said the song is about Marshall Grant—the bassist in her father's original backing band— and his wife, Etta. Cash paints a twilight portrait of the aging couple sitting in their old home in Memphis surrounded by the artifacts of their youth: "We kept the house on old Nokomis/We kept the polished bass guitar/We kept the tickets and reels of tape/To remember who we are."

Like many songs on the album, it's evocative of love and loss but too lyrically obscure to advance a bigger story. But that's not what the artist is after. *The River & the Thread* presents an artful set of songs that inspire largely through free association—just like our most cherished memories often do.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**

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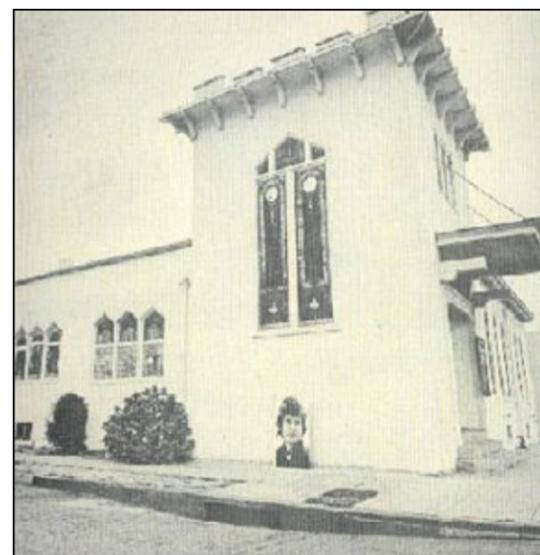
ime to celebrate the Bard. For no other reason than coincidence, a trio of Bob Dylan tribute records—two reissues, one an all-new original collection—pay homage to the icon via three different approaches that highlight the variety, reach, and multifaceted depth of his music.

As concepts go, *Bob Dylan in the 80s: Volume One* wins points for initiative and boldness. Few, if any, critics or fans will defend Dylan during the Reagan era, when he lost nearly all relevance. Interrupted only by 1983's *Infidels*, the period between 1980's *Saved* and 1989's Daniel Lanois-produced comeback *Oh Mercy* ranks as the weakest stretch of the singer's five-decade career. Alas, the observation plays out on a compilation that, despite valiant efforts, finds indie-leaning artists such as Elvis Perkins, Blitzen Trapper, and Hold Steady frontman Craig Finn contending with mediocre fare.

©Photo by Ken Regan



Bob Dylan in the 80s: Volume One
ATO, LP or CD



The Brothers and Sisters
Dylan's Gospel
Light in the Attic, LP or CD

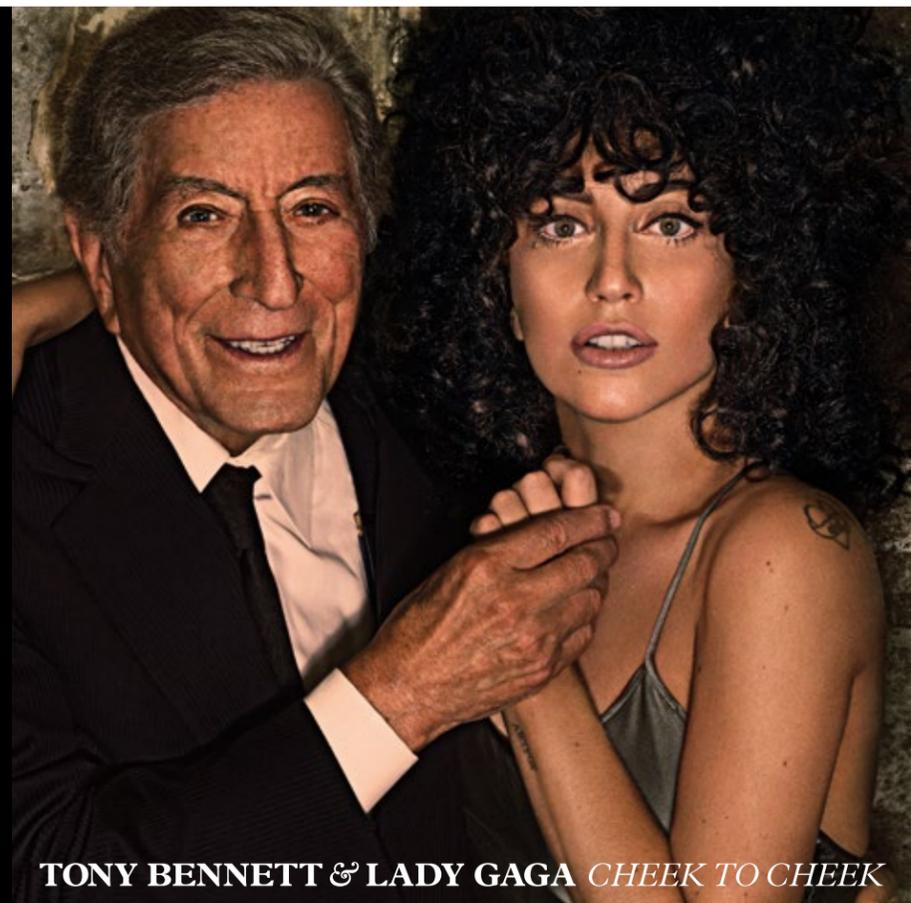
In the liner notes, author Jonathan Lethem states the project's goal is to "showcase one of the greatest artists of our time during an off-rhythm period" and claims "Dylan was a lot better than anyone knew" during the era. Wishful thinking, mostly. Aside from Built to Spill's cover of "Jokerman" and Deer Tick's "Night After Night," little here supports his argument. While enthusiasts might get a grin out of spinning *Bob Dylan in the 80s: Volume One* for curiosity's sake, it remains more intriguing in theory than execution.

Originally recorded in 1969 for the long-defunct Ode Records and produced by Lou Adler just months before he spearheaded Carole King's *Tapestry*, *Dylan's Gospel* exudes character, consistency, and focus. Credited to a 27-member choir anchored by soul great Merry Clayton—the commanding female voice heard on the Rolling Stones' eternal "Gimme Shelter" and a star of the recent Oscar-winning documentary *20 Feet From Stardom*—and dubbed the Brothers and Sisters, the album turns ten of Dylan's most-beloved 60s songs into churchy anthems.

Several tunes ("The Mighty Quinn," "I Shall Be Released") benefit more from the big, group-centric gospel treatment

than others ("Lay Lady Lay," "My Back Pages"). A cadre of top session singers (Ruby Johnson, Patrice Holloway, Shirley Matthews) surrounds Clayton, but the latter deserves headlining status courtesy of a performance that almost pulls off the audacious attempt of transforming "Just Like a Woman" into what passes as a send-up to a higher power. Light in the Attic's reissue is remastered from the original ¼-inch stereo tapes, and sounds it.

Out of print for more than a decade, the superb *Bob Dylan: The 30th Anniversary Concert Celebration (Deluxe Edition)* documents what went down at the all-star fete held in Madison Square Garden in October 1992. Amidst a plethora of tributes, the double-disc affair ranks among the most emotionally invigorating and creatively inspired commemorations ever released. A host of big-name artists directly and indirectly connected to Dylan—Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash, Tom Petty, Roger McGuinn, George Harrison, Stevie Wonder, and Lou Reed among them—offer interpretations of Dylan gems invested with sincerity, passion, and purpose. The legendary Booker T and the MGs serve as a supremely soulful and versatile house band. (continued)



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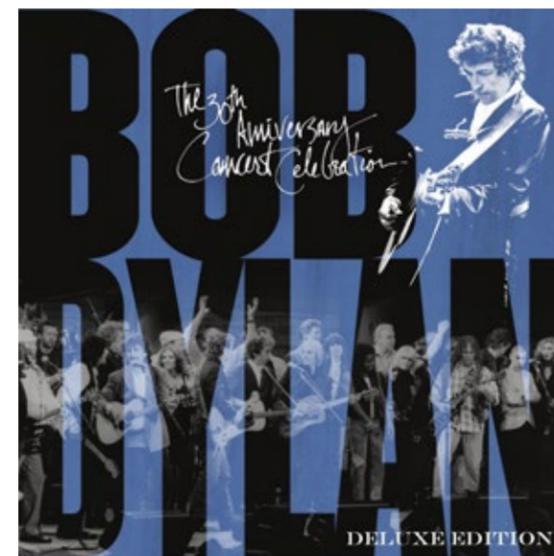


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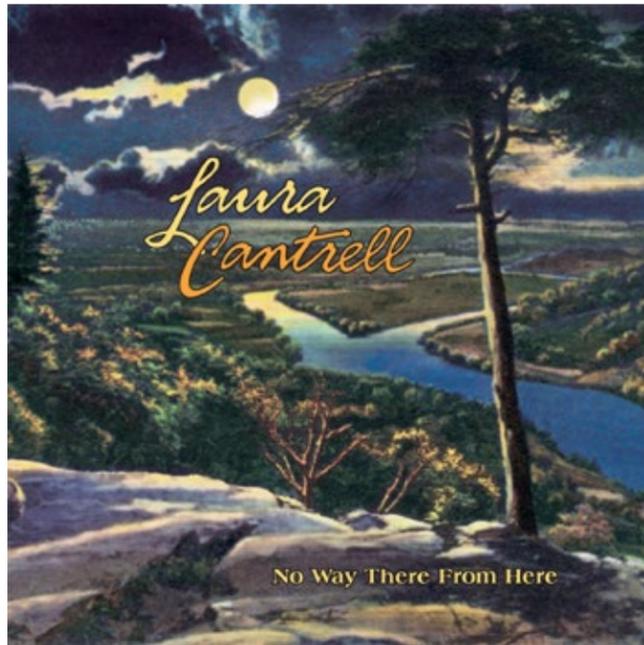


Bob Dylan: The 30th Anniversary Concert Celebration (Deluxe Edition)

Sony Legacy, 2CD or 2DVD or 2 Blu-ray

Memorable for the hypocritical manner in which the crowd booed then-controversial Sinéad O'Connor offstage as retribution for her ripping up a picture of the pope on "Saturday Night Live" weeks earlier, "Bobfest" features Neil Young coming to the rescue and following the O'Connor debacle with a show-stealing, bloodletting rendition of "All Along the Watchtower." It's nearly equaled by a mercilessly electrifying take on "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right," a kiss-off that stands as Eric Clapton's most galvanizing commercially recorded performance of the past 25 years. Lou Reed's bruising "Foot of Pride," Petty and the Heartbreakers' incisive "License to Kill," and a Hall of Fame-worthy duet edition of "My Back Pages" by Dylan, McGuinn, Petty, Young, Clapton, and Harrison are just a few other reasons *Bob Dylan: The 30th Anniversary Concert Celebration (Deluxe Edition)* is mandatory listening—and viewing.

Sony Legacy's CD reissue touts new mastering, yet the real incentive lies in the two bonus tracks—rehearsals of Clapton's scorching "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right" and O'Connor singing a touching "I Believe In You," the song she was scheduled to perform. The DVD and Blu-ray sets are drawn from a new high-resolution video master and include the entire O'Connor episode, as well as the Irish lass' spontaneous a capella rendition of Bob Marley's "War" and angry, arms-folded backup-vocal performance on the cast-sung "Knockin' on Heaven's Door"—a subtle treat no audio format can bring to life. —**Bob Gendron**



Laura Cantrell
No Way There From Here
 Thrift Shop Recordings, CD

Anxiety rarely sounds as lovely as it does on Laura Cantrell's "All the Girls Are Complicated," the opening number on the country-minded singer/songwriter's first proper solo work in about nine years. Cantrell sings as if she's downright charmed by her "raving mad" friends, ticking off character traits—there are the ones who "tend their looks" and the ones who "mind their books"—as if she's listing casual descriptors of a Disney princess.

As musical adornments are carefully added throughout—be it relaxed handclapping, Western-styled guitar soloing, or neighborly harmonizers—Cantrell keeps a bemused distance and hums off into the sunset.

Not all of *No Way There from Here* is as lightheartedly upbeat. But it eases you into Cantrell's calm, knowing, and observational tone: a point-of-view from someone who has lived and learned, and isn't going to be torn up again. The dozen songs here never make a mess of things. Blink, for instance, and you'll miss the warming strings on "Starry Skies" or can-do banjo of "Driving Down Your Street." Understatement rules, and the New York-via-Nashville songwriter touches on country standbys (some trains are a-comin' and there's an insurmountable mountain or two) with such ease that casual listeners may miss the way Cantrell illuminates the quiet moments among grown-up struggles and dreams.

It's not the romance highlighted in "Washday Blues" but the way it's interfering in one's nightly errands. Slide-guitar atmospheres get broken up with a rhythm that sounds like elbows dejectedly being placed on a dryer. Harmonies glimmer and light piano touches score the everyday tragedy of "Barely Said a Thing," where a failure to communicate brings an awkward, unwanted end to an evening. Wind instruments add a sense of optimism to the finally-going-to-get-right honky-tonk of "Beg or Borrow Days," while empty wallets and unanswered dreams dot the slow-dance heartache of "Letter She Sent."

On the latter tune, heaven is little more than an easy chair at the end of a day. The sound is spacious and one of solace, and Cantrell says just enough to let our minds wander. —**Todd Martens**



The Notwist
Close to the Glass
 Sub Pop, LP or CD

The Notwist, like a glacier or filmmaker Terrence Malick, doesn't like to rush things. One imagines the musicians would make horrible daily reporters, content to let countless deadlines slide as they crossed out words and re-wrote sentence until everything...was...just...so. As a result, the German crew has a tendency to release projects whenever it sees fit rather than holding to a more predictable schedule.

Due to this slow-and-steady approach, the band's latest album arrives six years after the release of its predecessor, *The Devil, You + Me*, and a dozen years after its Stateside breakthrough *Neon Golden* introduced its particular brand of downtempo electro-pop to the masses.

While the latter doubled as a drastic maturation—the sound of a once-petulant crew finding an artful way to combine diverse influences (jazz, electro, pop, etc.) into something at once seamless, chilling, and beautiful—everything the band has released since has felt like a continuation of a theme. It's a trend that carries over into the pretty if inconsequential *Close to the Glass*.

The set opens in promising fashion with "Signals," a glitchy cut that finds singer Markus Acher dropping cryptic lines ("We want to be you") atop an electronic backdrop that sounds something like an outdated desktop computer trying to log onto the Internet via a dial-up connection. Even better is the sleek, propulsive "Kong," which effortlessly glides along on a shimmering synth line and Acher's sighing vocals. It would have sounded most excellent playing over the credits of the equally seductive Ryan Gosling film *Drive*.

Unfortunately, the band's imagination begins to fail with the deconstructed symphony of "Into Another Tune," an overwrought number nearly as vapid and forgettable as its on-to-the-next-one title suggests. Over the course of the album's bloodless second half, an unrelenting lethargy seeps in. The acoustic "Casino" arrives completely absent of glitz, painted as a characterless office space rather than a lively neon-lit room. The instrumental "Lineri," in turn, meanders for more than eight minutes, refusing to coalesce into anything more than vaguely pleasant background music. Indeed, even when the Notwist finally cuts loose and cranks the volume on the dense, fuzzy "7 Hour Drive," it's in service to a tune about the soul-sucking monotony of long car treks.

Occasionally, the musicians strike upon a snippet of a melody or an interesting texture (the percussive electronics ushering in "Run Run Run," the steam-engine drums driving "From One Wrong Place to Another"). But too often, they sound unsteady, or worse, disengaged. How odd, then, that the album closes with "They Follow Me" as this band appears to have little interest in leading.

—**Andy Downing**

KISS

FIRST MIDWEST BANK AMPHITHEATRE
TINLEY PARK, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 16, 2014

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Keith Leroux

The past decade has witnessed a concert-downsizing trend, with artists playing smaller theaters and audiences preferring to patronize intimate halls in favor of large-scale shows at impersonal venues. Somebody clearly forgot to tell Kiss.

Performing on a gorgeous mid-August night at First Midwest Bank Amphitheatre outside of Chicago, the arena-rock pioneers ignited a decadent bonanza of concussion bombs, ear-ringing explosions, airborne fireworks, and ceiling-licking fireballs during a 90-minute set that culminated in a blinding storm of smoke and confetti. While Kiss practically guarantees pyrotechnic displays on the overblown level of "Sharknado," the band's health and chemistry have not been as certain of late.



LIVE MUSIC

As recently as last year, frontman Paul Stanley croaked his way through concerts, his once-limitless falsetto ravished by time and throat surgery. The New York native sounded awful, and his band tired. To help ameliorate the situation, his co-founding partner and the group's lone other remaining original member, Gene Simmons, picked up some slack at the microphone. Yet the entrepreneurial Simmons couldn't tame his infamous brontosaurus-sized ego or shut his mouth long enough to realize his marketing obsessiveness and polarizing outspokenness kept threatening to permanently turn the band into what its harshest critics always labeled it: a parody.

Fissures also surfaced last fall when Kiss received news it secured induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. For the band and its fans, the recognition served as long-awaited retribution in the face of myriad naysayers that insist Kiss lacks musical merit. However, due to bad blood with original mates Peter Criss and Ace Frehley, Stanley soon insisted any performance at the event would involve current guitarist Tommy Thayer and drummer Eric Singer—a hardline position that contradicted Simmons, who initially stated he'd be open to a one-off reunion. *(continued)*



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LIVE MUSIC

Kiss later announced it wouldn't play at the ceremony, a flabbergasting decision some fans felt smacked of selfishness but which ultimately kept relations civil.

Drama and disagreements aside, something this year—probably a combination of the group's 40th anniversary and Hall honor, which even prompted perennial Kiss cynics *Rolling Stone* to finally put the greasypaint-caked foursome on its cover—triggered a dormant spark within the band. Commanding the stage, Kiss sounded energetic, heavy, forceful, and cohesive. If not what could be accurately deemed youthful sway and swagger (after all, Simmons and Stanley are in their 60s), the quartet's rhythms touted qualities at least shaded more towards the earlier than the later side of the middle-age spectrum.

Songs gut-punched with on-point dynamics and midrange wallop. Wisely bypassing ballads, the band kicked and stomped like a horse confined in a stall, conveying edginess that instilled leather-tough fare such as the barreling "War Machine" and chest-thumping "I Love It Loud" with requisite ruggedness. Of course, Kiss being Kiss, hedonism received its due, with a revived "Lick It Up" surging with lustful persuasion, the thinly disguised "Love Gun" firing rounds of battering-ram percussion, and the interlocking "Detroit Rock City" building to a fiery climax.

For all the clamor for Kiss to welcome Criss and Frehley back into the fold—their cheerleaders often fail to mention that both already received second chances after substance-abuse issues and still again failed to keep their contractual promises—the band is better at this juncture in its career with Thayer and Singer. Diehards may cringe, but the two replacements afford Kiss a rejuvenated attack and synchronized crunch. They understand their place (and wear their predecessors' makeup and costumes) and get out of Stanley and Simmons' way when needed.



LIVE MUSIC

Yet they also know the song structures inside and out, whether it's how to give "Hotter Than Hell" a street-worthy strut or "Calling Dr. Love" a glam-metal grind.

Just as importantly, Stanley and Simmons again appear to recognize what Thayer and Singer mean to the brand. Constantly engaging the large crowd, the *eminence grise* figureheads played with something to prove. Stanley's voice no longer hit the choirboy high notes, but it remained steady—save when he over-embellished with banter shtick. He also shuffled and danced in high platform heels with the ease of a runway model, occasionally stopping to roll on the ground or drop to his knees with guitar in hand. His most symbolic gesture, however, was subtle—not a trait for which Kiss is recognized. When he high-fived Simmons in the midst of "Deuce," it suggested all was again right in the Kiss family.

Augmented by the addition of an ominous tolling bell, bathed in dim vomit-green lighting, and hoisted several stories above the stage, Simmons transformed his customary blood-spitting sequence into a demonic moment worthy of a 1920s German Expressionist horror movie. His traditional fire-breathing bit resonated with comparable anticipation and excitement. Nearly everyone knew what was coming, but Kiss demonstrated that not even high-definition video can substitute for witnessing a larger-than-life performance in the flesh. Correspondingly, years of familiarity couldn't diminish the make-believe imagination and forget-your-troubles fun wrought by the costumed ensemble when its hard rock comes across with the similar jubilant rush one gets after hooking up with a much-desired lover.

Indeed, the painted faces, spiked boots, tasseled jackets, winged capes, rising drum platform, elevating harnesses, and mobile spider-legged lighting rigs occupy the same cultural terrain as currently popular Marvel Comics franchise films, sci-fi graphic novels, and fantasy board games. In an age when many people are opting to vicariously live life through tablets and smartphones rather than getting out and experiencing it unfiltered, Kiss' indulgent escapism feels refreshingly creative—and collectively triumphant. ●



The Afghan Whigs

Do to the Beast
180g 45RPM 2LP or CD

“**Y**ou know me by now” softly repeats Greg Dulli in the midst of the Afghan Whigs’ new noir showpiece “Lost In the Woods,” his tone taunting, threatening, haunting, reminding. Seeing the statement comes from one of the most charismatic and polarizing singers of the past two decades—a proud frontman whose vices and outspokenness continually inspire hyperbolic descriptions that ignore the subtlety and complexities of his persona—it does indeed seem audiences should be familiar with his moves, to the extent he’s expected to live up to a mythologized Lothario status on-stage and on record.

But nothing in Dulli’s world is ever so simple or clear-cut. He’s never adhered to expectations and, with *Do to the Beast*—the Afghan Whigs’ first new record in 16 years—as evidence, isn’t about to start. From major names such as Pixies to The Who, to novelty acts like Cibo Matto, the practice of once-disbanded groups launching Second Acts is as ordinary as a Starbucks opening on the corner. Yet with rare exception, career reboots usually result in disappointment once the allure of nostalgia fades away. Inspired to reunite after bassist John Curley joined Dulli at several solo shows in 2011, the Afghan Whigs mounted a critically acclaimed tour in 2012 that found the riveting live act in even better form than it displayed during its initial tenure during the 1990s. For closure, the band capped off the successful run with a New Years Eve show in its hometown of Cincinnati.

Three months later, however, the group’s plans changed when it received an unexpected invite to play a special South By Southwest show with soul singer Usher. Original guitarist Rich McCollum opted out, but after the event, Dulli and Curley elected to begin recording again, aided by musicians and collaborators involved with Dulli’s other bands (Twilight Singers, Gutter Twins). Because of the Afghan Whigs’ stainless reputation, the decision arrives fraught with risk. Save for 1988’s self-issued *Big Top Halloween*—a record the band quickly disowned—the band released five very-good-to-great albums, including 1993’s *Gentlemen*, an inimitable work that stands not only among the decade’s best efforts but as one of the most emotionally eviscerating and savagely primal break-up documents ever recorded. Resurrecting the Afghan Whigs’ name arrives loaded with considerable pressure to maintain such excellence and own up to expectation.

While 16 years represents an eternity between records, on *Do to the Beast*, several sonic and thematic holdovers serve as guideposts that link the band’s past to its present. Dulli remains unpredictable—shifty in temperament, elusive in motivation, concealed by clever metaphor and the element of surprise. *(continued)*

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The band's distinctive soulful sound pulses throughout a majority of songs, with percussive backbeats steering the direction and grooves plucked from the depths of old R&B 45s prowling in the background. Betrayal, retribution, pain, loss, and deception run rampant. The dicey themes beget menacing environments in which Dulli often roams as a mercenary, unshackled from responsibility or guilt.

The absence of culpability marks a pointed shift from the band's earlier works that, however steeped in vitriol and blame, seldom witnessed Dulli entirely divorced from consequences and responsibility. Here, when at his most confrontational, the singer operates in complete control: a man bent on exacting vengeance on his own terms, and approaching subjects with a cool demeanor meant to prolong suffering, incinerate any suggestion of forgiveness, and instill deep-seated fear. At times, he saunters in and surveys situations much like a hardened Walter White in the later stages of "Breaking Bad," his former personality extinct and transformed into that of the merciless, seemingly immortal, and largely invisible Heisenberg.

On the revenge fantasy "These Sticks," Dulli pulls strings with cunning fearlessness and unforgiving intent, stalking his prey amidst tribal-drum thunder and explosive crescendos. He sets the trap, lays out the bait, and ensnares the victim in similar nonplussed fashion on the simmering "Matamoros," during which pronounced funk and Middle Eastern gypsy accents give way to an air-dropped hook and stinging outro that finds Dulli salivating as he admits, "I'm so excited you decided to come over/ And beg."

Having kicked cigarette smoking in 2008, Dulli sings with more finesse, delicacy, dynamics, and soulfulness in his voice than in years past. On the tantalizing "Algiers," as unique a song the Afghan Whigs have recorded, a classic girl-group beat collides with a spaghetti-western melody and acoustic flamenco rhythm. Above it all, Dulli croons in a true falsetto, the dreamy highs and romantic smoothness contrasting with a whip-cracking guitar solo indicative of the tune's implied bloodlust, sin, and temptation. His singing goes off-leash in a different manner during "Parked Outside," a push-and-shove grudge match

brewed with sexual friction, R&B swagger, and cathartic hard rock.

For all the musical resemblances to the Afghan Whigs' established sound, *Do to the Beast* unsurprisingly contains as many departures from it. As a whole, the album is guided more by mood and texture than guitars. Atmospherics and ambience provide the foundation to a number of compositions. Dulli's embrace of electronic and exotic strains in his other projects bleeds over here, as do increasingly dense arrangements and mixes. More than a dozen guests, including a memorable turn by soul singer Van Hunt, contribute. Packed with instrumentation and overdubs—sometimes to the point of overload—the record shares more in common with 1996's extravagant *Black Love* than the leaner *Gentlemen* and 1998's sweaty, celebratory *1965*. The Afghan Whigs even reference the latter on "Royal Cream" via a mean, tempo-altering guitar riff straight from "My Enemy."

A scholar of music history, Dulli pays homage to multiple influences with faint cues throughout, ranging

©Photo by Piper Ferguson



from the Stevie Wonder-like Wurlitzer on "Lost In the Woods" to the "wet" James Brown-fueled drum sounds heard on multiple tracks. Dulli's lifelong interest in film scores also surfaces on a few songs found on the album's back end that feel like slightly incomplete vignettes and more akin to ruminative solo work than Afghan Whigs music. The counterpoint balance achieved by McCollum's

steady guitar playing is missed on occasion.

Still, such minor shortcomings become trivial when measuring the levels of songwriting consistency, quality control, and group chemistry attained on *Do to the Beast*. Free of easy nostalgia and open to bold ideas, the artistically vital effort puts the Afghan Whigs in rare company with contemporaries that never made a mediocre or disappointing record. More

importantly, it signals a spirited creative evolution that even extends to Dulli's outlook.

Yes, he still thrives in the roles of sinister playboy and tormented lover. But in subverting these positions on "It Kills" and strongly hinting of redemption during "I'm Fire," he and the Afghan Whigs point towards something more rewarding than revenge served hot or cold—that of lasting emotional transformation. —**Bob Gendron**



Cloud Nothings

Here and Nowhere Else
Carpark/Mom & Pop, LP or CD

Time and again on Cloud Nothings' *Here and Nowhere Else*, the fourth full-length from the snarling Cleveland trio, singer/guitarist Dylan Baldi fumbles to find the right words, singing: "I feel there's nothing left to say"; "I don't know what you're trying to say"; "You don't really seem to care/And I don't even talk about it." While the frontman might have issues communicating verbally, the music never fails to get his point across, the three bandmates unleashing a barrage of songs that alternately shriek, simmer, sneer, and explode.

It marks an evolution that started with Cloud Nothings' 2012 breakout, *Attack on Memory*, an album that reintroduced Baldi's onetime bedroom solo project as a full-on group affair. Even the 2013 departure of guitarist Joe Boyer hasn't slowed the band's momentum. If anything, the crew sounds tighter and less prone to exploration, akin to a government that chose to halt expenditures on deep-space ventures in order to reinvest in building infrastructure from the ground up. So, gone are the pianos that occasionally surface on *Attack on Memory*. They're replaced by slash-and-burn guitars, thundering drums, and a relentless, restless sense of urgency.

Drummer Jayson Gerycz, in particular, is a constant revelation, hammering at his kit with the same brute efficiency as Liam Neeson hacking his way through a gang of Armenian kidnapers in *Taken*. If there's any justice in the world, the former will quickly supersede John Adams as Cleveland's most famous drummer. Alternately, Baldi sounds like he spent the time away absorbing the rawer elements of Nirvana's *In Utero*. There are moments, particularly on the skinned-and-flayed "Just See Fear," where the singer barely sounds human.

At times, these vocal elements hold the group back. While Baldi has never been a

great singer—his hoarse rasp is roughly as thin and haggard as Christian Bale's character in *The Machinist*—the band's increasing vitality merely shines a brighter spotlight on his vocal shortcomings.

Fortunately, he makes up for any such deficiencies with his guitar work, lacing "I'm Not Part of Me" with melodically barbed riffs and closing out the seven-minute-plus "Pattern Walks" with an instrumental barrage that conjures images of a prison riot.

Producer John Congleton, best known for his orchestral work with comparatively wide-screen acts like Okkervil River, St. Vincent, and the Walkmen, resists the urge to adorn the band's sound with all manner of bells and whistles (and pianos and string sections and horns and...). His wise decision heightens the scrappy tension in scorched-earth burners like "No Thoughts" and pummeling "Now Here In."

Throughout, Baldi utilizes this primal backdrop to exercise his id, turning out instinctual songs that alternate between emotional detachment ("I can feel your pain/ And I feel alright about it") and a desire to be entirely present in the moment ("I'm learning how to be here and nowhere else"). He never quite reconciles these extremes, but the tension provides ample fuel for the players, which channel his youthful confusion into eight absolutely visceral tunes. Play this album loud.

—**Andy Downing**

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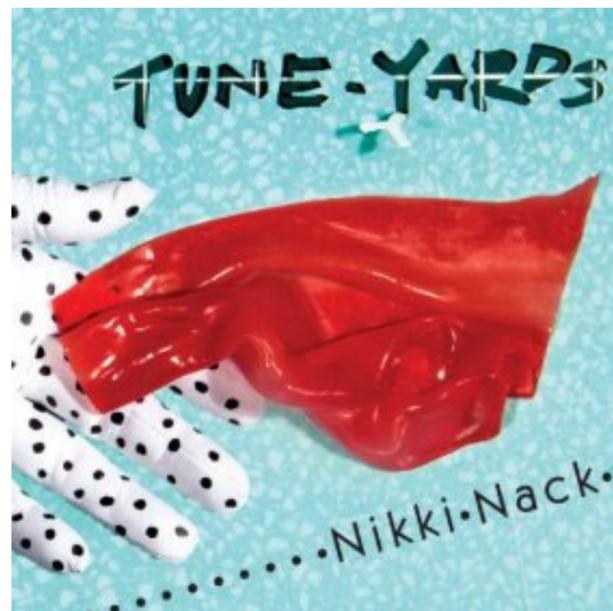
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Few artists put on a show like Merrill Garbus. A puppeteer-turned-one-woman-band, the architect of Tune-Yards is a marvel of human innovation onstage, where songs are sampled and remixed before a listener's eyes. A thump-thump-thump on the drums gets mashed and manipulated with a few acoustic notes and short vocal melody to ultimately result in something akin to a world-beat orchestra.

It's an ambitious undertaking, and over the years, Tune-Yards has gradually grown into a small band. On *Nikki Nack*, Garbus' third album under the Tune-Yards name, she works again with bassist and frequent collaborator Nate Brenner. But this time, she also turns to some A-list help—namely, producers such as Malay (John Legend) and John Hill (Rihanna). *Nikki Nack* still has a ramshackle, beat-focused feel in parts, but if Garbus as Tune-Yards once felt like a Burning Man magician, the new record boasts a polished army of digital flourishes and diversions to give the project a more accessible gloss.



Tune-Yards
Nikki Nack
4AD, LP or CD

There's rarely a loss of attention-grabbing details. "Find A New Way" opens the album with candy-coated keyboards, heavily processed rhythms, and a choir of Garbus' vocals that sound as if they're bouncing off imaginary walls. You'll also hear a harpsichord—or maybe not, as the digital and organic often come in and out of focus. "Water Fountain" creates a melody out of the sound of tapping on empty glass bottles. A vibrating static gradually swells throughout, giving the impression the song fades in and out of dimensions. "Real Thing" begins with a sweet dip into mid-80s R&B (think Sisters With Voices) but that direction doesn't hold, as Garbus soon becomes an orator leading an African drum circle.

Tapping a similar soulful vibe,

"Hey Life" leans on layer after layer of colorful keyboards to temper Garbus' sometimes spoken-word approach. "Look Around" is a piano-based nursery rhyme, where the groove spins with a bit of vinyl static. It's psychedelic, but in the way, say, a 70s TV show may attempt psychedelic effects. Each sound and image gradually inflates in intensity until a kaleidoscope array of effects envelope the whole.

If the flood of sounds and ideas doesn't exhaust you, there's plenty to admire, and the politically aware lyrics give the effort a bit of a heft. Again, however, even this trait comes with some fine print: It's possible to be turned off by some of the earnestness (or use of phrases such as "nikki nack"). "I come from the land of slaves/Let's go Redskins! Let's go Braves!"

Garbus sings on "Real Thing," the line more befitting of a protest march than a pop song. At other times, Garbus is surprisingly effective. "Water Fountain," for instance, may be political activism at its most cutesy—there's a correlation between eating well and having "nice" poop—but it's a tale of haves and have-not's done with all the wacky colorfulness of a children's book.

So, while no listener can probably sit through an amateur radio play such as "Why Do We Dine on the Tots?" more than once, it's always clear that Garbus means well. "Your music's in your pocket with a power you can't even imagine it will bring," she sings early on the album. Only the most pure of cynics that deny someone the belief music equals magic would disagree.

—**Todd Martens**

Some musicians have back stories that sound designed for the big screen. This is most literally true of Syracuse-based Perfect Pussy, which first got together when a movie filmed in the quintet's hometown included a scene that called for a punk band.

That flick—the John Cusack-directed *Adult World*—doesn't come close to matching the intensity and sheer visceral thrill of the group's full-length-in-name-only debut, *Say Yes to Love*, which clocks in at a lean 23 minutes. Instead, these eight tracks, most of which tap out before the two-minute mark, sound as though they could have been inspired by a bit of *A Clockwork Orange's* ultra-violence.

Frontwoman Meredith Graves, for one, doesn't sing so much as she shrieks. Her vocals are so distorted, it's generally impossible to pick up precisely what she's going on about. In this regard, songs are less about her words (a handful of discernible fragments suggest the recording booth doubled as a confessional) and more about the out-and-out physicality of the performances. And what performances they are. Bandmates Garrett Koloski (drums), Ray McAndrew (guitar), Greg Ambler (bass), and Shaun Sutkus (keyboards) join forces with Graves and throw themselves headlong into the music like a marauding gang of wildlings on HBO's "Game of Thrones," lashing out not just at the world around them, but often at one another.

Witness "Driver," where Graves and her mates trade paint, repeatedly scraping together even as the momentum pulls everyone forward. "Big Stars" is similarly caustic, the singer hurling her words like concrete chunks while the players lay down a rickety backdrop so corrosive it would likely cause the listener chemical burns if it stretched even seconds beyond its 2:21 runtime. "Interference Fits," in contrast, builds to a noise-rock finale worthy of its title—the sound of five bandmates simultaneously seizing.



Perfect Pussy

Say Yes to Love
Captured Tracks, LP or CD

While the music never flinches, the snippets of lyrics that bubble to the surface can be far more unsteady. "We may never know," Graves growls on "Work." "Big Stars" finds the frontwoman confessing, "I know we're scared." On a handful of moments, the singer's ferocity falls right in line with that of her mates. "And I want to fuck myself," she snarls on the rumbling "Dig." "And I want to eat myself!" Considering Graves' conviction, I'm not sure anyone would try to stop her.

Say Yes only falters as it nears its close, the full-on aggression of the first 15 minutes giving way to "Advance Upon the Reel," a tune that opens by throwing haymakers before devolving into nearly three minutes of joyless tape hiss. It's followed by "VII," a disjointed, ambient noise-scape that comes on like the score to one of Trent Reznor's nightmares.

Still, it's hard to fault the members of Perfect Pussy for not being able to maintain their breakneck pace, and it's a testament to the quality of the music that the band's head-turner of a name seems like the least interesting thing about it. —**Andy Downing**



Archie Powell & the Exports

Back In Black

Team Cool, LP or CD

Archie Powell doesn't have an easy go with relationships on he and the Exports' terrific *Back In Black*. Candid, funny, and disarmingly personal, the Milwaukee quintet's third album serves a vital compendium of frustrations, repressions, infatuations, and decisions associated with dating in the 21st century. Darker, heavier, and noisier than the group's preceding efforts, it juxtaposes unforced wit and black humor with catchy power-pop hooks and sticky, lick-the-beater melodies.

While self-deprecation and obsession have long occupied a special place in rock n' roll, Powell's intimacy and earnestness with such characteristics—and their depraved offshoots—grant the songs relatable familiarity and believability often missing from heartbreak- and longing-themed works.

Akin to fellow Midwestern singer/songwriter Ike Reilly and a younger Rivers Cuomo, Powell isn't afraid to embarrass himself via private disclosures or risk being seen as a stalker due to frank confessions related to sex, and generally, him not having it.

A casual dude that looks like he'd be comfortable popping the top off a Budweiser and handing it to you on a beer-stained couch, Powell is worlds removed from the self-obsessed rock star, ego-tripping pop diva, and material-obsessed hip-hop persona whose music distorts reality with unattainable fantasy. He and his cohorts are also refreshingly free of hipster trappings—well, save, possibly, for the beards. They avoid suggestions of indie elitism or insider pretension; at no point does artsy temptation trump good, old-fashioned guitar-drums-bass explosiveness. *Back In Black* may not create a new language for romantic exasperation and sexual tension, but it freshens and twists existing vocabularies in clever ways.

Throughout, Powell gives the impression of someone who spends more than his share of time scouring the likes of OKCupid, Match, and local bars for the perfect girl. It's a character type anyone in their 20s, 30s, and 40s knows well. He misreads signs, pines after wrong women, and can't break free of fixations. Many of his first dates devolve into sad, weird affairs. On occasion, he's managed to land a few follow-up dates, but never gets the prize, and often, settles for imagining desired-for outcomes while dealing with letdowns and breakups. The recurrent cycle prompts him to question himself, repress anger, drink heavily, resort to desperate of measures, and, due to his yearning, do it all over again.

Powell's frazzled mental state comes into focus seconds into the album. "I wish someone could make this masturbation obsolete/But baby if it's not you/I guess I'd rather tug," he cries on the high-strung, high-velocity "Everything's Fucked."



Before the song crashes headfirst over the finish line, he's spurned on the phone, convinced he'll never move past his *objet d'affection*, and wishes her memory would be assassinated by a bullet. His fortunes don't improve.

On the low-key "Electrocute My Heart," Powell sways to dream-pop treble notes and springy percussion, the sensuality attached to his sad-eyed-puppy-dog pleas ceding to bizarre relief when, during the climax, he seizes, burns, and fries from the shock treatment he requests from his sought-after mate. "Holes" is similarly detrimental to his physical being, his bandmates riding cheerleading beats and in-the-red glam riffs to a conclusion that witnesses Powell go from optimistic to urgent. The irresistible "I'm Gonna Lose It" spills over with chiming chords, a strolling pace, backing wordless doo-wop vocals, and a litany of sweetly voiced confessional zingers. "But now I'll never press you/And tell you jokes/

Or send you texts," Powell laments, slipping into precarious territory while craving sex so badly he can't help but proclaim his lust: "Let alone undress you/And bite your tongue/Or touch your breast."

Throwing himself into the song until his reddening throat gets scraped raw, Powell also loses control on "Mambo No. 9," a 94-second blast of guerilla punk played at scorched-earth tempos and to-hell-with-everything abandon. The Exports' inner *Doolittle*-era Pixies also surfaces on the grinding "Lean," where caustic dancefloor grooves and rah-rah beats eventually surrender to Powell's disturbed screams and a sympathetic hook that comes on like a surprise haymaker punch.

By all indications, Powell needs rehab—or at least a good therapist—before *Back In Black* hits the halfway mark. He never appears to obtain either option, but on the distortion-laden "Jump off a Bridge," his deadpan delivery projects a

healthy ire at love interests that on deceptively spry tracks such as "Tattoo On My Brain" cause him to require medical attention. Powell also gains the upper hand on the minimalist ballad "Rodeo Crush," his echoing words eviscerating an ex while a solitary piano and atmospheric strings float in the background.

The balance of musical chill-outs and blowouts all lead up to "Everything's Cool," a closing kiss-off track on which saloon piano lines and Powell's calm demeanor function as assurances that the turmoil is behind him and he's ready to move on, hatchet buried. It's the only time on the record Powell seemingly doesn't want us to believe him. Like everyone else that's been through the dating ringer, dealt with crazed exes, and amassed emotional baggage, he understands we can see right through his protective sardonic veil. —**Bob Gendron**

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MUSIC

Aimee Mann and Ted Leo, longstanding pillars of indie-pop songcraft, drop nugget after nugget of indispensable and straightforward truths throughout their debut album as The Both.

"Don't blame the world or a girl for what keeps you estranged," the two sing at one point. "Try to answer a bomb with a calm undertone," Mann assuages at another. And when everything seems to be going to all heck, the two remind us we're all in this together. "You know, we're all in debt now," they sing as the album fades to black.

Theirs may not be words that will change a life, but on song after song, Mann and Leo comfort with dependability, offering the sort of sage approach of a big brother that knows a thing or two about life. It's what a good trusty pop song should do, and it's one of the many reasons Mann and Leo's pairing as The Both is such a listenable affair.

As solo artists, both take different routes to a memorable hook. Mann's is more melancholic, and Leo's is more high energy and loose. Together, these 11 songs never quite approach Leo's pop-punk roots or Mann's reflective balladry. But the middle ground is never less than snappy and makes the most of a guitar-drums-keyboard setup.



The Both
The Both
SuperEgo Records, LP or CD

"No Sir" is nearly four minutes of twilight shading, as harmonies sync-up and shadow one another while skidding guitars and late-arriving handclaps give the tune a determined uplift. "Volunteers of America" puts a spotlight on the thankless and tireless with a buzzy, fast-moving bass and cheery keys that adorn the arrangement akin to a teacher affixing glittery stickers on an ace assignment.

Toying with listener expectations, "The Prisoner" strips away instruments when one expects an explosion and returns them in the form of clenched-teeth guitar work. "Hummingbird" and "You Can't Help Me Now" slow the pace via an unfussy albeit fanciful approach, the back-and-forth vocals brimming with melodic embellishments that answer every expression of doubt with a hook. —**Todd Martens**

F

or close to 50 years, Brazilian singer-songwriter Caetano Veloso has taken a wide-open view of the world's popular music alongside his own country's traditions and combined them all with an imaginative—and critical—poetic spirit. Back in the 1960s, as part of the Tropicalia movement, he blended samba and bossa nova with cutting-edge rock n' roll together with his ironic commentary on Brazil's dictatorship and gender identities. After exile and return (and forays into more straight-up pop), Veloso re-emerged as a national hero in the 1990s and released such richly orchestrated discs as *Livro*.



Caetano Veloso

Abraçoço
Nonesuch, CD

But Veloso's best work usually comes when he delivers a wealth of ideas through a stripped-down small group. His 1972 album *Transa* is a sparse, haunting, and, at times, lovely picture of life in forced expatriation. Veloso recently returned to this format, leading a four-piece rock band on 2006's *Cê* and does again here on *Abraçoço*, which means, appropriately enough, "wide embrace." While this recording appeared overseas two years ago, it is just now seeing a United States release.

Back in the 1960s, Veloso knew how to choose collaborators that could challenge him while also enhancing his own vision. This foresight hasn't disappeared. A younger generation of creative Brazilians contribute to *Cê* and *Abraçoço*, with guitarist Pedro Sá and Veloso's equally



©Photo by Fernando Young

imaginative son, Moreno Veloso, producing. (The younger Veloso played more on the previous disc; here, he just lends bass and percussion parts to "Gayana.") With bassist Ricardo Dias Gomes and drummer Marcelo Callado returning, the working group dynamic has grown stronger.

Such flexibility is especially crucial given all of the sudden twists in tone and contrasting idiomatic layers that run throughout *Abraçoço*. On "A Bossa Nova É Foda," the group rocks with nationalistic pride, even if the track's tone diverges from the quiet music it celebrates (its title translates as "Bossa Nova Is the

Fucking Shit"). But the big guitar attack can also suddenly cut off, and at just the right moment, for Veloso's characteristically soft vocals on "Um Abraçoço." Controlling the barrage adds tension and accents underneath his delivery on "Estou Triste." The group also mixes progressive electronic dance music with romantic nostalgia on "Funk Melodico."

Veloso's band clearly sounds like it shares his affinity for Brazilian musical history. The collective just brings something new to it all. The samba strings and percussion on "O Império Da Lei" emphasize what an expressive

singer Veloso still is, even when his lyrics are about revenge. "Parabéns" serves as an irrepressibly upbeat tune that seems to convey the maracatu rhythm from the country's northeast.

Veloso wrote, or co-composed, ten of the 11 tracks on *Abraçoço*. His longtime friend Rogerio Duarte penned the dark, closing love song "Gayana." Like always, Veloso's songs are poetic discourses that combine romance, politics, and history, all of which have different levels of meaning. At any volume, he still demands to be heard.

—Aaron Cohen

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Curtis Harding

Soul Power

Burger Records, LP or CD

Curtis Harding, like Tatiana Maslany portraying a half-dozen wildly divergent clones on the television series *Orphan Black*, is comfortable in any number of guises. In addition to working as a backup singer for Cee-Lo Green, the Atlanta native formed a scrappy surf/soul garage band (Night Sun) with Black Lips singer Cole Alexander. In recent months, he's been writing and recording songs for a collaborative project with Brent Hinds of art-metal behemoths Mastodon. On Harding's solo debut, *Soul Power*, the multifaceted musician (and son of gospel singer Dorothy Harding) delves into classic 60s and 70s soul befitting the album's title. While the music borrows liberally from the past, the lyrics tend to cast an eye forward.

"I'm focused on my future," Harding sings on opening "Next Time," a silky number buoyed by wobbly organ and woozy, just-roused horns. Then, on the rougher-around-the-edges "Surf," a scruffy garage-rock number most reminiscent of his collaborations with Alexander, he sings, "The future's coming soon."

Even so, the soul man's church-steeped past bleeds through repeatedly, surfacing in everything from his delivery (the spirit-tortured falsetto he flashes on the otherwise chilled "Freedom") to the lyrical content. On the slow-rolling "Beautiful People" he calls the masses to prayer, while "Keep on Shining" builds around a line from the gospel standard "This Little Light of Mine." Rather than searching the heavens for redemption, however, Harding repeatedly finds it in his fellow man (or, more accurately, woman).

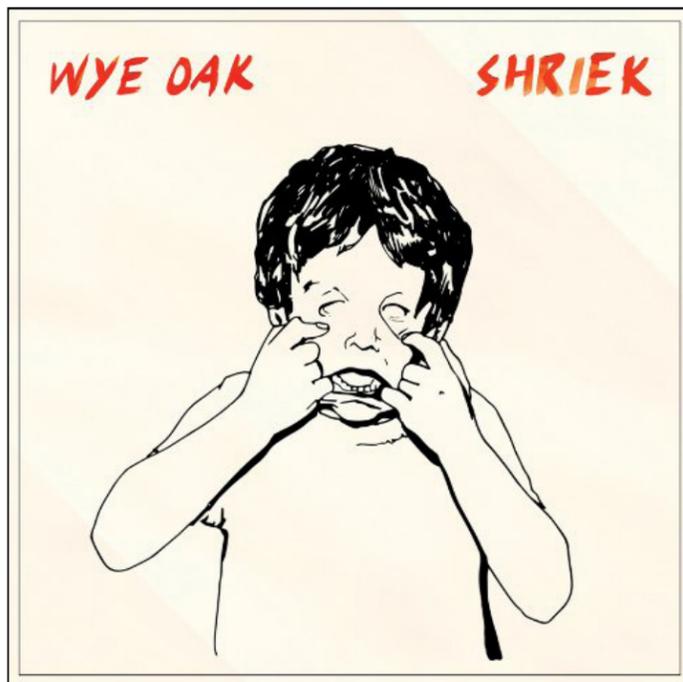
"I can finally see the light," he sings on "Keep on Shining." "It's the light in your eyes that fills this space." Meanwhile, "Heaven's on the Other Side," a toe-tapping tune awash in nimble funk guitar and celebratory brass, locates something akin to salvation in the sweaty bump-and-grind of a packed night club.

Harding also displays a fondness for automobile allusions that could have some questioning whether the native Southerner has been spending significant time in the Motor City. Nonetheless, it's a safe bet neither V6-revving tune ("Drive My Car" and "The Drive") has a thing to do with the highway. "You're moving too fast, baby," he sings on the latter even as the music continues to accelerate. "I'm hitting the brakes."

It's little surprise when the singer urges caution. Rather than a Lothario-in-the-making, Harding most often comes across like a troubled soul in search of deeper human connection. It's an urge he expresses most explicitly on the someone-please-hug-me slow-burner "I Need a Friend" even as the bluesy "Cruel World" offers the most compelling evidence of his need for companionship.

Here, Harding sings of various tortures he could subject himself to and best ("I could walk through the desert without no rain," etc.) before adding, "If I didn't have you I wouldn't last long." It's to the singer's credit that these admissions of weakness emerge as strengths on this grower of a debut.

—Andy Downing



Wye Oak
Shriek
Merge, LP or CD

The following may not seem like an endorsement, but it could take about 10 or 12 hours to fully appreciate *Shriek*. For those that have been following along to the indie-pop musings of the Baltimore duo of Jenn Wasner and Andy Stack, the headline here is that Album No. 4 more or less does away with the guitar. Any organic instruments populating the record are tweaked so they sound synthetic.

The good news is that the act's forlorn, reflective nature has never been dependent on any one instrument. In fact, Wye Oak only seems to have become more intimate—and the choir-ready vocals of Wasner only more poignant—given the newfound clarity surrounding them. Just expect it to take a few listens to unwrap, as the pair's intricacies aren't built for short attention spans.

There is, perhaps, a sort of plainness to Wasner's upper-register calmness. Yet if she's the girl next door, she's the one sitting in a window and staring endlessly and deeply into the horizon. If only for a moment, you want to know just what she sees out there. We may not know who, for instance, is "undeserving of the light" on "The Tower," but the ping-pong rhythms and electronics, which sound a little like stringed instruments, all bounce in such a way that they appear to dare Wasner to show more emotion.

By contrast, the title track is more ornate, with nature-like sounds and circular keyboard pitter-patter creating hypnotizing effects. On "Glory," rhythms sound like pulsating air pipes while the late-song breakdown subscribes to an otherworldly beat-boxing trait. The true accomplishment on *Shriek* is just how human it all sounds, even as the arrangements aim to sing the band off into a dream.

"I hope we'll meet and still you will speak to me," Wasner sings on, "Despicable Animal," on which Stack lays down a muted R&B hi-hat beat while Wasner alternates between a flowery chorus and fuzz-laden, fangs-out verses. Turns out all those laptops have a little bluesy soul in them after all.

—**Todd Martens**



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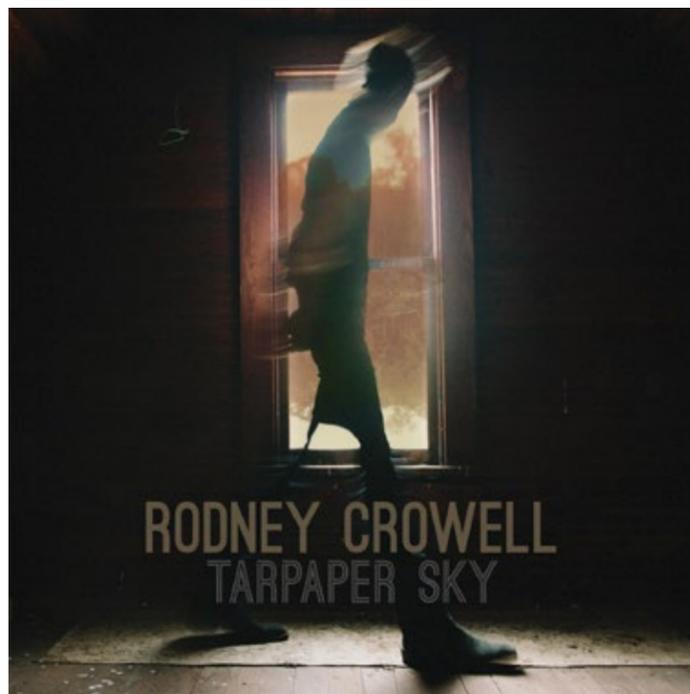


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Rodney Crowell

Tarpaper Sky
New West, LP or CD

Nashville gets a bad rap for low points like the 1990s hat-act stampede and its current focus on bro-country overkill. But it's important to remember that Music City is also home to many of the world's finest singer-songwriters and musicians. Take Rodney Crowell. He's a member of the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame, and disparate artists such as Van Morrison, Tim McGraw, Etta James, and Bob Seger have covered his tunes.

©Photo by David McClister



A writer of songs and prose as well as a prolific recording artist, the 63-year-old Crowell remains busier than ever. He recently teamed with best-selling memoirist Mary Karr for the album *Kin*. He's also fresh off a Grammy win for *Old Yellow Moon*, his collaboration with Emmylou Harris.

Crowell's new solo outing *Tarpaper Sky* is a backward-looking release in the best sense of the term. For the album, he assembled most of the session players that performed on *Diamonds & Dirt*, his 1988 set that yielded a record-breaking five number-one country singles. Passing on studio perfectionism, Crowell and crew cut *Tarpaper Sky* live in one room.

Among the assembled are drummer Eddie Bayers, bassist Michael Rhodes and guitarist Stuart Smith, both of whom boast impressive resumes. But this album isn't the sound of a solo star backed by a well-oiled machine. The band members play Crowell's tunes like they're slipping into a beloved, familiar, and well-worn leather jacket. On sprightly country-rockers ("The Long Journey Home"), Cajun dance tunes ("Fever on the Bayou"), homages to first-generation rock n' roll ("Frankie Please"), and tender ballads ("God I'm Missing You"), the arrangements brim with warmth.

Singing in a grainy tenor, Crowell is a smart, honest lyricist—alternately vulnerable and cheeky. He's also a fine storyteller, whether sharing family tales of love and faith ("Grandma Loved That Old Man," "Jesus Talk to Mama") or the remembrance of his friendship with songwriting legend Guy Clark ("The Flyboy & the Kid") amidst music that sounds like a cousin of Bob Dylan's "Forever Young." Crowell sings his finely honed couplets with such offhand ease, it takes a moment for the unique sentiments to sink in, proffering: "May your nights be filled with laughter and your days with honest work/May you wake up smelling roses when you're face down in the dirt."

He may no longer be at the top of the charts, but artistically, he's at the top of his game.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**



Jessica Lea Mayfield
Make My Head Sing...
 ATO, LP Or CD

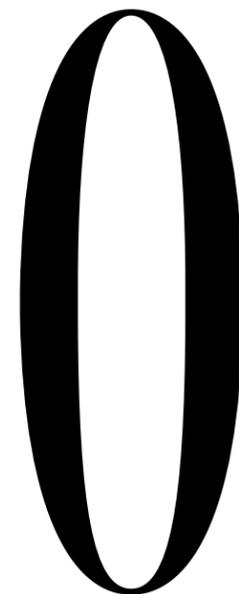
If Kiss is stripped from the conversation, much of the attention surrounding this year's crop of Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductees focused around Nirvana and Linda Ronstadt. The latter recently enshrined pop temples have likely always been points of influence on the young career of Ohioan Jessica Lea Mayfield, but never more so than on *Make My Head Sing...*, her third album and first without any credited assists from Black Keys member Dan Auerbach.

The 10 tracks here seek to see what happens when a little country crooning collides with torrents of grunge-era guitar raving. The result, more often than not, is that the high-pitched, reverberating-off-the-concrete guitars knock Mayfield's folksiness right out of her. The battle isn't necessarily a wash—tracks like "Anything You Want" and "Oblivious" put hard-nosed, colorfully tattooed emotion front and center.

"I could kill with the power in my mind," Mayfield sweetly coos to open the album, as if she's some guitar-wielding superhero or supervillain. Pick your high-concept extreme: This tough/soft contrast may be an old rock n' roll standby, yet it remains a comfortably powerful one at that. Most of the time, at least. Gone is the bluesy kookiness that marks Mayfield's 2011 debut *Tell Me*, and when she lets herself get drowned in shoegazey washboard guitars ("Pure Stuff"), it's not the smartest of trades.

Mayfield makes a significant impact when she aims to balance her inner Cobain with some of rootsy charm, be it via the sinister, Southern rock-stamped stomp of "I Wanna Love You" (a line Mayfield delivers more as a threat) or the hippie harmonies on the retro garage-pop ditty "Standing the Sun." "Party Drugs" wallows in sparseness, the cockily tongue-in-cheek ballad assessing the live-fast, die-young lifestyle. Mayfield's note-bending guitars on "Do I Have the Time" concoct a rather pretty take on sexual abandon.

"I never wanted to be that crazy mess," she sings on "No Fun," just before a "Come As You Are"-like explosion. No, it's not necessarily crazy or messy, but *Make My Head Sing...* imparts Mayfield with a few exciting new tools for a still-promising career.
 —**Todd Martens**

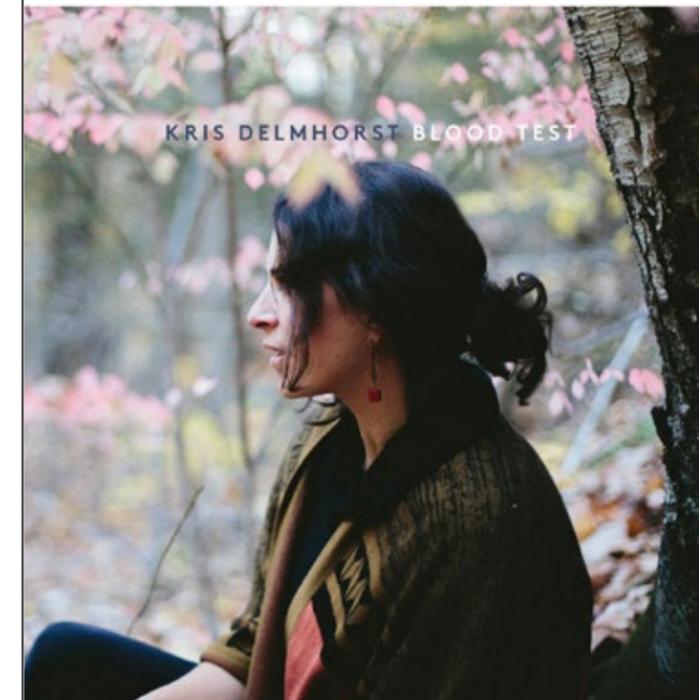


In the modern folk spectrum of exceptional female singer-songwriters, Kris Delmhorst would fit nicely on a bill between Dar Williams and Krista Detor. Smart, mature, and given to sincere reflection, she's a classy artist whose cerebral tendencies never detract from her innate warmth.

"Remember how it used to be?," Delmhorst sings in a burnished alto on "Blood Test," the title cut of her new release. She waxes nostalgic for a time when there was "Nothing on the radio/Nothing on TV/Just us and all those hours."

A Brooklyn native that has long been a stalwart of the Boston folk scene, Delmhorst mines the past for some material. At times, there is wistful reminiscing in her songs, a trait that also extends to her overall sound. She brings to mind a modern-day Carole King on the poignant balladry, while her stripped-down classic-rock redux makes her sound like Sheryl Crow's kid sister.

Co-produced by Anders Parker, the arrangements feel as intimate and inviting as a mellow cup of coffee in a friend's kitchen on a cold winter day. Delmhorst is a versatile singer that easily ranges across the breadth of this material. She gets misty-eyed on the tender numbers "My Ohio" and "Hushabye." She belts out the jangly power pop of "Bright Green World." "92nd St." starts with a plaintive voice and muted guitar

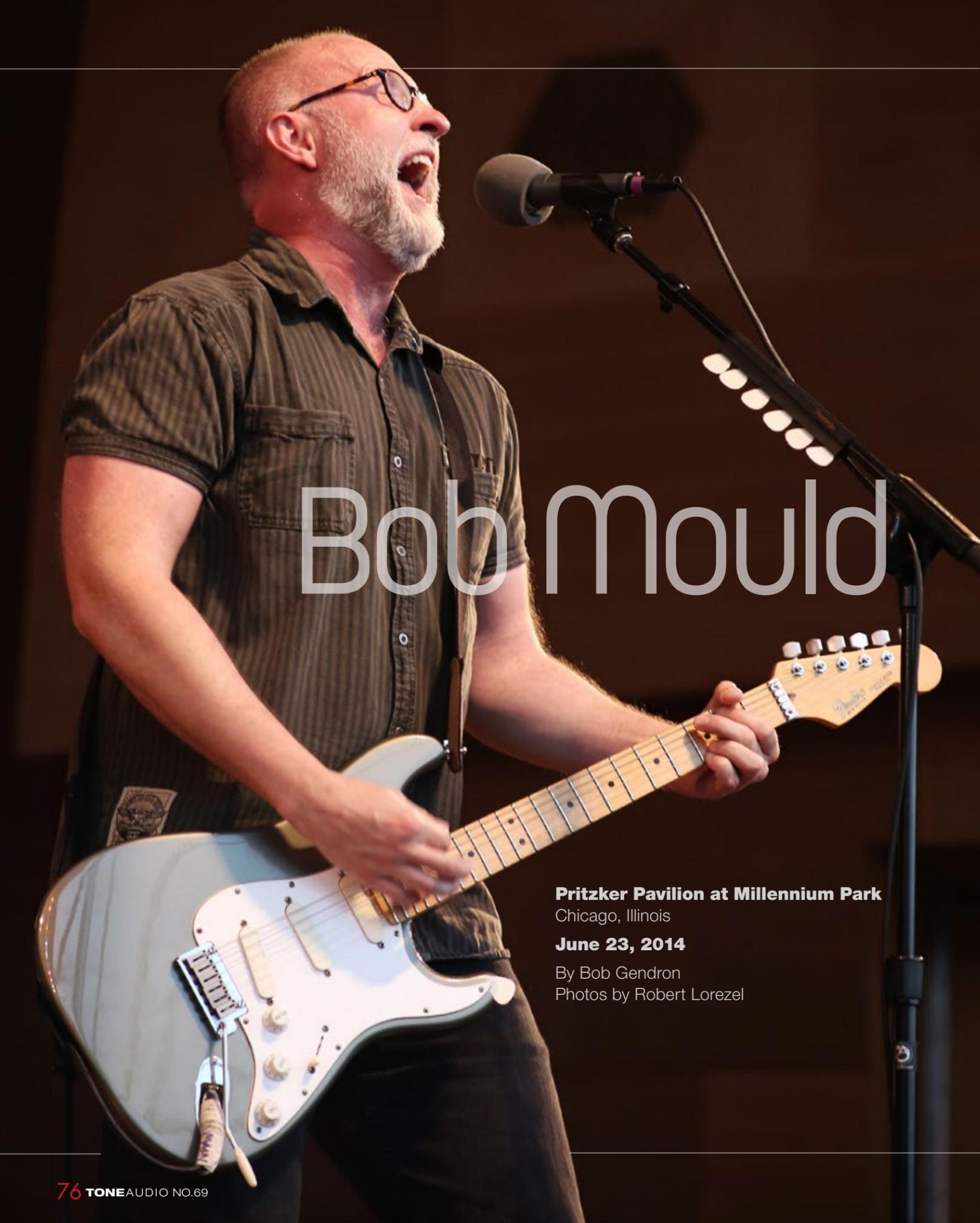


Kris Delmhorst
Blood Test
 Signature Sounds, CD

before blossoming into a crunchy piece of folk psychedelia. Delmhorst is also in her element when it comes to the blues. She strikes a sensual, slinky vibe on "Saw It All" and achieves near gale-force power on the driving "We Deliver."

While she crafts lovely phrases, her lyrics are more mood pieces refracted through a poetic lens than straightforward stories. Watery signifiers of the East Coast get tucked into her songs via numerous references to the ocean, the seas, the shore, the harbor, a seawall, and waves. The aquatic bent reaches its apotheosis on "Lighthouse." Musically and lyrically it's a gentle piece of yacht rock.

"Put your eye on the horizon," Delmhorst sings. "At the edge of the blue/There's a shining in the darkness/Gonna guide you safely through." As she does with many songs on *Blood Test*, Delmhorst poetically addresses the storms of life. Sometimes she sounds rueful, at other times hopeful. But what always underpins these songs is the resilient tone of a survivor.
 —**Chrissie Dickinson**



Bob Mould

Pritzker Pavilion at Millennium Park
Chicago, Illinois

June 23, 2014

By Bob Gendron
Photos by Robert Lorezel

S

o much for his tinnitus. Bob Mould, who only several years ago rarely plugged in due to recurrent ringing of the ears, blazed through an electrifying 75-minute performance at Chicago's Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park with the searing intensity of a man half his age. For the former Husker Du front man, the vibrant concert continues a mid/late-career revival hinted at back in 2005 and launched in earnest with 2009's *Life and Times*. Mould's creative trajectory, let alone his resurgent vitality at 53 years old, is largely unique among his contemporaries.

Buttressed by the release of back-to-back studio gems—2012's *Silver Age* and the recent *Beauty & Ruin*—Mould has reclaimed the urgent punk-rock territory he helped first outline with Husker Du in the 1980s and later with the more pop-prone Sugar in the early 1990s. It's a sonic landscape sculpted by his sheets-of-sound guitar work, concussive drums, concise bass lines, distorted overtones, and insistent vocals that roar to life with the forceful propulsion of a jet engine. Hardcore aggression and sweet melodies cross at its intersection. While Mould arrangements can favor one style over the other, his sense of balance and professionalism allow him to take chances that result in pieces such as the sledgehammer drone of "Come Around" and doo-wop-accented "Nemeses Are Laughing."

Those two songs were among the nearly two-dozen numbers the upstate New York native breathlessly rifled through on a perfect late-June night underneath a grand, twisted-metal canopy designed by Frank Gehry. Touching on every phase of his career, Mould was in reflective mode but didn't pine for nostalgia. Instead, he interwove ghosts of the past into the fabric of the present, wrapping the set around introspective new material that deals with the death of his father and their complex relationship.

Tense and tumultuous, potent tunes such as the hook-fueled “I Don’t Know You Anymore” and furious “Tomorrow Morning” emitted the sort of mixed emotions, self-awareness, and mortality struggles that linger in the wake of loss, grief, and attempted reconciliation. Similarly themed, the shell-shocked ferocity of “The War” bounced off imaginary walls, Mould ending the purge by whispering advice to himself: “Don’t give up, don’t give in.” The back-and-forth lyrical ricochet of “Hey Mr. Grey” battered around akin to a metallic pinball, Mould pushing the tempos high and hard, and drummer Jon Wurster and bassist Jason Narducy responding with a battering-ram charge. “Kid With a Crooked Face” arrived as an agitated hornet’s nest, the stinging instrumental notes a blur and the pace attempting to establish a new land speed record.

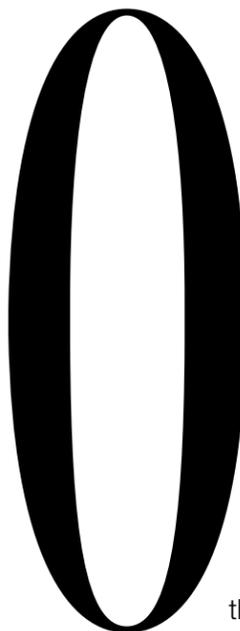
Through it all, Mould kept the accelerator depressed, sweating profusely and yet flashing brief smiles as if it all was just another day sitting in front of a computer screen in an air-conditioned office. During solos, he stomped around like a stallion, digging his heel into the stage floor, the movements signaling to the crowd and his two bandmates that he wasn’t going



to be taken or tamed by anyone. Sure, the balding head, salt-and-pepper beard, and bookish glasses served as obvious signs of middle age and settling down. But Mould has different plans, and for him as much as any artist, the decibels, density, and din provided cathartic release that’s needed as much as it’s wanted.

As he proved with the cleansing grooves during “A Good Idea,” smash-and-grab assault of “Star Machine,” socket-frying jump of “Egoverride,” and spring-loaded overdrive on “Chartered Trips,” beauty can be found amidst noise, desperation, and the crush of everyday life. Mould and Co. often knocked down everything in their way to uncover it. At other times, as on the slow-burning eulogy “Hardly Getting Over It,” light wrestled with pitch-black dark, and the heavy burden of change and acceptance—perpetual Mould concerns—seemed suffocating. Still, gracefulness and optimism prevailed.

“Fix it, fix it, full enough,” Mould commanded over racing rhythms and crunchy guitar lines on the soul-affirming “Fix It.” “Time to find out who you are.” At this juncture, it’s safe to say Mould answered the challenge and is better for it, personal scars and painful mourning be damned. ●



Orchestral pop for the remix era, much of what Swedish duo JJ delivers is familiar. Fragments are recognizable. Lyrics sometimes unravel as a confluence of Miley Cyrus and Drake songs. Harmonies echo Madonna hits of the 80s. Synthesizers are glacier-cool like those of ABBA. And yet much of *V* sounds just beyond the reach of familiarity.

Is that a harpsichord, or bird chirping? Is that guitar feedback, or droning electronics? Did “When I Need You Again” just mash-up references to the Mamas and the Papas’ “Dream a Little Dream of Me” with Young Money’s “BedRock”?

Probably, as the duo of Joakim Benon and Elin Kastlander attempt to tap into our collective Top 40 and then turn it into a softly brimming haze. Alternating between abstract ambience and glistening melodicism, *V* filters a romance—from its courting to its dissolution—through the lens of modern pop. Images of spilled drinks on “Dean and Me” clash with those of fairly tale-like idealism, and the sound of a church-like



JJ

V
Secretly Canadian, LP or CD

hymn runs up against vague Auto-Tuned rapping on “Hold Me,” each noise emerging and dissolving as harmonies crest and violins drift into the clouds. The message JJ conveys is often one heard in the most accessible club music, but the sound is built for the heavens.

Past JJ releases—a pair of albums, a collection of singles—have drifted toward the experimental, equal parts folk-pop, hip-hop minimalism, and hypnotically looping digital landscapes. Bits of those sonic aspects are here, but *V* is all forward momentum. One song pushes into the next and a giant, layered hook lays beyond every hand-drumming break.

Moments, such as “Fågelsången,” sound as if they were recorded in the wild. Birdcalls and tribal drumming mesh with manipulated thug-like vocals, Kastlander’s fragile rasp, and electronically boosted violins. Others, such as “Inner Light,” are choral-quiet one moment and turn into finger-snap-enhanced reveries the next. Even then, knobs may turn Kastlander’s voice up high until it’s a dirty-minded chirp.

It all seems designed to disorient. Just when you think you have *V* figured out, the act drops a “Summer of ‘69” riff to close the album, and it becomes a work as much about love and loss as it is the songs that get us through it all. —**Todd Martens**

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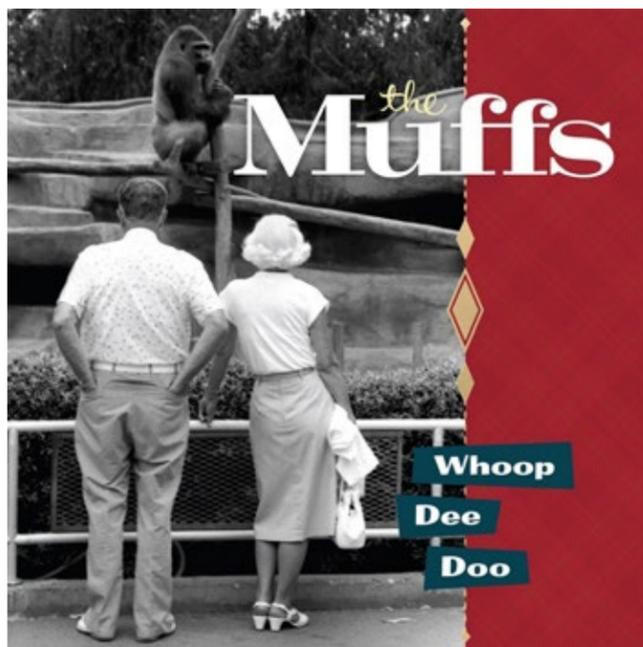
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The Muffs

Whoop Dee Doo
Burger/Cherry Red, LP or CD

Kim Shattuck will forever be the answer to the trivia question: “Who replaced original bassist Kim Deal in the Pixies?” Never mind that the former’s tenure in the once-impeccable band lasted only a few months before she was terminated, the fall girl for an embarrassing run of shows short on energy, purpose, and inspiration. As it happens, the Pixies’ decision to end the relationship with Shattuck is the best move they’ve made in nearly a decade—and they’re not even the direct beneficiaries. Rather, the dissolution prompted Shattuck to re-start her primary band, the Muffs, after an extended hiatus.

Whoop Dee Doo, her trio’s first album since 2004 and most consistent since 1997’s *Happy Birthday To Me*, bursts with bounding melodies, crunchy tones, and bash-and-slap raucousness that have been Shattuck signatures since the group released a self-titled effort on Warner Bros. more than 20 years ago and immediately announced itself as one of the most fun, catchy, and happy-go-lucky acts in pop-punk history. Too raw for the mainstream and too sugary for the underground, the Muffs attracted a cult following smitten by Shattuck’s sweet-and-tart vocals, goofy sensibility, and hummable hooks that would be the envy of Cheap Trick, Big Star, or any other formidable power-pop band.

These hallmarks course throughout this 12-track set in which concise songs go off like Black Cat fireworks behind a school and put grins on the faces of all the sly neighborhood kids watching the disruption. Carefree, punchy, and comedic, the Muffs give listeners permission to cause silly trouble, partake in shenanigans, and hang around in pajamas all day because, well, why not? Musically, fuzz-drenched chords, chiming tambourines, and broken notes stem from garage tradition. Shattuck’s come-hither coos and persuasively sultry hiccups suggest romantic girl-group swooning until she shatters any such illusions with guttural roars and husky growls that belong on a riot-grrl seven-inch.

Dynamic and pronounced, the contrasts lend to the group’s playful energy and sense that no matter the subject at hand—boys and their ignorant ways are a common theme, and fittingly so, since the Muffs’ fizzy tunes mirror the ups and downs of the rollercoaster emotions associated with fleeting crushes—Shattuck sings as if she’s completely infatuated and unable to concentrate on anything else.



©Photo by Kim Shattuck

Whether it’s the annoying bore in “Weird Boy Next Door” or oblivious guy she pines after on “Like You Don’t See Me,” she invests her all in the vocal deliveries to the extent weaknesses, vulnerabilities, and strengths get exposed with the same no-regrets openness. Sadness and disappointment occasionally arise, yet the Muffs’ infectious shimmy-shake means they don’t linger.

Besides, Shattuck and Co. primarily reside in a headspace defined by cheerfulness, cuteness, and lazily wasting away hours. Even when Shattuck gets angry on the revenge tale “Take a Take a Me,” declaring

her intent to punch out another suitor after her man, she’s upbeat and hilarious. Her mates follow suit, tapping out bopping beats and leaning on a retro-styled organ for added punctuation. Violent tendencies again briefly appear on “Cheezy,” but the harmonica-laden jangle-rock ditty turns into a charming ode during which Shattuck’s voice breaks into an uneven falsetto. “Forever” is more gleeful, a low-key ballad that due to its sincerity never collapses from its too-good-to-be-true sentimentality. Bassist Ronnie Barnett even gets into the action on “I Get It,” a relaxed

duet seemingly destined for a hand-in-hand strolling scene in “Portlandia.”

“In the middle/Is the place I want to be,” Shattuck professes on the magnetic “Up and Down Around.” “But I know it/Won’t come naturally.” Indeed, the Muffs are anything but normal—and they know it. Their willingness to celebrate abnormalities and drop their guard on seriousness emerges from every corner of *Whoop Dee Doo*, which makes being an out-cast sound like much more fun than a day at Disneyland.

—**Bob Gendron**

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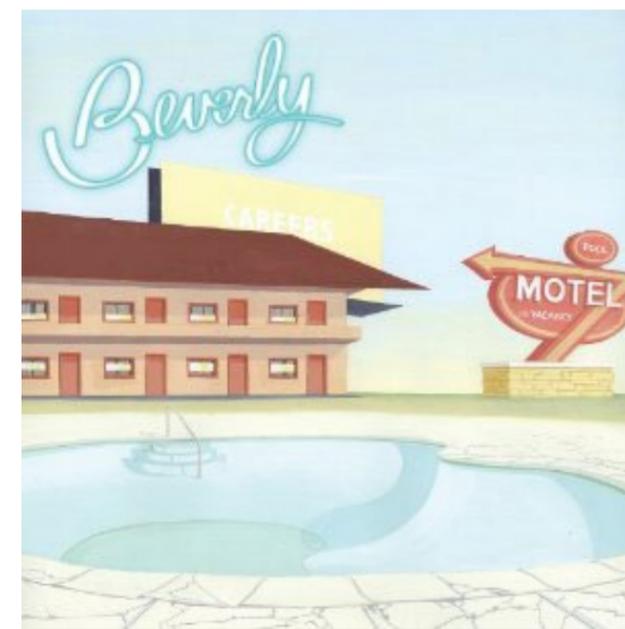
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“You don’t have to over-think it,” Beverly vocalist/guitarist Drew Citron told a radio interviewer when asked about her duo’s debut record. “It’s just pop music.”

She’s right on both accounts, of course, and the ten songs of *Careers* so easily fly by in under 30 minutes that the album dang-near invites an ignorance-is-bliss approach. But fast and familiar don’t mean the same as lacking in charm. The latter characteristic is relatively bountiful on *Careers*, a set that feels like a soundtrack to a daydream. Guitars are bright but obscured, phrases get lost in harmonies, and melodies are so comfortable they already feel nostalgic.



Beverly
Careers
Kanine Records, LP or CD

The sprightly opening notes of “Medora” bounce along like they’re playing hopscotch with the tightly cropped beat, a summer pop feeling if there ever was one. That is, at least, until the song builds to a burst of power and fuzzy energy in the chorus (as most tunes here do). Still, the friendly, come-what-may vocals ensure things never get too out of hand. But Beverly certainly pushes the limits. “Ambular” conjures all the panic its phonetic, paramedic cousin implies. Hard-pounding, milk-carton-like drums are met with an array of alarming, counter-punching streaks of guitar.

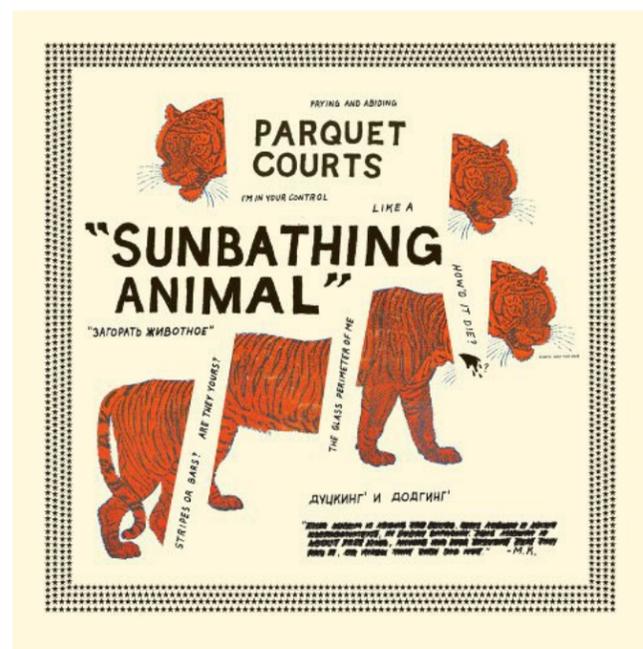
“Planet Birthday” is heavy on the bass and feedback, and “Out on a Ride” feels as if it’s on rails.

Throughout it all, sweetness prevails. A collaboration between Citron and Frankie Rose, the latter of whom has played in the likeminded Vivian Girls and similarly likeminded but moodier Dum Dum Girls, the Brooklyn-based duo ultimately has its radio dial tuned to upbeat, West Coast-style garage pop.

Vide, “Honey Do” is exquisite pop craft, with harmonies at their most yearning and washes of guitars broken up

by minor-key, surf-ready clarity. “All the Things” takes its left turns around swoon-worthy “whoa-ohs.” “Yale’s Life” answers its hot-and-bothered lyrics and breathy, whispering vocals with a reflective pace and chords manipulated to the point that they come off as church-like organs. Things seem more amiss in “Honk Kong Hotel,” with lyrics that allude to crimes and long-held secrets. Here, Citron’s guitar tempers the fast-moving pace with woozy balladry. Recklessness may be implied, but the tone is wistful.

—**Todd Martens**



Parquet Courts

Sunbathing Animal

What's Your Rupture/Mom+Pop, LP or CD

Light Up Gold, Parquet Courts' 2012 breakthrough, doubled as an indie-rock Rorschach test of sorts. Critics and fans gazed into the Brooklyn via Denton, Texas quartet's musical outpouring, a twitchy mash-up of angular guitar riffage, post-punk rhythms, and stream-of-consciousness lyrics—and depending on the person, were reminded of everything from Sonic Youth to Television to Guided by Voices to the Fall to Pavement. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Pavement frontman Stephen Malkmus even recalled hearing one of Parquet Courts' songs in a Portland burger joint and momentarily thinking it was one of his own. The recollection sounds like something culled from an episode of "Portlandia."

There's going to be a similar urge with *Sunbathing Animal*. The droning, monotone "Dear Ramona," for one, comes on like Lou Reed jamming alongside Modern Lovers, while the stoned and starving thrash of "Always Back in Town" conjures images of scrappy surf-punks like the Trashmen. Parquet Courts haven't tried to run from these influences, either. In a recent interview, singer/guitarist Andrew Savage described the hypnotic, seven-minute-plus "Instant Disassembly" as the band's attempt to pay homage to everything from Velvet Underground and Roxy Music to newly cast lover-of-lo-fi Neil Young.

But where previous efforts felt more like a joyous celebration of the band's idols, *Sunbathing Animal* arrives jammed with enough sonic quirks and unexpected left turns to quantify as something new. Witness the droning "She's Rolling," where guitars saunter through like thick brambles of tumbleweed as Savage spouts his surrealist poetry. "She's rolling down a hill/She's rolling down a hill," he drawls. "And I can still see her when I close my eyes."



©Photo by Ben Rayner

Only a cranky blast of harmonica near the end of the tune—think Dylan if his harmonica had somehow corroded at a similar rate as his actual voice—disrupts the relative calm. "Into the Garden," in turn, takes a Southwestern detour, the four players constructing a dry, airy musical landscape more in tune with their Texas home than their current, cramped Brooklyn digs.

Lyricaly, Savage remains fond of dreamy bon mots, and there are times his words play like imprecise riddles. "What's sharp as a knife, followed me all my life, waits never rests, till it eat me alive?" he sings on

"What Color Is Blood," a slow dance of epileptic guitar and drummer Matt Savage's tightly wound kit-work. Elsewhere, he veers between lines that seem to hint at the pressures placed on the band by the increased public spotlight ("The velvet stage, the concert stage...all my friends are disappearing") and the kind of disassociated ramblings one might expect to hear shouted from a skid-row street corner ("Unalloyed joy/I thrice repeat/Unalloyed joy/Unalloyed joy"). That both lines fall within the same song—the urgent, pogoing "Duckin and Dodgin"—only shows how

slippery meaning can be in the frontman's skilled hands.

While grasping the band's words can feel a bit like trying to take hold of a puff of smoke, the music itself never feels anything less than primal. There's momentum and physicality to tunes like "Sunbathing Animal," a thrashing cut that throws sharp elbows. *Light Up Gold* might have served as the breakthrough, but tracks like the title cut announce Parquet Courts' intentions to press onward even further.

—Andy Downing



Le Butcherettes
Cry Is for the Flies
Ipecac, LP or CD

The introduction to Le Butcherettes architect Teri Suarez may not always go smoothly. She is a force, a frontwoman who, in the tradition of Iggy Pop or Joe Strummer, puts emotion first. Ask her about her approach to singing, and Suarez is likely to act something out, to tell you that she sometimes “sings like a mad woman.” She will do this as her voice turns into a shriek and her eyes roll deep into her forehead. And she waits all of 40 seconds on her band’s second album *Cry Is for the Flies* before things get weird, before her stern command of the opening verse starts to give way to something that feels more possessed. “Burn it, burn it down,” she sings, her voice snapping and swiping at the words as if trying to break free of a leash.

As for what Suarez wants to burn down, take your pick. Now 24, she formed Le Butcherettes as a teenager in Guadalajara, Mexico, when she viewed punk rock as a weapon. Collaborators have come and gone, but her rage hasn’t tempered. A debut album, *Sin Sin Sin*, was released in 2011 after signing with a boutique label run by Omar Rodriguez-Lopez of Mars Volta and At the Drive-In fame. It’s loud, brash, and unpredictable. A song can be a blistering, guitar-fronted attack or little more than hollering and a rhythm. Adding another dimension comes via a left-of-center, carnival-like keyboard.

All that chaos has returned on *Cry Is for the Flies*, but it’s a little more harnessed. “Demon Stuck in Your Eye” hits hard and fast—stop-and-start blues constantly catching its breath. “Normal You Were” is more expansive, adding eerie, angelic choirs to the mix. Consider it a mini-orchestra of aggression, where guitars scrape and clank before locking in sync around a swarm of layered vocals. Each

addresses the album’s primary themes, as songs deal with those that feel no remorse or, in the case of “Normal You Were,” a mass shooter that has lost all grip on reality.

The topical, the political, and the personal intermingle throughout. “My Child” unwraps one tier of guilt after another, as drummer Lia Braswell hits like something medieval. “Shame You’re All I’ve Got” tones it down as the rhythm stutters into a march and the keyboard gets dementedly toyish. “Poet from Nowhere” is an Eastern European brouhaha on which Suarez’s dreams of being an artist clash with working-class realities. “The Gold Chair Ate the Fire Man” juggles images of class warfare amid a Stooges-inspired strut.

These descriptions barely touch on the multiple personalities Suarez channels throughout the album. But whether singing with crystal-clear furiousness or an impassioned growl, the message is the same: Le Butcherettes demand to be heard.

—Todd Martens

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Sharon Van Etten

Are We There
Jagjaguwar, LP or CD

Sharon Van Etten recently covered Bruce Springsteen's "Drive All Night" for the A.V. Club's "Pioneering" video series, performing it solo at the Stone Pony in Asbury Park. While countless artists have paid homage to the Boss, Van Etten's choice to interpret the penultimate cut from *The River* both deviates from the norm (it's a deep track) and speaks volumes about the burgeoning singer-songwriter's own music.

At its core, the epic ballad serves as a devotional pledge from the protagonist to his lover, who the narrator attempts to win back after a split. Dig beneath the surface, however, the song addresses the lengths people will go for someone they cherish while simultaneously laying bare the weaknesses, regrets, and desperation that surface in such instances. Similar themes occur throughout *Are We There*, Van Etten's superb fourth album.

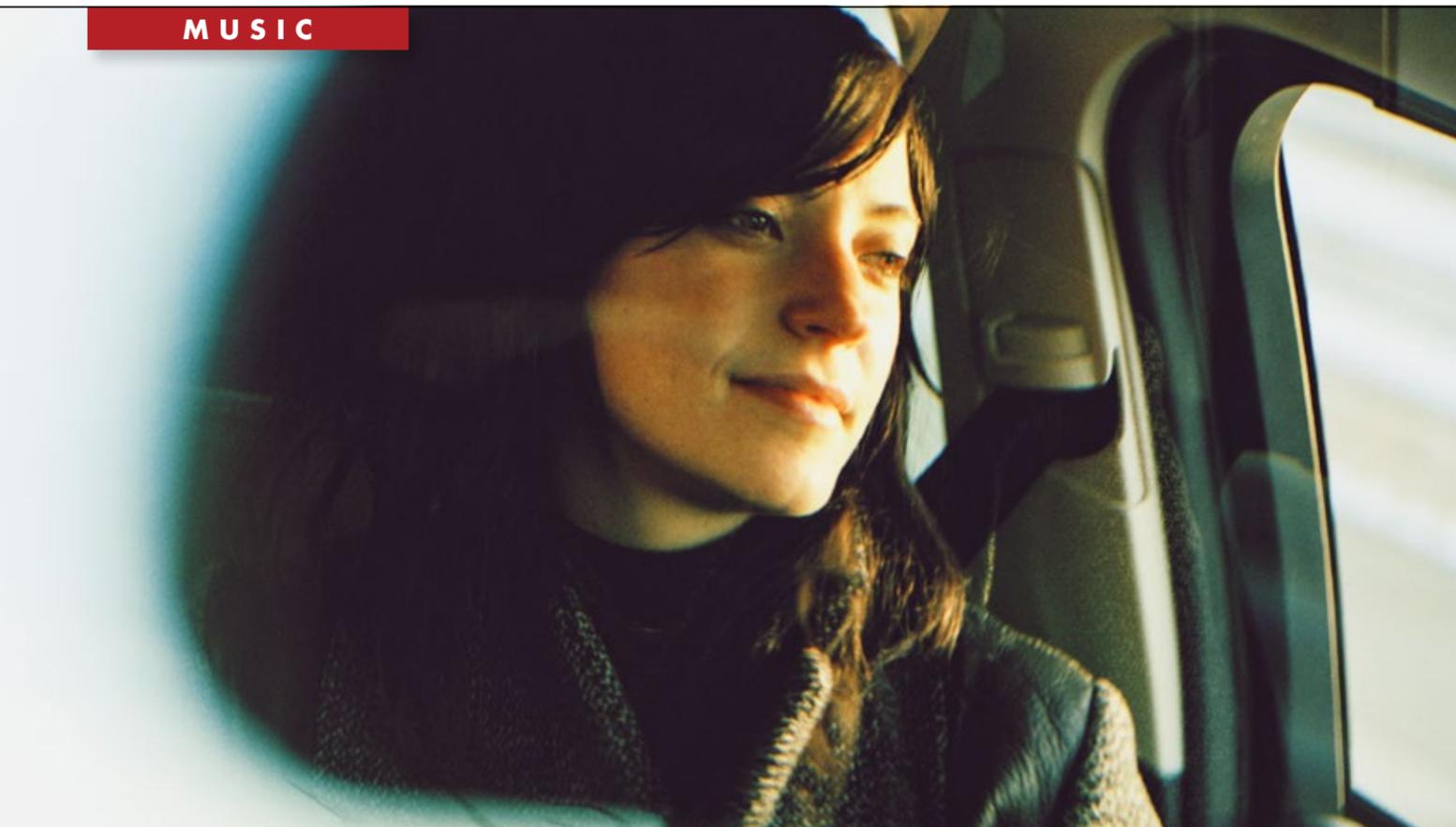
Accented by orchestral devices, ornate horns, and atmospheric elements ranging from humming Hammond organs to minimalist textures, the self-produced set witnesses the 33-year-old New Jersey native expanding with fuller arrangements and sounding even more self-assured and balanced than she did on 2012's excellent *Tramp*.

Akin to those in many of Springsteen's narratives, characters in Van Etten's tunes contend with anticipation, troubles, strife, and uncertainties. But, they're also frequently buoyed by hopeful undercurrents and the possibility of resolve. Even as the prospect of walking away often appears to be the better option, their want to stay and see flawed relationships through gives Van Etten's songs—and their scenarios—an undeniably human touch and graceful reach.

The vocalist has always traded in heartbreak, yet her lyrical insistence on taking chances and being alive no matter the consequence has only increased. At the same time, Van Etten's anger and accusatory tones continue to decline. She remains capable of unleashing lacerating emotions and calling out offenders with exacting detail, but she's also found a deep-seated stability and insight that arrive only after a person exits their 20s. The signer on *Are We There* is extremely confident, self-aware, direct, and intimate. Even during moments when confusion and indecision reign, her commanding vocals and shrewd phrasing eliminate doubt. *(continued)*

©Photo by Dustin Condren





©Photo by Dusdin Condren

Above all, Van Etten's first-person heroines know themselves and, in most cases, where they stand. "Maybe something will change?" she posits on the ponderous "Nothing Will Change," already knowing the answer to her question as echoing harmonies surround her falsetto coo. In a world filled with cynicism and hesitation, Van Etten clings to an unspoken faith that suggests goodness ultimately wins out over agony. Amidst the disappointment on the solemnly spare "I Love You But I'm Lost," her gospel-soaked declarations encourage reconciliation and growth. On the thumping chamber-rock drama "You Know Me Well," she fights against personal darkness and decay with a passionate cry seemingly pulled

from the depths of her soul. In Van Etten's vignettes, turmoil, sacrifice, and love often become synonymous.

She breaks her legs, cuts her tongue, burns her skin, and stabs her eyes in metaphorical fashion on the towering "Your Love Is Killing Me," projecting a self-consciousness that turns her from victim into someone in control. "Afraid of Nothing" comes on like the sun breaking through low-lying clouds, Van Etten laying down terms and acknowledging nothing worthwhile is gained waiting on the sidelines—risk and suffering be damned. She documents what can happen when such ventures breed fear and tentativeness on "I Know," a gorgeous solo piano-vocal piece that presents her as a singer with

few contemporary peers.

"Hold on/All I ever wanted was you," she confesses, her breathy timbre swooping down on each word as if to extinguish lingering ambiguity and wrap her partner up with the warm embrace sincerity brings. Van Etten realizes such happy endings may be the stuff of fantasy, but she's smart enough to understand that in order to attain dreams, chances need to be taken and protections must be surrendered. Listening to her voice—in both in its more insistent, liquid, huskier iteration on guitar-based fare and more patient, sensual form in which syllables float like weightless symphonies on lullabies—is all one needs to do to know whether or not the rewards outweigh the risk. —**Bob Gendron**



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Fans of Mary Gauthier have long known she's a first-rate tunesmith. Keeping with her stellar reputation, the singer-songwriter's new *Trouble & Love* adds a fresh chapter to her already significant body of work. It's an album of fierce intelligence and unflinching emotional exposure. Throughout, Gauthier writes about the end of a relationship and does so with bull's-eye precision.



Mary Gauthier
Trouble & Love
In the Black Records, CD

Trouble & Love is primarily recorded live, sans studio fuss. The direct approach shows. With its stirring Hammond organ sound and snarly blues riffs, "When a Woman Goes Cold" is so raw and immediate, it could pass for a lost track from Bob Dylan and The Band's *The Basement Tapes*.

Equally striking are the lyrics, delivered by Gauthier in a yearning drawl reminiscent of Lucinda Williams. The narrator is numb as she watches a lover walk out the door. There's no shouting or recrimination, no accusations or tears.

Gauthier captures both the narrator's shock and the lover's chilling matter-of-factness. "She didn't get mad/She didn't even cry/She lit a cigarette and she

said goodbye," she sings. "I musta missed a sign/I missed a turn somewhere /I looked in her eyes/ There was a stranger there."

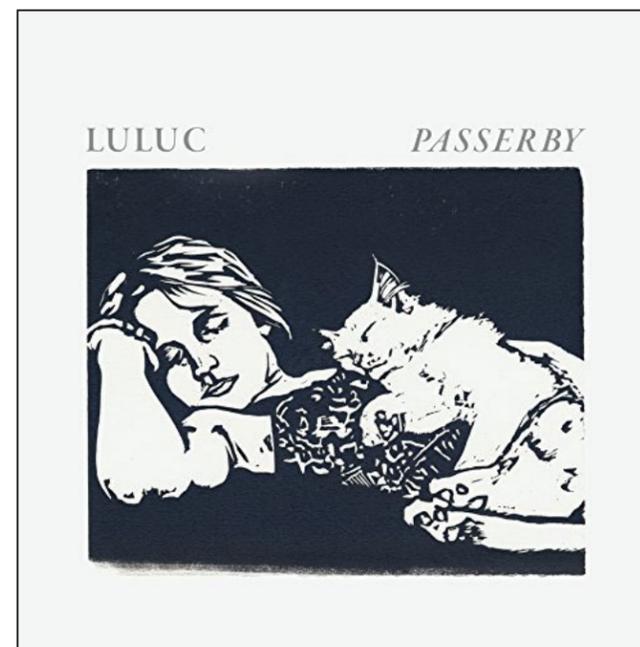
Penning a postmortem album detailing a shattered relationship is certainly not a new idea. But few writers are as masterful as Gauthier at analyzing every twisted piece of a breakup. "You woke up inside a cage/I woke up consumed with rage/A million miles from our first kiss/How does love turn into this?," she asks quietly on "False From True." The gentle albeit lacerating cello-driven number nimblely traces a couple's doomed arc in less than three minutes.

A co-write with the superb Gretchen Peters, "How You Learn to Live Alone" is Gauthier at her wrenching best. "You sit there in

the rubble until the rubble feels like home," she sings, the bereft words tumbling forth and cascading down over sweetly reverbed electric guitar and brushed drums.

While a good chunk of the song-cycle focuses on devastating romantic loss, it's also about redemption—and learning to love and respect yourself. Only a writer as skillful as Gauthier can make such truisms not sound clichéd.

"It took a mighty blow to crack me to the core/To finally come to know I could ask for more," she sings on the stunning "Worthy," a song about the hard climb back up. Like the rest of *Trouble & Love*, it's an unashamed and artful admission from a songwriter at the height of her powers.
—**Chrissie Dickinson**



Luluc
Passerby
Sub Pop, LP or CD

The group, on both emotional extremities and all sentiments in between, never loses its composure. The folk-pop sound Randell and creative partner Steve Hassett produces is one of amiable reflection, where guitar chords and harmonies are never less than precise but feel as if they could suddenly dissolve. *Passerby* often finds Randell lost in a moment, staring somewhere off into the horizon. Memories flow from the sight of a drawing on "Without a Face." "Winter Is Passing" frets about a reconnection while watching "bone black twigs fall to the ground." The sun sets on long dead dreams in "Gold on the Leaves."

Randell and Hassett, tastefully augmented by small choral and brass arrangements, deliver dra-

ma in slow motion and songs for afternoons spent watching a light rain. *Passerby* is the Australian act's second album, but the first to receive widespread release. Working with the National's Aaron Dessner, the set takes a less-is-more approach. Violins, flutes, and harmoniums are so spare one may be excused for missing them. Before catching the attention of Sub Pop, Luluc had the ear of Joe Boyd, the prolific producer who worked with the likes of Richard Thompson and Nick Drake. Fittingly, the latter's gentle indie-folk serves as a touchstone.

Passerby is, first and foremost, a songwriter's record, each tune investigating some form of longing. "Senja" leaves all the nature references be-

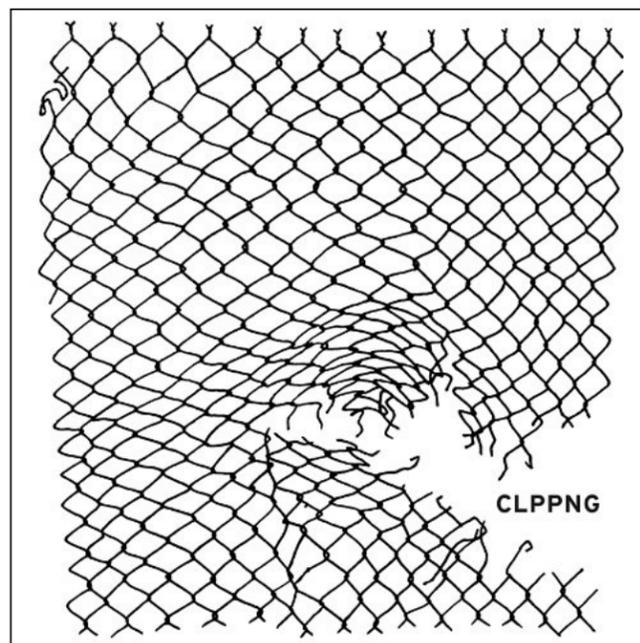
Luluc singer Zoë Randell begins *Passerby* by looking down on Chicago from the window of an airplane, the twinkling city lights essentially speaking to the tender-voiced vocalist in Morse code. As the plane begins its descent, the message is one of nervous anticipation, a lightly strummed ode to new beginnings. Randell ends the album with an emotional 180, her eyes swelling with tears as she looks to the sky, with the glowing stars recalling the memory of a lost loved one.

hind to probe the depths of a rich girl's eyes. "A pretty young face," Randell sings, her voice relaxed and nonchalant. "Already she saw her part and the boredom." The acoustic guitar is clear, but the rest is a blur, as a piano doesn't go out of its way to make its presence heard. "Reverie On Norfolk Street" comes on as the album's most melodic moment, and easily its most readily chamber pop, as Randell muses how a city has changed without the company of another.

"Some noise above," she sings, "interrupts my quiet reverie." And that offense, one gets the sense after spending time with these songs, is a grave one. —**Todd Martens**

S

ay this about Clipping: The abrasive Los Angeles hip-hop trio certainly makes a night out at the club feel like hell. Familiar hip-hop tropes get the nightmare treatment throughout the act's proper debut, where beats sometimes feel fashioned of the torture equipment found in a slasher film series and rhymes place uncomfortable close-ups on the desperate, the misfits, the thugs, and the losers. When Clipping raps about a cold-blooded killer, it puts us not at the scene of the crime but inside his apartment, where paper plates litter the floor and an alarm clock, which doubles as the song's rhythm, won't stop buzzing. All that's missing is the drool stain on a bed sheet.



Clipping

CLPPNG
Sub Pop, LP or CD

Like the music of West Coast kindred spirits Death Grips, it's not always an easy listen. The soundscapes, courtesy of producers Jonathan Snipes and William Hutson, are deranged low-fi. It hits hard, as influenced by Black Flag as it is Cypress Hill—artists name-checked on the album. "Body & Blood" splices dentist-office drills with a groove that could have been created inside an empty dumpster. Voices echo just beyond the periphery, as lyricist/rapper Daveed Diggs takes pop-culture staples of

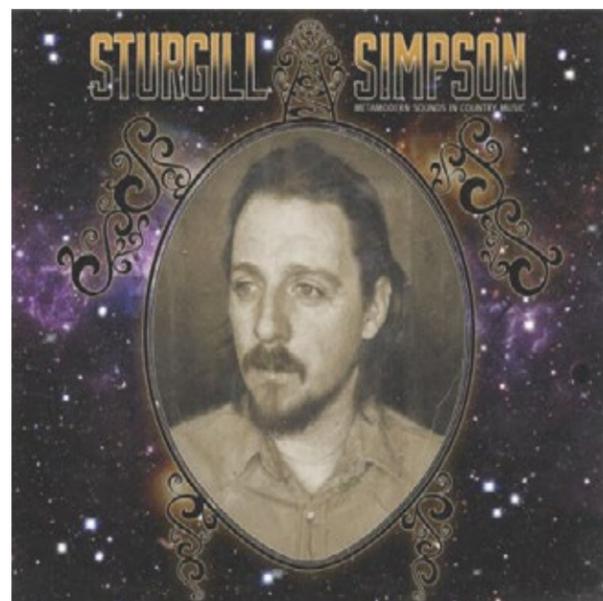
the past few months (think twerking) and finds more murderous uses for them. "Dominoes" learns a trick or two from "Hard Knock Life," with a children's choir framed around metallic rubber-band grooves that emphasize empty space. "Ends" should drive the listener mad with its CD-skipping sensation, and "Summertime" will confound or transfix, depending on how one feels about the sound of grinding of breaking glass.

Characters in Diggs' songs are most often hiding

something most of us would prefer not to know. The protagonist of "Story 2" is spied on his way from a bartending gig, angry that life took a wrong turn when he spots a "blue Acura, dent on the left-rear fender" that lets him know his past has caught up to him. A thick-tongued narrator, Diggs muscles his way through a zig-zagging 8-bit groove to leave the listener with details that linger—the babysitter not picking up her phone, the awnings on the neighboring home. Individuals dance

around sexual assault in "Tonight"; a wayward noir horn and machine-gun beats document the inner-city politics of "Taking Off."

Similarly grim, "Inside Out" places a wide-angle lens on a murder scene, jumping from the bitter cops to the crooks that drive by, never to get caught. Like watching a gruesome documentary, you'll keep listening to this promising debut long after you told yourself you'd turn away. —**Todd Martens**



Sturgill Simpson

Metamodern Sounds in Country Music
High Top Mountain Records, LP or CD

Indie-roots sensation Sturgill Simpson is enormously talented. But on his second release, *Metamodern Sounds in Country Music*, it's often hard to find the contemporary artist inside the retro package.

On its surface, this album has the feel of an art-school project. Riffing on the title of Ray Charles' groundbreaking 1962 LP *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*, Simpson pushes into hipster territory with the "Meta" in his title and a self-consciously cool cover photo. And when it comes to the sounds, most of the songs are carefully crafted period pieces.

Produced by Dave Cobb, the record functions a sonic throwback teeming with various musical reference points. Among them? "In the Ghetto" comeback-era Elvis; Merle Haggard's classic recordings with producer Ken Nelson; Glen Campbell's shimmering L.A. session sound meets countrypolitan Nashville; and Hank Williams Jr.'s career-making 1975 country-rock salvo *Hank Williams, Jr. and Friends*.

Simpson and Cobb recreate past sounds to such eerie effect that it's hard to not be constantly reminded of the original artists. Simpson is a low, earnest vocalist—a neo Waylon Jennings. The clucking Telecaster in "Life of Sin" recalls the guitar work of the legendary James Burton. On "Living the Dream," the sonics echo outlaw moments such as Waylon and Hank Jr.'s "The Conversation."

On one hand, it takes genuine skill for an artist to so closely mimic classic country moments. But the downside is that Simpson spends so much time duplicating such sounds and styles, his own individuality recedes into the shadows. His forays into psychedelia arrive as odd and awkward experiments. "Turtles All the Way Down" combines a familiar Bakersfield Sound with a brittle, hallucinogenic interlude that sticks out like a sore thumb. The long jam "It Ain't All Flowers" devolves into a Beatles-esque "Revolution 9" outtake.

Instead, Simpson is at his best when he stops overthinking, gets out of his own way, and speaks directly from the heart. A pensive cover of When In Rome's "The Promise" includes a shouted entreaty so genuine it hurts. The singer likely sounds his most authentic here because he isn't trying to duplicate the original version.

Simpson could also take a lesson from Hank Williams Jr., who spent his early years as a mini-doppelgänger of his father before breaking free and finding his own voice. When Simpson loosens his ironclad grip on the past and relaxes into his own contemporary vision, he'll earn the buzz that surrounds him. —**Chrissie Dickinson**

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GLASS BOYS FUCKED UP



Fucked Up

Glass Boys
Matador, LP or CD

The post-hardcore noisemakers in Toronto's Fucked Up surely never envisioned they'd stick around long enough to flirt with rock-band middle age when they first adopted their moniker back in 2001. Yet somehow, the group, which was once defined by the seemingly self-destructive onstage presence of Damian "Pink Eyes" Abraham—its burly, bearded growler of a frontman—has not only survived, but thrived, releasing a string of increasingly ambitious albums that culminated in the sprawling punk-opera *David Comes To Life*, an 18-suite, 77-minute epic about factory bombings and doomed romances.

While Fucked Up's music is constantly searching and probing, forever stretching out into new sonic frontiers, its members have gradually transitioned from restless punks into responsible adults.

Even Abraham has settled, becoming a family man and father plagued by the types of questions that arise among many as they move into their mid-to-late 30s: Have I made the most of my time here? Does what I do make a difference? Would the teenage me approve of the life I'm living now?

These are the challenges the band grapples with on *Glass Boys*, its fourth full-length and likely the most accessible album in its increasingly diverse catalog. Opener "Echo Boomer" sets the tone, with Abraham envisioning himself as a teenager enamored with the possibilities of a career in music. Rather than celebrating the successes he's experienced on this chosen path, however, Abraham, along with guitarist/co-writer Mike Halietchuk (the two split songwriting duties, yet everything here sounds of a piece), spends the remainder of the album struggling with confusion, fear, and doubt, wondering if the so-called compromises the band has made along the way (signing to a giant indie, appearing on network television shows, opening for the Foo Fighters, etc.) somehow tainted the youthful idealism once represented by the music.

"We traded our moral high ground so they would sing along/But is it so bad?"

grows Abraham on "The Art of Patrons," a tune that comes on like the Hold Steady doing its best Husker Du impression. "Is it as dark as it seems?/To trade a little purity to prolong the dream?" It's an issue the crew confronts even more directly on the album-closing title track, with Halietchuk writing, "I'm afraid to grow up/And fuck my life up."

Growing up is an inevitability, however, and much of the music here sounds as if it has similarly matured. The band continues to shed its hardcore skin in favor of a more melodic, classic-rock-influenced approach. "Warm Changes," for one, opens amidst a raging see of fuzzed-out guitars before the weather breaks, giving way to a winding, two-minute guitar solo and organ passage that sounds on loan from the Doors, of all artists. Weirder still, it actually works.

Such increased accessibility and broader emotional palette have done little to dampen Fucked Up's fire, however. The music on *Glass Boys* remains as vibrant, chaotic, and brash as ever, driven by reverb-laden guitar, complex drum patterns, and Abraham's earthy bellow. The musicians are growing up, sure, but just because they're getting older doesn't mean they still can't kick your ass.

—Andy Downing



©Photo by Danny Clinch

B

efore the May 13, 2014 release of *Turn Blue*, the Black Keys' eighth studio album, the Ohio-borne duo of Dan Auerbach and Patrick Carney released a tour itinerary. It was one befitting of one of the biggest rock bands in the country—a band that wins Grammy Awards and appears on gossip sites such as TMZ mocking Justin Bieber—and included stops at most of our nation's famous basketball arenas.

Turn Blue, however, is not an album built for arenas.

It's still the Black Keys, in that this is still a Midwestern band steeped in meaty heartland blues. Only this is the Black Keys turned down to...heartbroken. "Dance all night because people they don't want to be lonely," a clearly wounded-sounding Auerbach sings on album opener "Weight of Love." But where the band is heading certainly isn't straight to the dancefloor. The nearly seven-minute cut could well be the soundtrack to a film whose antihero is the boy sitting alone on the top bleacher in the gymnasium. Guitar solos weep, and then fade, and starlight atmospheres are mellow, as if they're reflecting off of a disco-ball moving in slow motion.

This—and the album itself—is more Pink Floyd than the sweaty bar band obsessed with the Mississippi blues that the Black Keys once were. It's somber, quite pretty, and will no doubt confuse some listeners that preferred the ease with which the band punched the accelerator and found a hook on

its prior two efforts. The song isn't an outlier, it's the *Turn Blue* pacesetter, and only the eleventh and final track truly deviates from the tone.

Of course, the Black Keys never exactly were a band operating with blinders on. If it's big choruses and swoony ballads you're after, Kings of Leon are committed to working, working, working, and working that formula to death. While the Black Keys are still billed as a duo, producer/chameleon Danger Mouse is now more or less a member of the group. He pulls triple duty as co-writer, co-producer, and player on nearly each one of these cuts, and the middle-of-the-night comedown he works in his project the Broken Bells seeps its way into *Turn Blue*.

Only the Black Keys take a more organic, soulful approach. One would be hard-pressed to find any sort of review or preview of *Turn Blue* that doesn't reference Smokey Robinson. Auerbach's voice has never been so pliable. Guitars bend, effects get trippy, and there's a hint of gospel on "Waiting on Words." "In Time" mixes in even more odd turns. A dirty, loungey horn section punctuates the beat, handclaps are more forceful than communal, and demented hits on the keyboard seem to arrive without warning. Auerbach, it seems, learned much from his time working with Dr. John.

While the Black Keys proved on 2011's smash *El Camino* that they weren't going to stick to one genre, the album moved through garage and glammy twists with exuberance. On *Turn Blue*, it's attention to detail that's paramount. Characters mull over dead but not-forgotten relationships, as the album is a document of defeated emotional fallout rather than drama. (For those interested in such tidbits, the effort is said to have sprung from the dissolution of Auerbach's marriage.)

It's grim, even when the band flashes some rock grit. "It's Up to You Now" is full of sludgy explosions reminiscent of early 70s metal, the song constantly exploding on itself. The keyboard is sprightly on "10 Lovers," but the guitars are turned down, clearly not ready to match the mood.

Ultimately, the songs that pack that most life feel less inspired. The organ brims throughout "Fever," but in the larger context of *Turn Blue*, the brightness is false. Compounding matters, the Black Keys were never poets, and the open space between the beats doesn't do the band any favors.

"Gotta Get Away" is cute, but tacked on at the end, it's a throwaway, a hit-the-road breakup anthem that largely feels like a roll with an old fling—in this case, straight-up blues-rock.



The Black Keys
Turn Blue
Nonesuch, LP or CD

The surprise is that the Black Keys are pretty adept at wallowing, which pays off for those in the mood for a breakup record. The title track is a mini-orchestra in its own right, a time-shifting journey of wormy synths, redemptive keyboards, call-and-response backing choir, and circular guitar melody that's caught in a descendant loop. "Bullet in the Brain" finds some spring in a ripped-from-the-gutters bass line, and "Year in Review" pairs rattlesnake rhythms with Italian choral samples fit for a eulogy.

"Why you always wanna love the ones who hurt you?" Auerbach asks at the song's start, and while the guitars find a bit of room to soar, the effect is more Bond soundtrack than arena rocker. As for the question Auerbach asks, *Turn Blue* doesn't really present any answers but lets the Black Keys thrive as sonic explorers rather than deep thinkers. —**Todd Martens**



Tombs

Savage Gold
Relapse, LP or CD

Roughly 13 seconds into Tombs' third full-length, *Savage Gold*, the band throws its first haymaker, obliterating a spacy, psychedelic intro with a double-fisted assault of abusive drums and sludgy metal riffage. It's an attack the Brooklyn quartet continues over much of the album's surging first half before drifting into more exploratory (though no less satisfying) terrain on the record's comparatively winding back end. No matter the pace, however, the music remains as bleak and sunless as the group's sealed-beneath-the-earth moniker suggests. Fittingly, screamer/guitarist Mike Hill appears to be struggling with the concept of death throughout.

"Does the soul remain, does the spirit die?" he howls on "Thanatos," one of a handful of tunes with titles that could double as the names of X-Men villains (see also: "Deathripper"). "When flesh decays does the will prevail?" On the doom-laden "Echoes," the narrator slips into darkness as his or her soul begins a cosmic journey "across the void, between the stars." At times, the picture that emerges is far less poetic. Witness the chugging "Deathripper," which closes with Hill repeatedly growling the line "it's suicide" as guitars echo a brutal series of self-inflicted stab wounds.

Surfacing three years after the band's breakout sophomore album, *Path of Totality*, *Savage Gold* finds the crew both refining and expanding on its eclipse-conjuring sound, which forges elements of black metal, post-punk, and aggressive rock into a seamless whole. The approach is best represented by tunes like the genre-blurring "Edge of Darkness," which incorporates multiple tempo shifts (frenzied guitars give way to doomy, channel-scraping riffs—lather, rinse, repeat) over five-and-a-half roller-coaster minutes.

Over the course of the album's ten cuts, Hill and co-guitarist/new edition Garrett Bussanick veer between spacious, post-punk-inspired fretwork ("Severed Lives," for one, imagines what Joy Division might have sounded like had Ian Curtis and Co. been weaned on nightmarish bands like Behemoth) and comparatively finger-cramping fare like "Ashes," which sounds like the quartet taking a blowtorch to its environment. Drummer Andrew Hernandez, in turn, remains consistently revelatory with agile, powerful kit-work.

Dig the way he holds back on "Deathripper," for example, before leveling his surroundings on "Edge of Darkness," laying into his drums with the skull-crushing force and sheer brutality of the Mountain physically overwhelming the Red Viper in "Game of Thrones."

While Hill still tends to favor throat-shredding screams, he occasionally traverses down new, unexpected avenues. On "Echoes," an eight-minute end-times epic where "worlds turn to dust," the frontman whispers, screams, howls, and, ever so briefly, adopts a straightforward singing voice as

close to a conversational tone as his vocals have ever pursued.

This sense of exploration carries over in everything from the musical backdrop to the grave-obsessed lyrics, which find the band struggling with big questions surrounding the afterlife, death, and lasting scars impressed on individuals left behind in life's wake. There are no easy answers, but Tombs have emerged from these depths with a powerful document as visceral and immediate as any metal album released this year. In death, it could be said, Tombs has found new life. —**Andy Downing**



Finding That Spark

A Sit-Down Conversation With Dolly Parton

By Jaan Uhelszki

Dolly Parton has a gift of intimacy, and makes every person she comes into contact with feel like they're the only person in the world. It's not something you'd expect from one of country music's most recognizable icons—someone who has sold more than 100 million records and just released her 42nd album, *Blue Smoke*. So, how does she do it?

"I never think of myself as a star. I think of myself as a working girl, always have. That's why I never had any ego problems. I'm thankful and grateful," she says. And you know she means it.

In a sit-down interview, *TONEAudio* talked to the eight-time Grammy winner, theme park mogul, movie star, philanthropist, and singer-songwriter about cooking, creativity, Bob Dylan, and what she really thinks about when she's onstage.

JU: You've just released your 42nd studio album. How do you know when it's time to make a new record? Does a buzzer go off in your head?

DP: Something like that. I have to weigh everything and ask myself: Should I tour? Put together a band? Record an album? I'm 68 now and I have to be smart about time.

JU: So you overthink it? Or do songs usually just demand to be written and you know it's time.

DP: Yeah, most of them do. But in this particular case, I had a lot of songs in the can. "Blue Smoke" I wrote years ago, and I used to do it onstage because it was just a fun song to do. A lot of fans remembered it and they kept saying, "Why don't you ever put that out?" So when I got ready to do this [album], not only did I include the song but I thought *Blue Smoke* was a great title because I was going to do a lot of bluegrass stuff.

JU: And you love the word blue. You've put the name in so many of your song titles.

DP: I guess a lot of it comes from growing up in the Smokey Mountains. The Cherokee had a word, "shaconage," and it meant land of blue smoke. That's what they called them the Great Smokey Mountains. When I did my bluegrass album, I named it *The Grass Was Blue*. I was going to travel around with a bluegrass band, and at one time I thought I was going to call my band Blue Smoke. That was before I wrote the song. I was going to call my label Blue Indigo. I never thought about that until you said that. I wrote a song called "Blue Me."

JU: I love how you referenced the Cherokee word.

DP: Well, thank you, because I am very spiritual. I'm not religious at all but I totally believe in that. I have to. I need to. I can't imagine anybody not believing in something bigger than us because I'd choose to believe it even it wasn't so.

JU: You are a known early bird, and you've said you commune with God, or you actually write songs with him in what you call the Wee Wisdom Hours.

DP: Wee-hour wisdom.

JU: Is there a time that you always wake up? [Self help guru] Wayne Dwyer has said if you are awakened early in the morning at the same hour, you should stay up, because someone/some universal force has a message for you.

DP: Years ago, I used to wake, it was almost like clockwork, it was just a thing. I would wake up at 3:00 a.m. every day. But now that I'm older, I'm waking up earlier and earlier. I go to bed early though, but I get up really early because I love the mornings. That's my time. Nobody else around, everybody asleep, all the energies have died down and I really feel that God's just waiting to come there. I think about God as like a farmer, and he's always throwing stuff out. I want to be one of those early-rising people so I get some of that stuff before it gets picked through. I always feel the energies, other people's energies, bad or good, that the world is kind of settled about that time. So I just feel like it's quieter and I have a clearer direction. *(continued)*

We all have our own time. That's my time, anywhere from like midnight to six a.m. I'll get up, I'll do my spiritual work, I'll answer mail or I'll call in messages to be typed up, and I definitely always do my affirmations, my reading, my Scriptures, and whatever I'm doing at the time. A lot of times I write songs, especially if I'm writing for something. I wrote a lot of the stuff for *Blue Smoke* in the wee hours.

JU: You have some interesting things on the album. The cover of Bon Jovi's "Lay Your Hands on Me" that you turned from hot to holy, and back to hot. Can you tell me a little bit about working with Jon Bon Jovi?

DP: We didn't get together to do it. When I first heard that song years ago I thought, wow, that is spectacular. What a great gospel song. I grew up Pentecostal church where laying on hands meant invoking the Spirit. Or to pray for the sick. Even now I'm always asking God to lay his hands on me. And so when I first heard that I thought it was a gospel song till I started listening to what it was *really* saying. I'm always loving to do covers, so I thought, well, I just can't take the liberties to think that I'm just going to go ahead and record this song without knowing if they'll let me do it. My manager worked as Jon Bon Jovi's tour manager for a long time, so he put me in touch with him and I just asked him if it would be okay if we turned his song into a gospel thing. He said he thought it would be fantastic. I said, "Well, you throw in some stuff, too." He said, "Okay. I'll throw in some stuff." Then I called [ex-Bon Jovi guitarist] Richie Sambora, who wrote the music for it, and made sure he was okay with it. I didn't want to just take the liberties. I wanted to make sure that we were all okay. We sent things back

and forth. This line works. What about this line? So out of all that, we got this version. I was really inspired, so I wrote a whole bunch of lines.

JU: You also cover Bob Dylan's "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right." Did you feel you needed to work with him on that?

DP: No, I did not. I met him years ago but he we really didn't connect. Although, I've always loved his songs. I'd recorded "Blowin' in the Wind" years ago on another album, and I've sung a lot of his songs through the years. But no. We just didn't connect.

JU: You also sang a duet with Willie Nelson, "From Here To The Moon and Back." You too seem to bring out the best in each other.

DP: I love Willie. I've worked with him through the years. He's very hard to sing with because of his phrasing. I mean, just like you'd think, because we both are stylists, and you'd think we'd be able to do it easily. It was really fun singing with him, but it was like an exercise of some sort, trying to catch him with all his little phrases and all. He called up and said, "Let's do that moon song you wrote because I can really play some hot guitar on that one." I love that old funky sound he gets on that guitar. I love what he played on that, too. I'm glad we did that together.

JU: Do you have any rituals before you write?

DP: I cook. I love to get in the kitchen when I'm getting prepared to write because if I'm in a good creative mood, my food is spectacular. If my food is spectacular, my writing's going to be spectacular. *(continued)*



20 Things You Might Not Know About Dolly Parton

1. Dolly once lost a Dolly Parton look-alike contest.
2. While it's reported she's Miley Cyrus' Godmother, Parton is Cyrus' honorary Godmother. There was never a formal ceremony.
3. It's often reported that her breasts, measuring a reported 40DD, are insured for \$600,000. False.
4. While Parton turned down Jack White's offer to produce her, she did let him buy her and her friends dinner at an expensive Nashville hotspot.
5. Parton and her husband Carl Dean often go food shopping in the middle of the night at 24-hour Walmart near their home outside of Nashville.
6. Parton has stopped trying to disguise herself in public because people always recognize her voice. Last time she tried, some kids said: "You're Dolly Parton in a black wig!"
7. Although she's co-owned the Dollywood theme park since 1986, she claims she's "too terrified" to ride any of the rides.
8. The world's first cloned mammal—a sheep—was named Dolly after her in 1996.
9. Parton once had a line of wigs distributed through Revlon cosmetics. *(continued)*



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- ANTHONY KERSHAW, AUDIOPHILIA


INTERVIEW

It’s very creative for me, so I always cook and write, usually at the same time. When I prepare to write, what I love to do—my favorite thing to do in the world—is to have time set aside, like two or three weeks to say I’m just going to go write. I go up to my old mountain home. Sometimes I fast and pray for a few days to get myself kind of in a spiritual place—get through the headaches, and everything with comes with the fasting till I get kind of clear. I hate to fast but I try to do that and kind of humble myself a little bit. After that, I get into the writing, then it starts to be creative, and then I can cook. After I’ve got connected.

JU: You are in tremendous shape. You’re a flirt. You say you’ve never met a man you don’t like, yet you’re a role model for women. What do you attribute that to?

DP: Well, I think women see me more like a sister or a girlfriend, or like a special aunt. I think they sense that feeling I have for them because all of my sisters—I have five—and I were very close to my mother, my aunts, and my grandmas, so I just really connect with women. But I don’t think women are threatened by me. Because I’m overdone, I’m more like a cartoon character, so I don’t think they feel threatened in that way either. Like I’m going to steal their man.

JU: In your book My Life And Other Unfinished Beauty, there are a number of photographs of you. Despite what you say, you really were a natural beauty.

DP: I’m really not, trust me. You haven’t seen me without all my makeup. Even in those pictures, I was already made-up. I’m not a natural beauty so I’ve tried to make the most of everything I’ve got. I’ve tried to turn all my negatives into as many positives as I can. That makes me feel better.

JU: You were never afraid to show your brains or your tough side. Even in less-enlightened times. Where does that come from?

(continued)

10. Parton has never made a big decision without fasting first. She usually fasts in multiples of seven. Either seven days, 14 days, or 21 days.

11. She was rejected from the high-school cheerleading squad at Sevier County High School.

12. The Ku Klux Klan once picketed Dollywood because of Parton’s annual Gay Day.

13. She once played herself in an episode of “Alvin & the Chipmunks.”

14. Kevin Costner was the one insisted Whitney Houston record Parton’s “I Will Always Love You” for The Bodyguard.

15. “I Will Always Love You” was Saddam Hussein’s re-election theme song.

16. A photograph of Parton’s little-seen husband Carl Dean is on the cover 1969’s My Blue Ridge Mountain Boy.

17. Parton received death threats after she wrote “Travelin’ Thru” for the film Transamerica, about a transgender woman.

18. She has three tattoos: An angel on her upper left arm, butterfly on her chest, and a red flower in between her cleavage.

19. Her production company, Sandollar, produced the hit show “Buffy the Vampire Slayer.”

20. Parton hates to fly and suffers from motion sickness.

DP: I knew I was a woman but it didn't dawn on me that could be a detriment until I came up against somebody who was trying to overrun me or come on too much, or trying to offer me this and that *if* I would do *that*. It was only then that I would [get tough] because I always believed in myself. I believed in my talent. I believed in my brains. I would always go into any place of business with any man, no matter how big or strong they were, and say: "I've got something to offer here. I think I can make us both a lot of money if you're interested in this." But if it got out of line, I knew how to walk away and say, "I guess it wasn't meant for us to do any business." You always have to be willing to walk away from something that's not right.

JU: You seem like you've always had that brutal confidence.

DP: Well, I always was confident in myself. But I think a lot of that comes from my faith in God, and depending on him and believing that through God all things are possible. I would gather strength from that.

I've been stronger all my life because of that. I never turned [my belief] loose. Never stopped believing, never. Never will. Even if I die a horrible death, I can't blame God for that because I'm sure I will have brought a lot of that on myself.

JU: What do you think your job is? You have said you would have been a hairdresser if you hadn't done this.

DP: Or a missionary. I woulda, too.

JU: But what do you think your job really is?

DP: I pray every day, and certainly every night before I go onstage, that God will let me shine and radiate with his light.



And to let me be a blessing, and let me not have people idolize me because I do not like idolizing stuff. If they see a light in me, I want them to think that it's the light of God. And even if I don't get to heaven, if I can help somebody else head in a better direction, that makes me happy. I just want God to use me to uplift mankind, to let me do something to point people in his direction, not mine.

JU: They say that the people that you like are a mirror for you. You're a mirror for so many people.

DP: Well, we're all God's children. We're all pieces of God, we're all pieces of one another. Everybody I see, I relate to. I see somebody in my family in that person, somebody I love. And I try to go right to that God light in everybody, to that God spark that we all have. I try to play to that even if I don't, well, immediately like them. I know there's that little spark in there.

JU: One of my favorite stories is when you went to see the Judds perform in Lake Tahoe and when they went offstage before their encore, you snuck out onstage and took their bows for them.

DP: I haven't done anything like that in a while. I still am embarrassed about that. I had to do it, just like I had to take off all my clothes and run across Tom Jones' lawn. But don't put anything past me. I'm capable of doing anything.

JU: You mean if someone dares you to do something, you just have to follow through. I love that personality quirk of yours—if it's a quirk.

DP: It is. I'm just like that. So if somebody dared me to do anything right now, I'm sure I would have to be held back from doing it. But I haven't done anything like that lately. With the Judds, I was back there watching. But I don't think they cared that I ran out there and took their bows, but I worried that they did. I'm sure they talked about it, talked about me bad. But I just couldn't help it.

JU: Is there one thing you'd change about yourself?

DP: Well, to change one thing would change everything. It's like of course we all wish to have great hair if we don't. We all want to be tall if we're short. But I think God gives us just what we need to have and he has to keep us humble some way, so I just accept that I am who I am and how God meant me to be, and it's working so far. People always ask me, "Do you have any regrets?" I say, "Well, I don't think so because I never did anything I might regret." I might regret getting caught at a few things but I didn't regret the doing it because I never did anything that didn't feel like the thing I had to be doing at the time, or wanted to do. I mean so how can you go back and say, ooh, I regret that?

JU: I don't know about you, but I just regret the things I didn't do. The shoes I didn't buy.

DP: Yeah, that would be me. I would regret more of what I don't do than what I've done. Always.

JU: UK talk show host Graham Norton talked about how much he loved you, and thought you could be friends. He wanted to.
(continued)

But he realized that you really couldn't, because you were busy being Dolly all the time. Is that accurate? Are you Dolly all the time?

DP: Did you think that was a negative statement?

JU: Maybe a little. I think he was just hurt. Or wanted you to let him into your life. Into your inner circle.

DP: Well, it's not that you don't let them in because every time I meet somebody, like I say, I play to that little spark that I find in them, and I loved him. I thought we worked so great together. But it's true, sort of like me and Kenny's [Rogers] song from this new album ["You Can't Make Old Friends"]. It's like there's new people all around. But it's just that you just don't really have the time to even be with your family and your old friends, or do the things you need to do. But it doesn't mean every now and then there's a person that will worm their way. But I don't even, like I say, have time for the things I need to do.

JU: Is it difficult to be such a big celebrity and have a private life?

DP: No, not for me. My life is good. I've managed to manage that really well. When I'm home, I'm really home. When I'm with my husband, I'm totally with him. I figured that out early. I had to because this is what I do. I've dreamed myself into a corner, so I have to be responsible for all of the things that I've dreamed and I've seen come true. I've been blessed that my dreams come true. But there's a big responsibility. It's wearing. Sometimes you just physically and emotionally can hardly keep up.

But, this is what I do. I never think of myself as a star. I think of myself as a working girl, always have. That's why I

never had any ego problems. I'm thankful and grateful. And I look at the body of work that I've done sometimes and I'm just shocked by it. I'm amazed by it and think, "How in hell did I get all that done? In this many years. How did I do all that?" But I did it.

JU: You have many gifts, but I think one of your greatest gifts is your ability to connect. To fully see someone when you're with them, as if they're the only person in the world.

DP: Well, thank you. That's what I go back to that looking for God in everybody. Finding that spark. But I do feel that way, though. People also say, "Don't you get so tired of singing the same songs, saying the same stuff?" I say no, because every one of those little faces is not a face I'd seen before, so that's the first time they heard it from me. First time I've said it to them. And I know that it's real coming from me, and I know that it's like an energy there. Even though I do these interviews day in, day out, it's like looking at you and the way you ask questions and the tone of voice makes me have a whole different delivery, makes me add more to something I've said before. But it takes on new meaning for me.

JU: What do you think about when you're onstage? Did I unplug the iron?

DP: You know, that's funny. Right in the middle of a song, especially songs when I'm talking to the audience, I'm really right there with them because you can't lose your concentration. But I've sung these songs so many times, right in the middle of a song my mind will trail off, and I'll think, "Did I leave the coffee pot on? Did I unplug the iron?" Like you said. And then I'll think, "Ooh, you better get back or you're going to miss your words." ●



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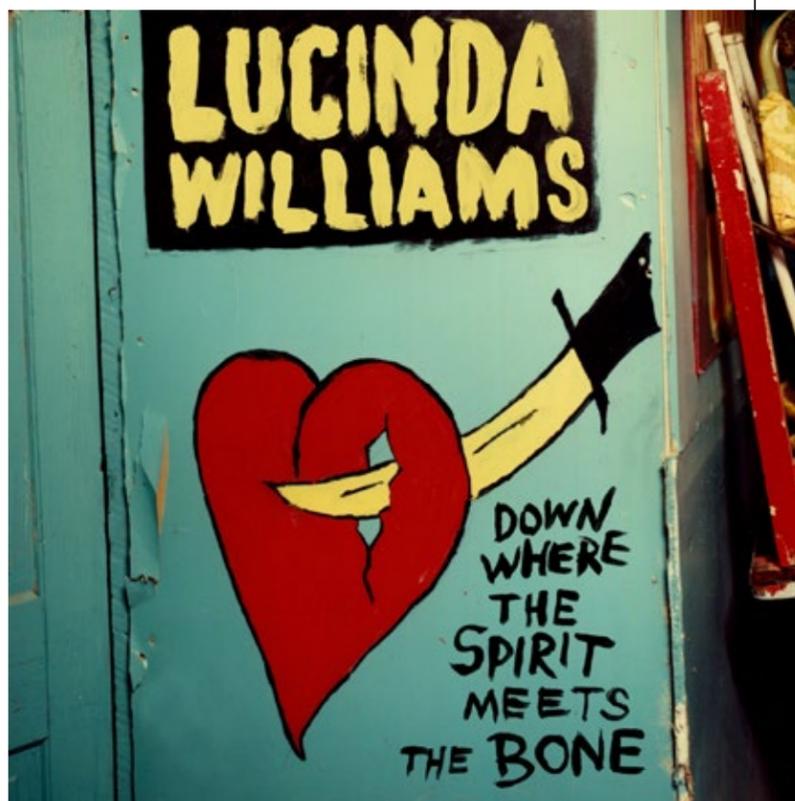
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Lucinda Williams

Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone
Highway Twenty, 3LP or 2CD

After more than three decades as a performer, three Grammy Awards, and a string of acclaimed studio albums for numerous

labels, Lucinda Williams can now officially call herself an indie artist again. And she's gone big. Issued on her own Highway Twenty imprint, *Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone* trumpets the Louisiana native's resiliency, adventurousness, and enviable songwriting in thrilling fashion. Williams' uncompromising ambition is reflected across the 20 songs and via the fact she chose to release a double album in an age when many listeners increasingly shun entire records in favor of individual tracks.

The move seems Williams' way of daring music lovers to stop and pay attention, to lean in closer, to value each note, much like she and her crack ensemble do throughout the set. Never commercially minded—astoundingly, she counts only one gold record to her credit, an outrage doubtlessly owing more to vapid mainstream taste than her style—Williams has never been concerned with fitting in or repeating the past. She's constantly ventured across creative boundaries in the studio, most demonstrably on 2003's eclectic *World Without Tears* and 2007's sobering *West*, during periods when she could've taken an easier route and simply duplicated the mold for *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*.

By extension, Williams' current bold streak arrives at an interesting junction in her life. Now 61, she's reached the age when many of her contemporaries settle for nostalgia or go through the motions. She's also happy—a condition that largely eluded her throughout much of her career and supplied grist for many of her extremely personal, veins-exposed, and profoundly sad songs. Her marriage to producer Tom Overby in 2009 changed her perspective. No, Williams hasn't forgotten what it's like to suffer deep-seated loss, but she's discovered a broader palette of emotional vistas that have in turn inspired her to push her capabilities as a vocalist. Both elements account for brilliant moments on

Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone.

An apt metaphor for her own unvarnished writing style, the album title is borrowed from a line in the opening "Compassion," a first for Williams in that the song is based around a poem penned by her father, award-winning poet/author/editor Miller Williams. In a raw, spare, and acoustic setting, Williams moans the blues, taking time to let notes quiver. It's as if she's singing while lying on her side, too bruised and pained to get up. The performance announces functions as a harbinger of what's to come, Williams consistently dipping into Delta ink that coats her throat and invites slow-burn deliveries. With Williams, we not only get the fire, but we watch as the ashes smolder and smoke fades. Such aspects emerge amidst her warm decay on the back-porch-bound "Big Mess," deep-fried boil of the harmonica-laced shuffle "West Memphis," and honeyed molasses of the jangling "When I Look at the World."

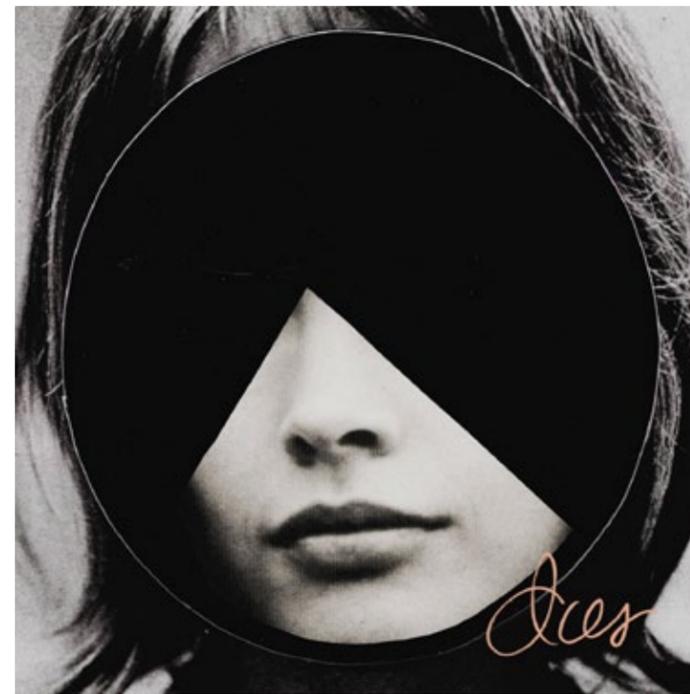
Save for the interchangeable familiarity of "Wrong Number" and soft pop on "Burning Bridges," Williams and company—she's joined by an all-star cadre of guests that includes Bill Frisell, Tony Joe White, Ian McLagan, and Elvis Costello's rhythm section—traverse a diverse array of Southern back roads, hardscrabble trails, and dirt-caked highways in their exploration and

advancement of folk, country, soul, rock, and gospel. She delves into the swamps dotting her native state during a sticky, humid cover of JJ Cale's "Magnolia." On the devilish "Something Wicked This Way Comes," she sways to a wang-dang-doodle jukejoint groove while growling words and invoking hellfire and brimstone. For the devotional "Stand Right By Each Other," on which she demonstrates no singer makes the word "baby" count for more, Williams clicks her cowboy boots to an organ-stoked Texas desert boogie.

Yet Williams appears to spend the most time hovering around Memphis. Seldom (if ever) has her music been more soulful and, in several instances, spiritual. The Staple Singers, in particular, seem lodged in her mind—sonically and thematically. She hops on the soultrain and snarls empowering verses with barbed-wire sharpness on "Everything But the Truth," a hypnotically driving rebuke of falsehoods and call for responsibility, faith, and comeuppance. Backup gospel vocalists boost the swaying "Protection," similarly steeped in righteousness and conviction. And it's easy to imagine Mavis Staples behind the microphone pleading for forgiveness and pledging to fight on during "One More Day," a loping ballad shot through with caressing horns, glowing-ember tones, and aching sincerity. *(continued)*

Indeed, when called for, Williams retains vulnerability. Yet she simultaneously displays heightened self-confidence and pronounced toughness. Even when she's facing sadness, affirmation replaces dependency. The days of Williams being rendered immobile by love and helplessly pining for obsessions are gone. Burnished with resilience and persuasion, "Walk On" bristles with courage. The slide-guitar-appointed "Foolishness" sheds demons, stares down fears, and shakes free of constraints. Conversationally warbled in a thick, easy drawl, "East Side of Town" expands on the traditional other-side-of-the-tracks narrative by serving as a challenging kiss-off tune to elitism as well as a wake-up call to often-ignored poverty, struggle, division. Organic and steady, it captures the real identity of Middle America no television commercial will dare depict and ranks as one of the finest tunes Williams ever composed.

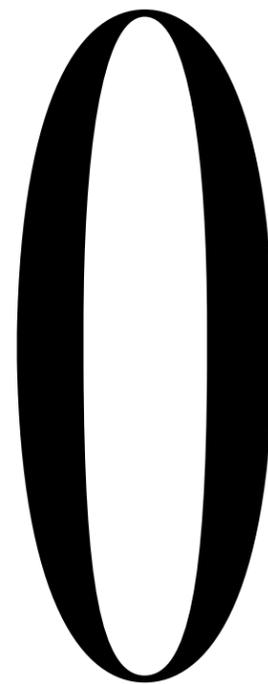
"It's always the deepest, saddest joys that prove to be the richest ones," confesses Williams with the lived-in wisdom of someone who has experienced debilitating sorrow on "Temporary Nature (Of Any Precious Thing)." Curling syllables on the tip of her tongue, Williams sings with butterfly-kissed sweetness, recognizing that from loss and despondency spring appreciation, understanding, hope, and even opportunity. It's a testament to Williams' strength that *Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone* makes embracing these and other hard life lessons sound simple—and vital. —**Bob Gendron**



Lia Ices

Ices

Jagjaguwar, LP or CD



In her first two albums, singer/songwriter Lia Kessel, who performs under the name Lia Ices, has shown a propensity for the quiet, the orchestral, and lost-in-the-clouds richness. If genre classifications were real estate, Ices would be weird-adjacent but ultimately entrenched in more domestic pleasantries. *Ices*, however, finds the artist cutting loose her tendency to experiment, letting her luminescent alto course like dandelion seeds through arrangements steeped in internationally flavored beats.

Inspired, she says, by a cross-country move from New York to California, *Ices* is an album that's more about being in constant motion than it is finding a consistent tune. Ear-catching moments flutter in and out. There's the distorted, flute-like vocals of "Electric Arc," the rubbery, hand-plucked island feel of "How We Are," and the propulsive electro-groove and tempo-shifting vocals of "Magick," to name a few. They blend into one another, attempting to transfix via their ebb and flow. It's the equivalent, perhaps, of being enchanted by the free-flowing steps of the girl with flowers in her hair at a music festival.

Perhaps that's why the strongest moments on *Ices* are those that cut through the rather sweet vibe of the proceedings, or, as Ices herself describes in the album's press materials, its "sympathetic magic." Don't groan at that description. The record's warm and relaxing tone may, in fact, mean it too often settles for background music, but it ultimately has an adventurer's heart. The Middle Eastern drums of "Tell Me" are rather striking, as is the minimalist synth-pop of "Higher," during which an electric guitar suddenly pierces what could be a harpsichord on a magic-carpet ride.

Vocals become another instrument in "Love Ices Over," where layered voices and tip-tapping skittering effects create a pillowy sensation. References to Kate Bush and the even more avant-garde Glasser abound, as the organic and electronic blend to make any chance at distinction an impossibility. When the swirls fully mix, as they do during the discontent of "Creature," the sound creates something that feels rather untamed, with voices in orbit around primal drumming and take-the-pain-away psychedelics. Heavenly, you may call it. At the least, it's of another world. —**Todd Martens**



The New Pornographers

Brill Bruisers
Matador, LP or CD

Just minutes into *Brill Bruisers*, the New Pornographers make it clear that despite the good vibes that are, well, everywhere on the record, this one cuts deep.

“I’m not your love song,” sings Kathryn Calder, one of the band’s four vocalists. Then comes the clarification: She’s not your “love song gone wrong.” The determined, low-to-the-ground guitars and choppy, lucent synths keep the momentum of “Champions of Red Wine” moving forward, and doggedly so. She’s coming over, there’s going to be booze, and maybe some bad decisions. It’s an early indication that *Brill Bruisers* is going to leave a mark, but as indicated by the parade-like bombast and celebratory “ba-ba-bas” during the opening song and title track, the album is more about the celebration that comes after surviving the blows.

That two such powerful moments arrive early and back-to-back on a New Pornographers LP isn’t a surprise. This is a band generally guaranteed to make a dandy of an initial impression. At first listen, a New Pornographers album always feels like an instant cure for whatever it is that ails you. Consider it an intravenous rush of melody-positive tunefulness.

Now six albums deep into a career that spans a decade and a half, the power-pop architects have in *Brill Bruisers* an album that once again hydrates the soul—a collection of songs that sparkle and glimmer with dazzling electrolytes and a zip-a-dee-doo-dah zest. The production flourishes are modern, if a bit more on the dance side than usual. There’s even a song dedicated to the power of shaking your tail as if no one is watching (“Dancehall Domine”), with a keyboard that blasts sonic confetti and a fake chorus that leads into a real chorus that overflows with cymbal-crashing euphoria.

Such expert craftsmanship is expected. The band is tagged as a “supergroup” in practically every article and every review, as its all-star cast of indie-pop auteurs have successful careers outside of the New Pornographers. If there’s a difference today than there was, say 10 years ago, it’s that the work of anchors Dan Bejar (Destroyer), Carl Newman, and Neko Case has only come into more notoriety, making it easier than it should to take the regrouping as the New Pornographers every three or four years for granted.

But that’s the way it is with any rock band that’s always been consistently not-awful (see Spoon, Wilco). *Brill Bruisers* connects via its overall dialing down of lyrical abstractness. On an album whose name is believed to be a nod to the famed American pop song factory, the Brill Building, the collective turns out its most upbeat and lavish set to date. It’s also the ensemble’s most direct. The New Pornographers have always been toe-tapping pros, but past earworms such as “The Jessica Numbers” and “Letter from an Occupant” are puzzles that demand to be decoded.

There’s some smile-inducing head-scratching here too—mainly the crackpot vision of the future that is “Fantasy Fools”—but just try and deny the quadrupled-layered vocals in the sing-along chorus. The message, ultimately, is about persuading the doubters, an underlying theme that crops up again and again. For its first six songs, *Brill Bruisers* is all restless energy, only calming down for the 90-second “Another Drug Deal of the Heart,” in which candy-coated keyboards plea for an end to emotional instability.

A silver lining is sought in “War on the East Coast,” a Bejar-led blast where dreams of destruction are balanced with the resignation “I wanted

to come home with you.” A Daft Punk-like overture opens “Backstairs,” during which the group’s harmonies gradually build to Abba-like grandeur all while the light-stepping Newman fights back after being shoved aside. “Born With a Sound” learns to live with hopeless romanticism by balancing skin-piercing guitars with an orchestra that sounds trapped in a vintage arcade.

Ultimately, this is an album tailored for foolish optimism. Hence, the joyous stomp of “You Tell Me Where” and quest for the “exception that proves our rule” in the hand-holding “Wide Eyes.” The enthusiasm relaxes toward album’s end, but there’s really no room for downers. Every song has a ready-answer for the skeptics.

“They say we can’t make this stuff up,” sings Case with a lived-in sweetness on “Marching Orders.” Maybe not, but then she has a question and she’s not waiting for the answer: “What else can we make?” —**Todd Martens**



Bahamas

Bahamas Is Afie

Brushfire Records, LP or CD

On past efforts, Canadian-born singer-songwriter Afie Jurvanen, who records and performs under the name Bahamas, ensconced himself in pretty, melancholic pop songs born of heartbreak and romantic failing. Tunes like “Okay, Alright, I’m Alive,” a lush ballad nearly as polite and unassuming as its title, typically found the singer aiming to keep his head high amidst rejections and struggling to convince himself he was better on his lonesome. “I know we had it before, but it went away,” he sings. “[And] ... I’m happy here on my own.”

At the onset of Bahamas’ new album, *Bahamas Is Afie* (a statement of fact if there ever was one), the musician again appears by himself, perched on an expansive stretch of sand where he watches waves roll with the tide. But in spite of the music’s solitary feel—the tune opens with Jurvanen singing atop little more than an acoustic guitar line so casual and beach-y it’s practically wearing board shorts—the singer’s words suggest a more communal mindset. “And I saw myself as one of many waves,” he sighs.

Throughout, Jurvanen explores his connection to his fellow man—or, more aptly, woman. So where previous albums are often steeped in disconnect, much of *Afie* comes on like elaborate, unflinching marital vows set to music. Album closer “All I’ve Ever Known” could even be interpreted as a first dance of sorts, Jurvanen jettisoning past conflicts and uncertainties and embracing a more hopeful future. “They pronounced us man and wife forever more,” he sings, as piano, drums, and a delicate acoustic guitar conjure images of a spring wedding ceremony.

Of course, the set traces a typically winding path to happiness. Jurvanen holds tight to past resentments on one tune (“Bitter Memories,” a bit sweeter than its title suggests) and admits even the strongest relationships can cause a world of hurt on another (“We are the cause of each other’s pain,” he sings on the bruising “All Time Favourite”). On multiple occasions, he tries to imagine setting off on his own once more—“I Can’t Take You With Me” and the prayerful “I Had It All”—and each time, he finds himself circling back to the same conclusion: He can no longer survive in the wilds on his own, nor does he want to try.

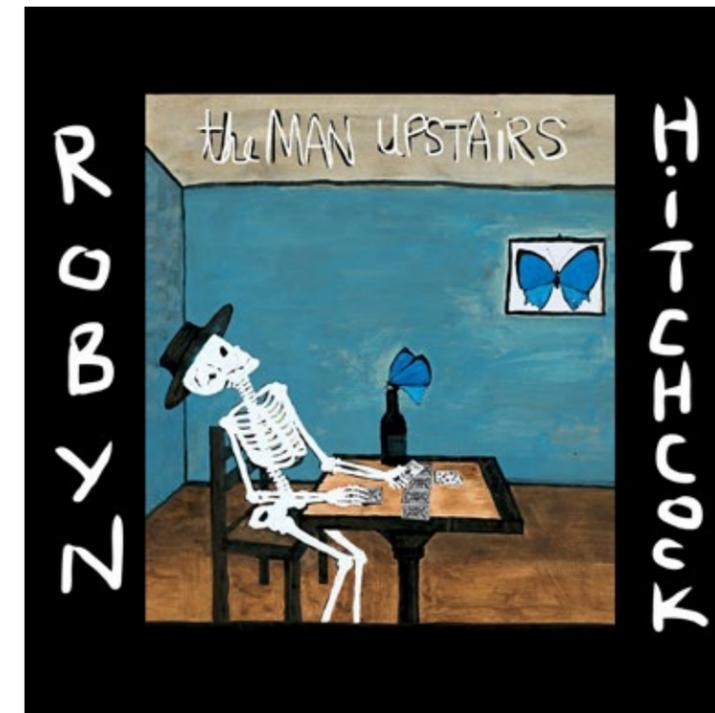
The music’s measured, introspective feel allows Jurvanen ample time to slow down and focus on everything from past indiscretions to his breathing. Occasionally, he sounds like a yoga instructor concentrating on every detail of the inhale/exhale cycle. He sings of holding his breath tight on one song, and on another he sighs, “[I] held the breath inside my lungs for days.” On the finale, Jurvanen even takes care to note that in every breath there’s life—a fitting admission on a record on which he finally sounds as though he’s ready to dedicate his fully to another. —**Andy Downing**

Few musicians have the ability to cover another artist’s song and make it fully their own. Johnny Cash certainly could. The Man in Black so fully embodied Nine Inch Nails’ “Hurt,” for example, that last year an Associated Press concert reviewer erroneously wrote Trent Reznor and Co. covered

Cash during a gig when they’d merely played their own tune from 1994’s *The Downward Spiral*. With *The Man Upstairs*, British singer-songwriter Robyn Hitchcock seemingly follows in Cash’s footsteps.

Hitchcock, 61, first came to prominence with the Soft Boys in the late 1970s and has since, over the course of 20 or so albums (including the odd collection of demos or outtakes), carved out an esoteric and consistently wonderful career left of the musical center. As a lyricist, his songs tend to be whimsical and absurdist. He wisely sought out a similar aesthetic in his choice of covers, tackling everything from Roxy Music’s digitized “To Turn You On” (transformed into a pre-technology ballad steeped in acoustic guitar, soft-stepping piano, and cautious cello) to Grant Lee-Phillips’ “Don’t Look Down,” a lonesome, world-weary number Hitchcock retraces in lovely fashion.

Other songs, like Psychedelic Furs’ “Ghost in You,” appear decked out in entirely new garb. In its original state, the anthemic track playfully bounds along on chipper synthesizers.



Robyn Hitchcock

The Man Upstairs

Yep Roc, LP or CD

Here, the music is stripped down to the absolute studs, Hitchcock strumming an acoustic guitar and singing with a startling intimacy that suggests a living-room recording or a secret shared in confidence. A version of the Doors’ “The Crystal Ship” is similarly bracing, Hitchcock swapping Jim Morrison’s bloated Lizard King persona for an odder, more insular presence. I now hope he rerecords the Doors’ entire catalog just for kicks.

The album is the partial brainchild of producer Joe Boyd (Nick Drake, Fairport Convention), who suggested Hitchcock record a “Judy Collins album” comprised of originals, old favorites, and new discoveries. Boyd imbues the recordings with necessary intimacy. Even when the group operates at full capacity—Hitchcock is backed by longtime collaborators Charlie Francis (piano), Jenny Adajayan (cello), and Anne Lise Frokedal (vocals)—the music maintains a solitary feel.

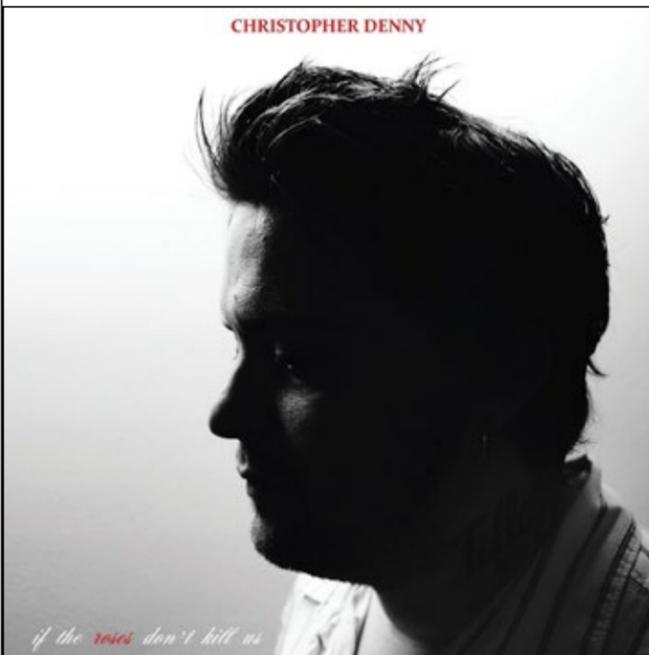
This trait is particularly true on a pair of new songs, “Comme Toujours” and “Trouble In Your Blood,” both of which find Hitchcock abandoning a past reliance on clever wordplay in favor of bracing directness. “You got a well-constructed shell,” he sings on the latter, even as the stripped-bare music exposes the tender heart concealed beneath. —**Andy Downing**

When the young Roy Acuff first sang the otherworldly biblical tune “The Great Speckled Bird” in the late 1930s at the Grand Ole Opry, he reportedly did so with tears streaming down his face. So singular was Acuff’s interpretation that he reduced his audience to tears as well. The performance made him a star and helped change the course of country music from a string-band-heavy format to a genre where the vocalist was king.

Christopher Denny is a lot like the titanic Acuff in his emotional impact, and I write that with all sincerity and no hype. It’s hard to overstate the hypnotic power of Denny’s voice. He’s a singer that gets under the skin and stays there. He makes it very, very easy to cry. He’s frequently compared to Roy Orbison, but Denny is more a country cousin to the earthier, acquired-taste Texas tenors Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Rodney Crowell. Although these names are mentioned as a way to place Denny in a peer group of distinctive singers, he’s very much his own man. An Arkansas native with a troubled past, Denny invests his lovely lyrics and melodies with deeply earned feeling. His quavering tenor is packed with intuitive phrasing.

Poetic and nakedly emotional, his songs are unusual—and unusually vulnerable. “I’m walkin’ on stilts, mama/I can’t reach you at all,” he cries out to a woman in “God’s Height,” his voice cutting through a dazzling hail of electric guitars and Hammond organ. “We done beat this damn horse to death/So please ride on,” he sings mournfully over dobro strains in “Ride On.” On the majestic soul outing “Radio,” he likens himself to a Statue of Liberty that doesn’t feel very free.

CHRISTOPHER DENNY



Christopher Denny

If the Roses Don't Kill Us
Partisan Records, LP or CD

Musically, Denny has an easy touch with a number of genres. He elegantly moves through hard country, rhythm and blues, soul, and classic pop. Horns punctuate the sultry “Our Kind of Love.” The sad and yearning “Wings” recalls the intimate pianoman reflections of the great southern soulman Charlie Rich.

There’s not a throwaway cut here, from the bright pop of “Watch Me Shine” to the retro rootsy country-rock of the title track. Helmed by Grammy-winning producer Dave Sanger with his partners PJ Herrington and Jay Reynolds, the songs are so consistently outstanding they could have been fashioned by a genetic hybrid of Fred Rose, Chips Moman, and Smokey Robinson. Christopher Denny is a timeless singer and *If the Roses Don't Kill Us* is a contender for album of the year in any year. —**Chrissie Dickinson**

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MUSICAL ECSTASY

MUSIC



Israel Nash
Rain Plans
Loose Music, LP or CD

For 2011's *Barn Doors and Concrete Floors*, singer-songwriter Israel Nash Gripka retreated with friends to a small farm in the Catskills region of upstate New York and bashed out a rowdy set of country-rock tunes about trying to hold things together as life chips away at the foundation. "Building bridges ain't the hardest part," he sings on one stormy tune. "It's trying to swim when they fall apart."

For his latest effort, *Rain Plans*, which surfaced last year in the UK and only recently made its way to US shores, Gripka appears to have made some sort of uneasy peace with the world. On "Through the Door," a pretty, pedal-steel-kissed number, he notes the stones once aimed his way "don't come around no more." Fittingly, a lingering sense of calm bleeds into the album's nine musically comforting cuts.

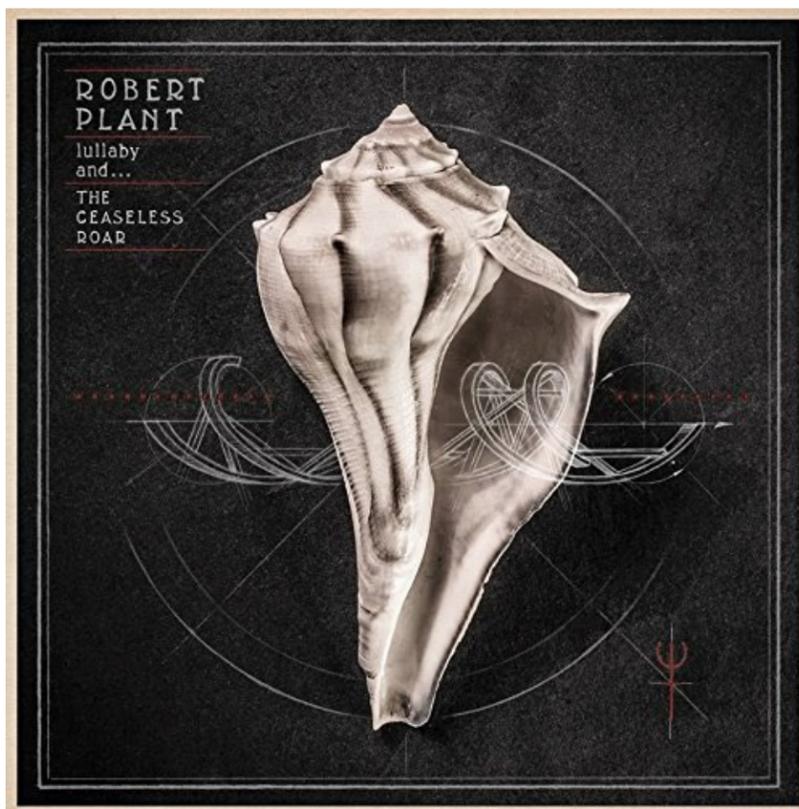
At least part of the shift can be attributed to a geographical relocation. In late 2011, Gripka left behind the crazed hustle of New York City for Texas Hill Country, settling in the rolling, rock-cropped vistas of Dripping Springs. The music frequently reflects the sun-kissed terrain, Gripka and Co.—the frontman is supported by touring bandmates Joey McClellan (guitar), Aaron McClellan (bass), Josh Fleischmann (drums), and Eric Swanson (pedal steel)—painting in textured, vaguely psychedelic hues that suggest a golden desert sunset.

Even so, water remains a steady presence, bubbling to the surface in the title track—a Neil Young-esque guitar

burner built around an awesomely shaggy solo—and on songs like "Myer Canyon," where the singer compares a former lover to "water drifting away from [him]." "Just Like Water," in turn, makes musical allusion to the theme song from "M*A*S*H" and includes a line about letting problems roll off your back "just like water."

The physical and emotional distance Gripka felt since transplanting himself from NYC to the Texas wilds crop up in similarly repetitive fashion, and the lyrics include numerous mentions of isolation and a desire to foster a deeper connection. "I could use some company," he sings with typical bluntness on "Who In Time," a shuffling number built on stubby guitar, weary pedal steel, and drums that clomp along like an aged mule.

Even if Gripka falls a bit short on the romantic front—"Bring your loving through the door/I could use a little more" he offers on one burnished tune—his bandmates make certain he's not alone, fleshing out his solitary tales and lending the music a communal touch even in the moments the singer appears most detached from his surroundings.
—Andy Downing



Robert Plant

lullaby and...the Ceaseless Roar
Nonesuch, 180g 2LP/CD or CD

Robert Plant sounds jubilant on his first new studio record in four years. And why not? Forever linked with Led Zeppelin, the singer has spurned convention over the past three decades by ignoring lucrative requests to reconvene with his former mates and choosing instead to press on with a solo career marked with diversity, risk, and exploration.

Yes, he's leaving Fort Knox-level money on the table. Countless fans and industry folk—including Plant's former right-hand man, guitarist Jimmy Page—tend to believe the 66-year-old English native bonkers for passing up an automatic eight-figure payday for simply playing old rock songs in exchange for the chance to gallivant with roots musicians such as Alison Krauss.

Of course, let's not forget Plant acquiesced to such requests, however briefly, by performing with Zeppelin for a one-off gig in 2007. At the time, Vegas put the smart money on a forthcoming reunion. Practically everything—and everyone—was in place save for the original golden-god frontman, whose decision to not partake rankled Page and ruined the get-rich-quick dreams of ticket scalpers around the world. No matter where you stand, however, it's virtually impossible to not respect Plant's integrity and desire to create rather than rehash.

Anyone still baffled about Plant's priorities should spend a few hours with *lullaby and... the Ceaseless Roar*, a charming album that both extends the singer's perpetual fascination with the blues and dives into African, Welsh, English, and American landscapes with fearless intrigue and wide-eyed wonder. While Plant immersed himself in sub-Saharan territories on 2005's mesmerizing *Mighty Rearranger*, he utilizes the eleven canvasses here as opportunities to blend old and new languages, traditional and contemporary influences, and related and disparate styles.

Accessible and inviting, the album seems more familiar than strange. Songs welcome multifaceted pop foundations. Lyrics revolve around the headliner's personal thoughts and experiences. In many ways, the set represents Plant coming full circle, a homecoming of sorts in which he threads together common strains that have always intrigued him—Appalachian bluegrass, Mississippi Delta blues, Texas blues, Chicago blues, African desert blues, Nashville country-and-western, Memphis R&B, Welch folk, ancient mythology—into loose knots that incorporate modern devices such as dub reggae and avant-garde rock/trip-hop to form distinctively Western European tapestries.

Plant navigates his way across remote sonic and geographic borders via obsessive interest in and study of his subjects—and also by way of having a crack band, the aptly named Sensational Shape Shifters, at his behest. Guitarist Justin Adams (producer, Tinariwen), keyboardist John Baggot, bassist Billy Fuller (collaborator, Portishead), jazz-learned drummer Dave Smith, guitarist Liam Tyson (Britpop veteran), and Gambian multi-instrumentalist

Juldeh Camara (a master of a one-string tribal fiddle called the ritti) reflect the same bottomless penchant for adventure and enthusiasm as their leader.

Indeed, Camara's out-of-left-field solo on the album-opening update of "Little Maggie"—a song popularized by bluegrass heroes the Stanley Brothers that receives two completely different treatments on *lullaby and... the Ceaseless Roar*—sets the mood for what follows. "I'm going away to leave you/ In some far-off distant land," utters Plant in a calm albeit breathy delivery, sounding akin to a warlock disturbed from slumbering at the top of a snow-capped mountain. As tour guide, Plant is in fine voice, trading the leather-lunged power of his Zeppelin days for added nuance, shading, phrasing, spaciousness, and soulfulness.

And yet it's completely possible to picture the highly grooved "Rainbow" gracing Side Two of *Led Zeppelin II*, with the hard-rock quotient slightly lessened and textures modestly increased. *(continued)*

Plant and Co. delivers sparse, chapel-recorded ballads (the gorgeous, time-freezing “A Stolen Kiss”), rhythmic, acoustic-based dance numbers (the irresistibly warm and Celtic-flavored “Poor Howard”), and gypsy-wanderer blues-rock hybrids (the mystical “Pocketful of Golden”) with equanimous verve and skill. On the slow-moving contemplation “Embrace Another Fall,” Plant gives way to waves of hand-struck percussion, rippling psychedelic guitar, and a vocal interlude by Julie Murphy while marrying the future with the past.

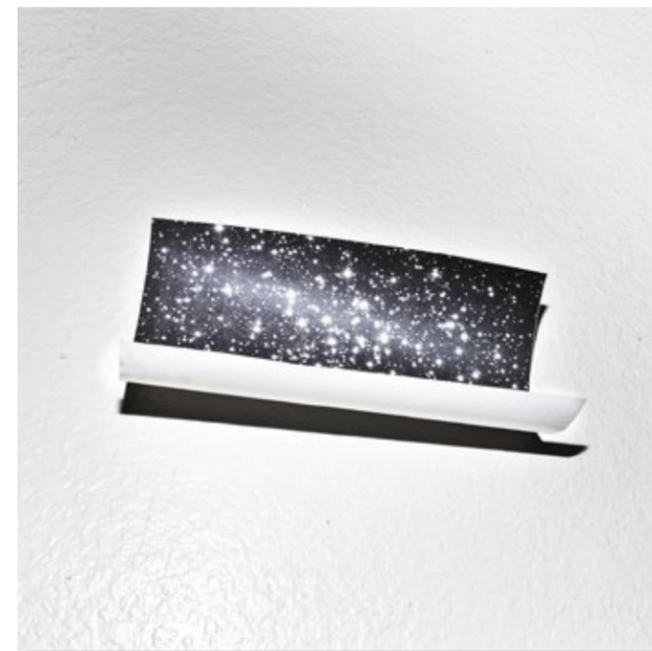
“I’m stuck inside the radio/Turn it on and let me out,” the vocalist implores in a high-register tone on the corrugated “Turn It Up,” a junkyard tune whose spare-part beats, funky grind, quicksilver tones, and carnival pulse simultaneously hypnotize and shake. The singer’s plea may as well be his creed. For the past two decades in particular, Plant has willingly trapped himself in global radio stations of his own imagination, eager to make the connections and pose the challenges few artists care (and dare) to construct. Vibrant and affirming, *lullaby and...the Ceaseless Roar* is his—and our—reward for keeping an ear to the ground.

—**Bob Gendron**



©Photo by Ed Miles

When it comes to opening tracks, Bear in Heaven has a winner in “Autumn.” The first 40 seconds constitute a rush of excitement and electronic exoticism. A drum charges in for battle, synthesizers swoosh, a bass pulses with a static charge, and all sorts of digital textures flutter, twinkle, and pulsate in a rainbow-colored wilderness of digital circuitry. All this momentum never lets up during the song’s three minutes. An unexpected break and some dancefloor-ready grooves only heighten the thrill.



Bear in Heaven

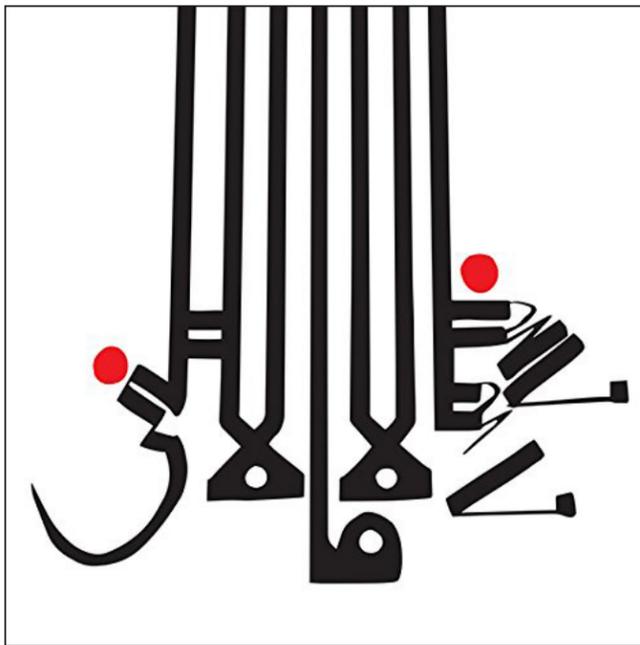
Time Is Over One Day Old
Dead Oceans, LP or CD

Naturally, *Time is Over One Day Old* can’t maintain such sonic ecstasy over its next nine songs, but the bigger surprise is how quickly it changes course. The Brooklyn indie-rock trio, led by Jon Philpot and a slightly revolving cast of musicians, largely drop the all-in experimentation of “Autumn” and elements of prior albums for more of a dream-pop excursion on this set, its fourth affair.

The music is pretty, as “They Dream” is layer upon layer of Technicolor lasers and weirder-than-they-should-be hand-driven beats. Philpot’s soft and detached vocals often camouflage themselves in the soundscapes. A phrase here or there jumps out when the instrumental support parts ways,

and it’s often one of forlorn contemplation, such as musings on “the time between nothing to do.” Then the voice gets quietly hushed into the background, masked by the propulsive handclaps and wind-blown guitar strumming of “Time Between” or cartoonish disco effects of “Demon.”

There’s nothing inherently wrong anywhere on *Time is Over One Day Old*. It’s all rather tasteful and seemingly tailor-made for tastemakers to license. Yet when things get a little off-color—or even a tad sinister, as they do on the predatory bass-driven march “If I Were to Lie”—one can’t help but wish Bear in Heaven would more often aim for a nightmare instead of a daydream. —**Todd Martens**



Shabazz Palaces is based in Seattle, but its music barely sounds of this earth. Vocalist Ishmael Butler, who rhymes under the *nom de rap* Palaceer Lazaro, joins producer Tendai Maraire to form the creative center of the experimental crew, which fills its latest, *Lese Majesty*, with elaborate “stories told in code,” as Butler explains on “Ishmael,” a stuttered number that comes on like a snippet culled from a futuristic radio broadcast.

Butler—Butterfly of 90s jazz-hop trio Digable Planets in another life—has rarely walked a straight line since first breaking into the public consciousness with “Rebirth of Slick (Cool Like Dat)” in 1992. Yet Palaces’ latest might be his least conformist effort yet, combining seven so-called “astral suites” that unfold over more than 45 trip-inducing minutes.

Shabazz Palaces

Lese Majesty
Sub Pop, 2LP or CD

The album’s title roughly translates to an offense against the state, and on the opening track, Butler rhymes of “throwing cocktails at the Fuhrer.” Rather than target any political or social figurehead, the rapper appears to direct his ire at the stilted state of modern hip-hop. So instead of following some prescribed radio blueprint, the crew favors cryptic tunes that take significant time to decode. Think of them as an updated version of the Dead Sea Scrolls. At times, the language is so dense, it feels like wading through a waist-deep swamp of syllables. Similarly, Butler repeatedly exhibits a tendency to fall back on maze-like bars that exude the feverishness of Basquiat brushstrokes scrawled on canvas. “Blackophilic pedolistic pedostrophic hymns,” goes one typically tongue-twisting exaltation.

It’s not all high-minded word games, however. Every now and again, Butler uncorks a bemusing literary reference (“Ish dances with the white whale on the Pequod”) or a playful couplet. “I’m not messing with your mind/I don’t have that kind of time,” he spits with impish glee on “Harem Aria,” a two-minute contact high of warped beats and blunted rhymes. A sense of seduction even bleeds into the heaving, funk-tinged “They Come In Gold,” given a major lift by singer/secret weapon Catherine Harris-White. “The brontides screech every time we kiss,” Butler hisses as wind chimes clatter in the gathering electric storm. “We converse in an ancient language.”

At times, *Lese Majesty* slips into indulgence. “Noetic Noiromantics,” for one, is barely a sketch of a sketch, building on a minimalist

beat that comes on like a barber sweeping up hair clippings with a firm-bristled broom. Meanwhile, the sci-fi “Sonic MythMap for the Trip Back” aims for the cosmos but never quite escapes earth’s gravitational pull, buzzing synths and spoken-word vocals gradually pulling apart like a rocket coming undone upon reentry into the atmosphere.

Tracks like “#CAKE” and the kinetic “Forerunner Foray” take better advantage of the mutating soundscapes, Butler rhyming atop enjoyably erratic instrumentals that continuously shift, erode, and give way to cavernous sinkholes. “If you come to see us, this is what you get,” the MC offers with atypical directness on one aside. It’s to the crew’s credit the music maintains its pull even as it drifts further into orbit. —**Andy Downing**



King Tuff

Black Moon Spell
Sub Pop, LP or CD

It takes smarts to make dirt-cheap look good.

Sub Pop garage-rock revivalist King Tuff is the type of artist that allows scuzz to feel fashionable. His third album for the label tidies things up a bit, but it’s all done in the manner of throwing on a sport coat over a vintage concert t-shirt—a look so simple and plain, you’re mad you didn’t think of it first. “I don’t care if you hate your face,” sings the artist known to his friends as Kyle Thomas. He then adds in some spit before declaring, all romantic-like, “I love you ugly.”

Bless the beauty of a little ol’ fashioned rock n’ roll done simply, and with humor. Much of *Black Moon Spell* touts the feel of a spontaneous kegger at your parents’ house, complete with the type of quotes bratty kids scrawled on their folders while bored at school. “I learn more working at the record store than I ever did in high school,” he declares in one song, and, in another, “Love just wasn’t fun until she took off your pants.” King Tuff doesn’t so much as sing the latter line as let it slither out of his mouth, bringing “Sick Mind” to a close with maniacal giggles and choppy, arms-high guitar riffs.

Admittedly, it’s all vaguely recognizable. “Headbanger” recalls Kiss’ “Strutter” and “Black Holes in Stereo” has shades of the streaking, choppy guitars dotting the Clash’s “Capital Radio.” But King Tuff is best enjoyed if one doesn’t think too hard. The familiarity, after all, is part of the fun, and his live show is the stuff of legend. (*Spin* even wrote an oral history of the early days, when Thomas was kicking around in numerous indie bands.)

If anything, the moments on *Black Moon Spell* that don’t feel tossed are where the album starts to falter. For example, the Haight-Ashbury balladry of “Staircase of Diamonds” or clunky Led Zeppelin-like mysticism of “Eyes of the Muse.” Thankfully, tracks like “Eddie’s Song,” with its “Boys Are Back in Town”-inspired riff and kazoo-sounding keyboard, outnumber the occasions when King Tuff overthinks it. —**Todd Martens**



Interpol

El Pintor
Matador, LP or CD

Here's a truth about Interpol in 2014: Few big-ticket rock bands sound as professional. Everything on the band's fifth album, from the moody-cool vocals to the knob-twisting guitar notes, is in its right place. On *El Pintor*, Interpol's first album in four years and first studio effort without bassist Carlos Dengler, the band's sound is aces.

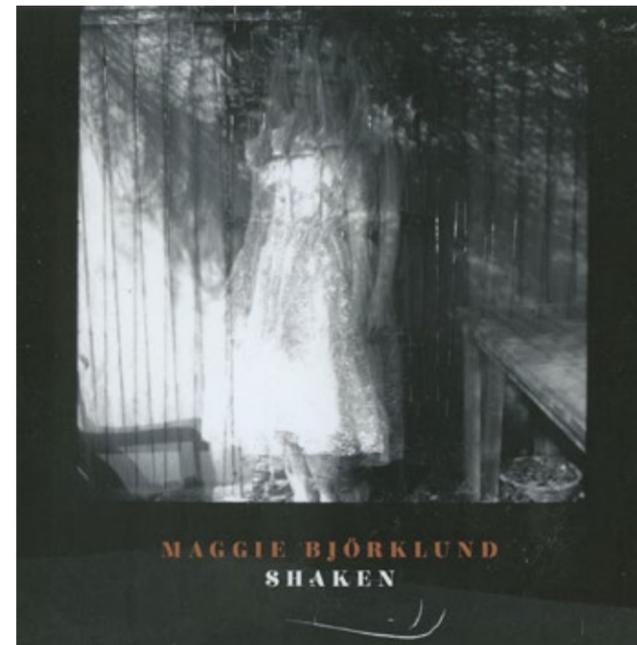
But this is not the Interpol of 2002, when the band's debut *Turn on the Bright Lights* went to the front of New York's rock n' roll class with dark-as-night suaveness and tightly wound songs that were all-tension, all the time. This is the Interpol that celebrated the 10th anniversary of *Turn on the Bright Lights* with a fancy reissue and whose later work has become a consistent, if somewhat predictable, source for soul-purging, slow-churning rock anthems.

El Pintor, refreshingly, brings some much-needed tweaks to the formula. After an extended break, the band regrouped as a three-piece, with the methodically voiced singer Paul Banks taking over bass duties and guitarist Daniel Kessler using the rhythmic shakeup to find even more spacious textures. There's a sense, right from the start, that the Interpol has something to prove. Opener "All the Rage Back Home" begins with an echo and rumble before spilling into the requisite, love-torn lyrics. But it's the pattern stitched by Kessler's guitar—a cursive noodling that only gets more squirrely as the song progresses—that keeps the song on constant high-alert.

"My Desire" simmers with a beat that hisses like steam seeping out of a smoldering cauldron, and "Same Town, New Story" serves as the centerpiece, four-plus minutes of finely sharpened high-pitched guitar notes that sound as if Kessler's instrument is tied up in knots. "Feels like the whole world is up on my shoulders," sings Banks with his baritone drone, his

lyrics outlining characters that treat all emotional entanglements as a great drama. But, never mind, it's the little details that matter, be it the unexpected space-age keyboards that twinkle in "Tidal Wave" or calibrated noose-tightening (and loosening) of "Breaker 1."

Zeroing in on small moments creates the sensation that Interpol sometimes loses sight of the bigger picture. There's lots of force in these songs, but it's labored. "Anywhere" is so intent on reaching arena heights, it becomes anonymous. "My Blue Supreme" boasts tap-dancing guitar-drums interplay in search of a direction. "Everything is Wrong" stumbles as it tries to marry woe-is-me theatrics with U2-like grandeur. Even in these missteps, every downtrodden atmosphere sounds hand-crafted, lending credence to the theory that Interpol may be some of the hardest-working perfectionists around. The bad news? They sometimes sound like some of the hardest-working perfectionists around. —**Todd Martens**



Maggie Bjorklund

Shaken
Bloodshot, LP or CD

Like experimental guitarist Kaki King, Maggie Bjorklund happens to be a gifted musician that also insists on singing. In both cases, the underwhelming vocalists would be better off letting their axes do the talking. Bjorklund's *Shaken* isn't without its highlights. The Denmark native's second album overflows with mystical-sounding prairie dream-pop made for a Scandinavian arthouse film soundtrack.

By day, Bjorklund is a sought-after as a pedal-steel guitarist that's toured with Jack White. For her new release, she enlisted a rock snob's Who's Who of guests, including PJ Harvey cohort John Parish and Portishead bassist Jim Barr.

They contribute to an album that, at least instrumentally, sets a hypnotic background mood. The hushed production is light-handed and lovely. And Bjorklund remains judicious with her playing, carefully weaving guitar sonics throughout webs of quiet percussion and bowed strings.

If you're a pedal-steel aficionado looking for classic western swing style playing ala Leon McAuliffe or Speedy West, this is not the record for you. Bjorklund uses her guitar as an atmospheric instrument. The headliner's eerie slide work glides over clippety-clop percussion on "The Road to Samarkand," an instrumental that demonstrates her sure feel for restrained riffs. On the aptly titled "Missing at Sea," she conjures whale sounds.

The fly in the ointment pertains to Bjorklund's less-than-arresting voice. Featured on several tracks, it recalls the slight pipes of 1960s French chanteuse Claudine Longet. But at least Longet's plaintive wisp stayed in tune during the course of a song. The same can't be said for Bjorklund. She's the kind of singer "American Idol" judge Randy Jackson would diplomatically call "pitchy."

A marquee duet does not help. Bjorklund's vocal partner on "Fro Fro Heart" is Lambchop frontman Kurt Wagner, himself a polarizing singer with a painfully mannered delivery. Pairing a weak singer (Bjorklund) with a precious one (Wagner) only makes matters worse. Oddly, Bjorklund seems to draw inspiration from the collaboration. On the stark and sad "Ashes," she apes Wagner's halting style and whisper-sings so closely into the microphone you can almost hear her saliva smacking. It's unfortunate and distracting.

"I'm a gypsy looking for a spell," Bjorklund admits on "Bottom of the Well," but there's no magic in her voice. The real spell is the one Bjorklund casts with her steel guitar. —**Chrissie Dickinson**



Shovels & Rope

Swimmin' Time
Dualtone, 180s 2LP/CD or CD

Shovels & Rope is one road-seasoned act. The husband-and-wife duo of Cary Ann Hearst and Michael Trent tours nearly non-stop, playing rambunctious Americana songs for audiences far and wide. In the process, they've built a devoted and growing fan base. Through word of mouth and glowing press, the duo has sold more than 60,000 copies of its 2012 breakthrough indie debut *O' Be Joyful* and was named Emerging Artist of the Year at the Americana Music Honors and Awards show in Nashville.

There's certainly a lot to applaud about the couple. A country-blues belter with a sandpaper edge, Hearst possesses powerhouse pipes and is no slouch on guitar and drums. Trent, by comparison, is a rustic multi-instrumentalist and grainy-voiced harmony vocalist. Produced by Trent and recorded in the couple's home studio, the duo's sophomore *Swimmin' Time* counts among its successes "Fish Assassin," an infectious chant that demonstrates the power of two voices and



©Photo by Molly Hayes

raw percussion. The couple also shines on "The Devil Is All Around," an ecstatic organ-driven number with a tambourine shake unnervingly emulating a rattlesnake's tail.

Alas, Hearst and Trent make for better singers and performers than songwriters and producers. They aren't great at crafting a consistently memorable or original melody. "Coping Mechanism" gives Hearst the space to bust loose vocally, but essentially, it's a

standard rock n' roll number with tinkling piano. Ditto "Stono River Blues," which sounds like a generic homage to Frankie Laine in his "Ghost Riders in the Sky" phase.

A few songs are too busy for their own good and overshadow the couple's more direct charms. "Evil" buzzes with a dirty guitar riff that tips its hat to Neil Young and Crazy Horse, yet it's more plodding and overly long than spooky. The title track devolves into an

overcooked stew of reverb and echo effects. By contrast, the duo succeeds when it doesn't belabor the production or Southern-gothic imagery. With its crying vocals and astringent harmonica, "After the Storm" throbs with desire and hope. Here, Hearst and Trent achieve the raspy pathos of a classic Lee Hazlewood and Nancy Sinatra duet. This is Shovels and Rope at its best: Simple, and straight from the heart. —**Chrissie Dickinson**



Weezer

Everything Will Be All Right in the End
Republic, LP or CD

Weezer's first album in four years begins with what could be mistaken as a parody—only, it probably is parody. Twenty years removed from its landmark debut, (*Weezer*) *Blue Album*, alt-rock's long-standing nerds are now geek conquerors and festival headliners that still appear to be flying the girls-don't-like-me flag.

Less than 60 seconds into the opening "Ain't Got Nobody," bespectacled frontman Rivers Cuomo gripes that he's searched all over the world for someone to love and there "ain't no one in all creation." You'd be forgiven for thinking you've heard this song before and reached the conclusion that it's a lot easier to stomach when presented by 20-somethings that were writing odes to playing *Dungeons & Dragons* in the mid-90s. And then, Weezer throws a curveball.

Everything Will Be All Right in the End, which sees the band again working with Cars anchor and Blue Album producer Ric Ocasek, isn't a reread. The underlying theme in many of these 13 songs concerns a band trying to articulate the inspiration and magic of what it means to be four guys still playing rock n' roll together at a time when singing competitions dominate, members have settled down, and peers tinker with disco makeovers. It's a sort of *Blue Album* revisited by the successful, the hesitatingly content, and those now weighed down by expectations.

The interest level of such themes is directly proportional to one's Weezer fandom, as there's a sense of pulling back the curtain on "Back to the Shack" and "Eulogy for a Rock Band," where Cuomo and Co. come to grips with the prospect of potentially dying in obscurity as fading guitar-carrying dinosaurs. Each nods to various facets of Weezer's career. The former is built around a semi-ironic-but-not-really heavy-metal crunch while the latter zips along with fluidity of a mid-80s MTV pop hit.



Sentimental influences prevail. "Ain't Got Nobody" is a not-so-subtle wink to where it all began, complete with chirpy voiceovers that recall 1994's "Undone (The Sweater Song)" and thick, engine-revving riffs from Cuomo and Brian Bell that aim to defy the background murmuring implying "guitars are dead." "The British Are Coming" nostalgically looks back on the punk-rock invasion with Revolutionary War imagery and falsetto crooning, while "Return to Ithaca" reeks of late-career rock excess. Everything hits at once, and all of it is over-the-top, with brightly twisted keyboards that echo Manfred Mann's version of "Blinded by the Light" trying to keep pace with crunched-for-time rhythms.

Ocasek's high-concept production seems to proudly channel that of Robert John "Mutt" Lange,

whose work with Def Leppard and Shania Twain is crisp, clear, and turned to 11. "Cleopatra" shifts from bare strumming to purposefully cheesy arena-rock countdowns. "The Waste Land" serves as an unnecessary head-banging instrumental that plays as a hair-metal overture to the multi-guitar front and operatic harmonies of "Anonymous." By album's end, Weezer presents us with a band that's gone from singing puppy-dog tales of rejection to one sounding fit for a Broadway show.

Only the theater here is that of a band playing the role of a rock n' roll band, and the songs that make for the best drama on *Everything Will Be All Right in the End* turn out to be the ones grounded in reality. The sing-along charmer "Da Vinci" grapples with courtship in the social networking era, with Cuomo

even copping to looking up a girl's history on Ancestry.com. "Go Away," a duet with Best Coast's Bethany Cosentino, brings a rather welcome female counter-punch to Weezer's woe-is-me tales.

Stronger still is "I've Had it Up to Here," a stop-and-start rant—maybe at girls, maybe at fans, maybe at the music industry—that toys with the shifting definitions of the term "compromise" as one ages. The band sounds serious, but with Weezer, it's always anyone's guess, and *Everything Will Be All Right in the End* gets by with bringing a middle-aged sheen to Weezer's trademark self-awareness. "Give it a try," Cuomo tells a lady rejecting his advances on "Lonely Girl." "I'm not gonna die."
—**Todd Martens**



Sallie Ford
Slap Back
 Vanguard Records, CD

Like an alt-rock Anita O'Day singing lost garage-rock classics from a "Pebbles" compilation, Sallie Ford damns the torpedoes and charges full-speed ahead on *Slap Back*. Her solo debut for Vanguard Records is fast, furious, and smart. It's also the rarest of things: an incredibly fun record.

Last December, the singer-songwriter-guitarist called it quits with her former band, Portland-based the Sound Outside. That outfit helped spread her name, but its rep as a neo-rockabilly band also hemmed in the multi-faceted frontwoman. With *Slap Back*, Ford expands her sound and bursts from the gate as a ferocious, wide-ranging rocker. She draws on the bracing talents of her new all-female backing band: keyboardist Cristina Cano, bassist Anita Lee Elliott, and drummer Amanda Spring.

Produced by multi-instrumentalist Chris Funk (the Decemberists, Black Prairie), tracks on *Slap Back* cherry-pick from a number of golden rock periods, including classic 60s surf and 70s punk. Ferocious energy and intelligence elevate it all above retro mimicry. Ford cuts loose like the soul daughter of girl-fronted punk eccentrics the Slits, Delta 5, and Siouxsie and the Banshees.

There's nothing clean or prissy here. Ford and Funk manhandle the past and get their hands dirty. The sound is raw and the ragged edges show. Buzzing guitars, throbbing bass, smacked beats, and Farfisa-like keyboards snake and stagger through the mix. These are irresistibly catchy songs recorded in defiant lo-fi. Crammed with infectious melodies, the blistering tunes come alive in the room.

"Oregon" is a big, greasy, glorious stomp that at times threatens to short-circuit the soundboard. With its gum-smacking girl-group insouciance, "Give Me Your Lovin'" functions as a nasty, fuzzy wonder that wears its influences on its sleeve. Akin to iconic post-punk band X recording the Doors classic "Soul Kitchen" with producer and former Doors keyboardist Ray Manzarek, Ford and Funk achieve a deftly rendered hybrid that marries several eras of music.

As a songwriter, Ford takes on love in all its messiness. In "An Ending," her lyrics cut like a serrated knife. "You saw me at my worst," she observes, glancing back at a love affair gone south. "Just remember me the best way you can."

Nothing sounds ironic or tongue-in-cheek. Ford is too honest and direct for such tricks. And it's exactly why her music sounds so very thrilling.

—*Chrissie Dickinson*

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MORE RENEGADE THAN BEFORE

A Conversation With Producer and Musician Daniel Lanois

By Andy Downing

Daniel Lanois titled his new album *Flesh and Machine*, and the music frequently traverses that ground between the two. Throughout, Lanois, a skilled solo artist best known for producing landmark records by the likes of Bob Dylan, Neil Young, and U2, combines acoustic instruments with electronic processing that gives the heavily textured tracks a warped, other-worldly feel. Even when voices appear, they rarely sound human, the musician applying them in the mix like one more paint color smeared on the canvas.

It's possible to hear the influence of the ambient recordings he laid to tape alongside Brian Eno in the early 80s. Reached by phone for a conversation at his Ontario home in late November, Lanois even admits those albums, *On Land* and *Apollo: Atmospheres and Soundtracks*, helped inform a blossoming sense of creative freedom.

"At that time, [Eno] decided he did not need to be in a pop band to make music, which is much what I'm going through now," says Lanois, 63. "He went to what he saw as a pure form, and isn't it nice when you find that in your work? That's the new Daniel Lanois: Still driven by quality, but more renegade than before."



©Photo by David Leyes

***Flesh and Machine* is an ideal title for the new record considering you really blur the line between the two.**

Yeah, I must finally be admitting I'm a studio rat but I still love people as well [laughs].

Was that a difficult realization for you to reach?

You know, I've always made an effort to hide the sutures of my work so I could present a perfectly formed little baby, but I like that there are a few risks taken this time around where the technology is so evident.

What inspired you to let some of those seams show?

I think I've just come into a whole new meadow of freedom. On this record I went back to the values I was operating with on those records I made with Brian Eno, where we weren't pop-song driven. We were just trying to make something as beautiful and elevating as possible. By going back to that I was able to feel the same sense of courage, and to be brave about this direction and realize what I love about records is when they take me on a journey.

Are you familiar with the guitarist Chris Forsyth?

I'm not, no.

I interviewed him recently, and he spoke about pushing his music to the point where you could see where the edges are, and that's something I really hear on this album.

That's a nice way to describe it, yeah, to push the boundaries. We have so many great years of rock n' roll under our belt...but we still owe it to ourselves to challenge form, really. You have to push the boundaries and see what else exists out there. I wake up every morning thinking that's part of my job.

What's the last piece of music you encountered that felt new or alien to you?

To be honest, there's not a lot we've been listening to. We actually shut the whole sound system down because we decided we wanted to be part of the cultural revolution that embraces silence. Have you ever been anywhere, ever, that didn't have music? Maybe someone in the arctic, once. Or the desert. I always had this back and forth with Brian Eno, and he'd say, "What every city needs is a quiet club where you can go in and converse with your friends in a quiet way." Every table would have a chessboard. We're starting the quiet club wherever we go, so you don't always have to be bombarded.

There's no conversing on this album, either. Even the vocals serve purely as a textural element.

The idea with this was to go the source material, take samples and then manipulate them and put them back into the track in the appropriate harmonic position. *(continued)*

That's why it sounds a little out of body, and sometimes you don't know if you're hearing a human or an animal, like on "Sioux Lookout," for example. I'm not sure where that takes the listener, because

I might be getting a bit too mystical here, but it's jumped on me a few times where I felt something had spoken to me, and I knew I should go a specific direction.

sometimes it sounds like a village chant and other times it sounds like a wild animal. Even though there are no lyrics on this album, I wanted there to be some sense of a universal language, where anyone anywhere could be transported.

Did you grow up fascinated by technology? Were you the kid taking apart the radio and the toaster?

[Laughs] My brother Bob was the one taking apart the toaster and the car. I was always interested in operating the equipment. We started a studio when we were kids. By the time I was 12 I had a recorder at home, so we were constantly fiddling with equipment. My brother was the scientist, and I got the musical gift. We never went to school for it. It was all just trial and error. That's where the madness started. We didn't know what we were doing, and the interfacing of our equipment was not manufacturer recommended, so early on we hit on a few things you would only bump up on by disobeying the manual. We didn't mind breaking the rules, though, because we never fully understood them to begin with.

Do you find different things inspire you to create as you get older?

Well what's happened is I've come across a new wave of courage and purpose. I've sat in that

[producer's] chair my whole life making records for other people. Hey man, I'm

a French-Canadian kid from small-town Canada, and the next thing I know I'm working with Bob Dylan and U2 and Peter Gabriel—these very established artists I grew up with. And in some ways, even though I was in the fast lane, I was still the insecure little kid sitting in that chair. I will not ever again walk on shells. That's a new bravado that's come upon me. I've always been lucky enough to feel the force somehow. I call it the force. I might be getting a bit too mystical here, but it's jumped on me a few times where I felt something had spoken to me, and I knew I should go a specific direction. I think anyone who has talent feels that at a certain point. It's something that lives outside education or business. Not to put myself in the prophetic seat, but to have the capacity to receive information that says, "I will provide you with...a glimpse into the unknown, and now it's up to you to do something about it."

How much of that new wave of courage stemmed from the motorcycle accident in 2010? I gather that was a fairly transformative incident.

(continued)

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There's no doubt about it, if you come to death you readjust your values pretty quick. But that's not the only thing, of course. I've noticed in my time chapters last five to seven years, a chapter being a specific time of devotion. I have fond memories of my ambient music-making chapter with Eno from 1979 to 84, for example. We won't make those records again, because they

he moved to ambient music. He got hit pretty bad, and his skull was fractured. Recovering in the hospital there was classical music being played very softly, so he only heard the crescendos and nothing else. He thought there was something sweet about the rise and the disappearance of it, and it became part of this music made of randomness, and we embraced that.

What a compliment, and it means so much to me. I won't let go until the music reaches that point of power. It's waiting for that invisible moment most will miss, where the artist jumped a little higher on the trampoline than expected. It's just that little moment of something special, and it's my job to make sure we catch it. It's a very difficult thing to talk about, because no textbook will teach it to you

Anyone I've worked with has been excited about a given angle at a particular time, and my job was to embrace the angle and build some kind of vehicle for them to ride in on the back of.

stand for what we stood for at that time, and you can't go back. You never know if you're in a chapter or not until it's gone by. I've been lucky to have been involved in a few chapters or a few scenes, and it's after the work is done you realize, "Oh, there was something going on here we were a part of." And I'm sensing that right now. I feel a wave of freedom and a wave of expression coming over me.

You've mentioned Eno a couple of times. When people discuss him he's almost portrayed as this alien creature. What was your impression of him when you first connected?

I worked with Eno after he put the Roxy Music costumes away [laughs]. He was wearing sensible English walking shoes. Brian had been through an accident at that time. That's part of the reason

Time and again in your life you seem to cross paths with these people I'd describe as seekers: Dylan, Peter Gabriel, Neil Young. What is it about these searching types to which you're drawn?

Well, all of those people you mentioned are interested in responding to what they're going through in a given time. Anyone I've worked with has been excited about a given angle at a particular time, and my job was to embrace the angle and build some kind of vehicle for them to ride in on the back of. Of course we all wanted to make masterpieces, and we did our best to do that.

In *Chronicles*, Dylan wrote this about you: "He seemed like the kind of cat who, when he works on something, he did it like the fate of the world hinged on its outcome."

and no school will embrace it. You have to experience it. It's seeing a crack of light under the door, and realizing the potential in something that just flew by. I need to earmark that one little spot, and if I'm right—and my intuition has served me well—you keep on it until you see the excitement of a room hitting the point of strike, and that's when you snap the picture. That's where the magic lives. ●



Gary Clark Jr.

Live

Warner Bros., 2LP or CD

This is how it should've gone down in the first place. Rather than issue 2012's *Blak and Blu*, an over-arranged albeit strong studio debut that showcased many attention-worthy talents of Gary Clark Jr., Warner Bros. would have been better served by focusing on the burgeoning guitarist/singer's greatest strength—namely, his scorching onstage performances. Well, as evidenced by the mesmerizing *Live*, better late than never.

Granted, few unknowns make their entrance with a concert album. Then again, few musicians possess the potential and promise of the Austin-based Clark Jr., who created massive buzz by opening for dozens of acts and playing countless festivals. Critics and fans alike came away from shows asking, "Who was that?" Alas, due to his blues-based sound, Clark Jr. immediately and unfairly became the subject of cliché "blues savior" pressure and hype. Momentum stalled when the crossover-minded *Blak and Blu* attempted to do too much and tried to be everything to everybody.

Doubtlessly recognizing the need to expose Clark Jr. to a larger audience and clean up any confusion rendered by *Blak and Blu*, Warner Bros. pursued an unconventional strategy by affording a still relatively obscure artist a live album as his sophomore release. In every respect, the 14-track set deserves to be heard—particularly in a contemporary rock environment that welcomes the likes of Jack White and the Black Keys.

Again demonstrating to hoary purists exactly why Clark Jr. can't be beholden to a single genre, *Live* strikes with the electrical charge, sudden surprise, and breathtaking power of a lightning bolt. It begins with the hum of an amplifier and a finger touching bare wire. Clark Jr. then proceeds to slow-throttle Muddy Waters' "Catfish Blues," foreshadowing the grit, rawness, menace, and passion that follow. On a majority of the effort, an equally hungry and boundary-crossing band accompanies the Grammy winner.



© Photo by Frank Maddocks

And while a handful of covers—including a steamy version of B.B. King's "Three O'Clock Blues" that demonstrates Clark Jr. is as adept with fluid, elongated lines as he is with maximum volume and stomp-box overdrive—further affirm the 30-year-old knows his history, the originals are the tracks that will, as he declares on the swaggering "Ain't Messin' 'Round," cause folks to "remember [his] name."

Picking up where Creedence Clearwater Revival left off, Clark Jr. buckles up and boogies down on the sassy strut "Travis County" while filling in the narrative details of an unsavory run-in with the law. Chords ricochet and souped-up wah-wah effects threaten to consume the quartet whole on the soulful "When My Train Pulls In," the guitarist utilizing sustain to hold long, single notes before unleashing torrents of fuzz-drenched flurry.

Mississippi hill country surfaces on the horizon of the push-and-pull of "Next Door Neighbor Blues," one of multiple occasions on which Clark Jr. exercises controlled chaos over his instrument.

He and his mates also dabble in pedal-steel-inspired twang in advance of unleashing a maelstrom of extreme feedback on the ferocious "Numb," and utilize Jimi Hendrix as a springboard into a modern hybrid of funk, rock, hip-hop, and Eastern music on an overhaul of Johnny Taylor's "If You Love Me Like You Say." Clark Jr.'s lone miss comes on the sensitive ballad "Things Are Changin'," treading the same retro crooner grounds that hindered his debut. While *Live* does away with the overproduced strings and horns that smooth out *Blak and Blu*, the singer still sounds like he's mimicking the style rather than making a convincing statement.

Besides, Clark Jr. needn't concern himself with throwback R&B and velvety tones when he plays guitar and tells stories with such intensity. Just consider the backed-up braggadocio of "Bright Lights," on which he bends and mauls passages, twists and chops riffs, and sends VU meters scurrying into the red. Clark Jr. possesses speed, dexterity, and vision to spare—but, more importantly, he's also loaded with spunk and bite. On the jump, jive, and wail of "Don't Owe You a Thang," the guitarist rebuffs a woman's material and commitment demands.

"Oh we ain't getting married/I ain't buying you no diamond ring," Clark nonchalantly declares, quick to pull the trigger on a wellspring of ripping slide-guitar distortion to drive his point across. Take that, Beyoncé. —**Bob Gendron**

In *Old Joy*, a 2005 film from director Kelly Reichardt, Will Oldham plays Kurt, a 30-something free spirit longing to reconnect with his past. He plans a Pacific Northwest camping trip with college friend Mark, and the two visit hot springs, spend some time in the woods shooting at cans with a pellet gun, and struggle to rediscover whatever connection had been lost.

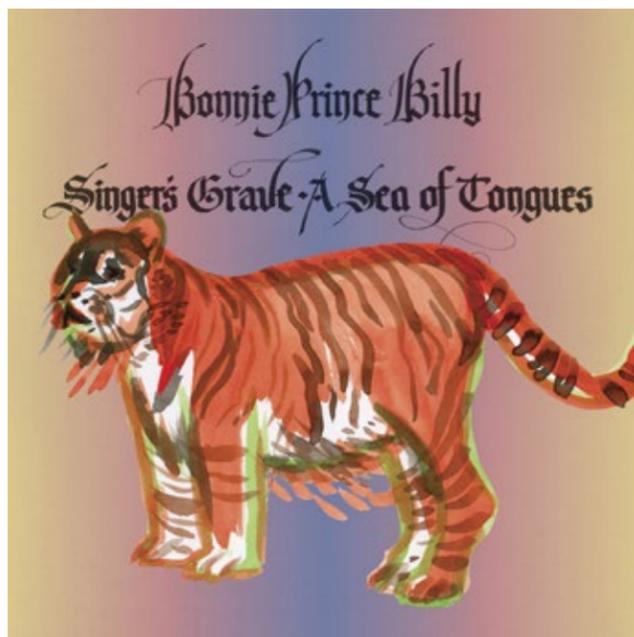
A similar quality bleeds into *Singers Grave a Sea of Tongues*, Oldham's latest effort under the Bonnie Prince Billy banner. It's a gorgeous, homespun recording that finds the singer revisiting and striking up new connections with his own musical past.

"There had been a time when the world knew my name," he sings in his weathered, rustic voice on "So Far and Here We Are." "They may know it somewhere still, but I ain't the same."

Fittingly, many tracks here appeared in radically different form on 2011's *Wolfroy Goes to Town*, a sparse, desolate album that often played like an alternate soundtrack to the Dust Bowl. Lyrics reference god's cruelty, hidden pasts, and the nature of manhood. Oldham, joined by collaborators Angel Olsen and Emmett Kelly, among others, delivered his words like a gravedigger reading last rights. Here, however, the songs are transformed, Oldham's stark language given new life amidst a gurgling mountain spring of stirring backwoods instrumentation.

"Night Noises," which originally closed out *Wolfroy Goes to Town*, arrives like dawn at the onset of *Singers Grave*, Oldham delicately stepping amidst acoustic guitar and graceful swaths of pedal steel. "Quail and Dumplings," in turn, evolves into a roots prayer dotted with sporadic violin that charts an unpredictable course like a housefly lazily circling the dinner table.

Even the deeply melancholic "We Are Unhappy"—a song on which Oldham sings of



Bonnie Prince Billy

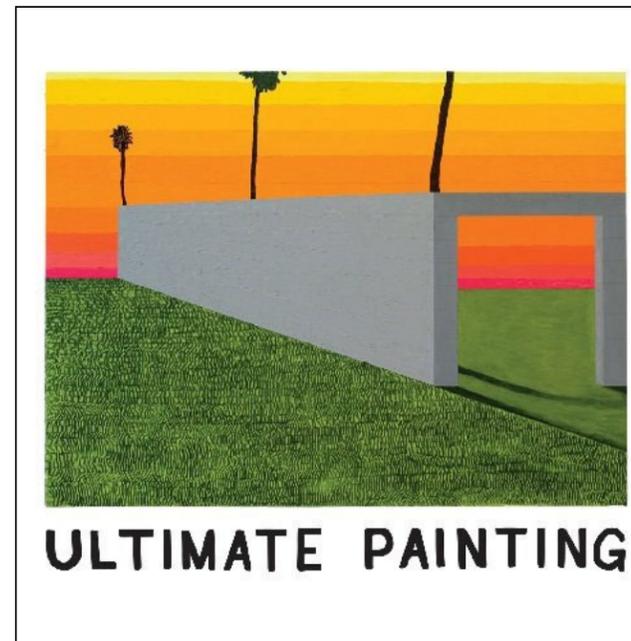
Singers Grave a Sea of Tongues
Drag City, LP or CD

shattered faith replaced by a yawning, empty chasm—sounds lighter, buoyed by plucky banjo and a beaming gospel chorus of female backing singers. Similar themes crop up in "It's Time To Be Clear," a simple, meditative tune where Oldham again questions the existence of a higher power, singing, "God isn't listening, or else it's too late," accompanied by little more than wind-swept violin and shuffling acoustic guitar.

Instead, the imperfect characters in Oldham's songs seek out comfort in their fellow man—"I'm in love!" he cries at the apex of the euphoric "Whipped"—nature ("There Will Be Spring" arrives like a seasonal thaw at winter's end), and, at times, music. On "Old Match," a joyous, tent revival of a tune, the narrator resists everything from godless men to the ravages of time by holding tight to a simple tune.

"As long as I do not let the song die there'll be no match for me," he sings. This stirring album serves as testament to that point.

—**Andy Downing**



Ultimate Painting

Ultimate Painting
Trouble In Mind, LP or CD

Things get weird, but that hunt for a connection and love of tangible items in an iCloud era never goes away—and never gets easier. This duo of James Hoare and Jack Cooper, names that will only mean anything to fans of jangly, garage-based indie-pop acts the Veronica Falls and Mazes, don't stray much from their comfort zone of loose, urban melodic songcraft. Dreamy harmonies hover over a rudimentary electronic beat on "Riverside," where one wants to unplug with only a compass

and a canteen. High-tinged guitar notes bring not brightly colored warmth but pins-and-needles sensations to the fatal attraction tale of "Jane," on which a would-be lover haunts our brain.

Continuing on a relationship tract, the relaxed, front-stoop feel of the title track and brooding "Can't You See" deal with our tendencies to focus on the emotional scraps given to us by another rather than the more difficult task of actually taking care of ourselves. "She's a Bomb" is more fun,

arly on in the self-titled record from *Ultimate Painting*, a moment arrives that's both decidedly modern and charmingly old-fashioned. It goes down easy—as much of the 10-track debut does—as if the song and album were born of a casual late-night mid-60s recording session in Andy Warhol's New York studio, the Factory. On "Talking Central Park Blues" a slightly nasally, slightly lonely voice sings of wandering the city, bumping into exes, and curling up at bars with a pen and notepad. The narrator attracts the attention of a "reeeeeeal couple," the word drawn out, as if to suggest that the sight of commitment in our hip, socially connected world is like spotting an unicorn.

lighting up the speakers with the old-timey keyboard luminescence of a hippie's rainbow scarf. And "Rolling In the Deep End" adds a sense of getting-older urgency with "California Dreamin'" harmonies while fretting over the reliance on "instant gratification."

If *Ultimate Painting* doesn't actually transport us to a simpler time and place, it's a nice reminder that it once existed, even if only in our heads.

—**Todd Martens**



©Photo by Thomas Neukum

Some people joke that they're so sentimental, a TV commercial can bring them to tears. Show them an image of a baby with a puppy, or give a clip of a grandpa and a grandkid at a baseball game, and all bets are off. The writer of this review is one of those people, and Caribou's *Our Love* is one of those records I'm sometimes scared to hear. It taps open an emotional well that's warm, nostalgic, comforting and, if you're alone, positively heartbreaking.

While the opening track "Can't Do Without You" ultimately ends on an euphoric note—Yay! You!—the song hits on a surprising spectrum of passion in under four minutes. Beginning with a bluesy sample, and one that aches with just the right amount of longing, the tune then adds one-by-one a bounty of tender elements: falsetto vocals, a swinging, cymbal-driven beat, and digital rushes that envelop the voices like some sort of professional hugger.

Here's an album that opens with the sound of infatuation, the rush and the fear of it all at once, and moments later, goes straight for the soul with "Silver." Old-school hip-hop supplies the track's foundation—imagine a deceptively simple synth beat given to a New York City beat-boxer—but the unknown female voice looped to only say "here" serves as the centerpiece. As the song ends with buzzing techno lines desperately trying to seduce, the listener is left only with the word "here." And then again: "Here." It's the word of another as our own personal heartbeat.

Our Love is the fifth effort Dan Snaith has recorded under the Caribou name. Known as the Manitoba before that, and as Daphni to the more club-going set, Snaith's career alternates among laptop psychedelics, avant electronics, and dance-the-night-away celebrations. Caribou's 2010 set *Swim* hits all on three elements at various points, but has a tendency to fall back on weirdness, lacing modern computer-savvy tunes with vintage tweaks as if the latter had been forgotten oddities.

More cohesive, this record is Snaith's most consistent and thought-provoking work to date—a grown-up meditation on love, longing, and loss for when the youngest of today's EDM set find themselves wondering what happens after the hangover. It's soulful, yes, and for the way it sometimes appears to rescue long-lost samples—the gospel hollerer of "Julia Brightly" or communal chants of "Mars"—the obvious reference point is Moby's mid-90s work, such as *Play*.

Snaith may be occasionally looking back, but he's always looking inward. "All I Ever" comes across as an electronic maestro's bedroom recording. It isn't quite minimalist, but it's not exactly lush, as handclaps and tear-jerking falsettos about the "best I ever had" reverberate

**Caribou**

Our Love
Merge, LP or CD

around a rubbery groove that makes it clear this one is going to leave a mark. The Jessy Lanza-voiced "Second Chance" certainly does, all breathy R&B and trippy, washboard-like soundscapes that never stop distorting.

Everything doesn't suffer from a heartache. Even the cynics among us know love can be pretty great. "Dive," for instance, becomes lost in hip-hop inspired hypnotics. "Back Home" is whisper-like sweetness, the title track aims to join two on the dancefloor, and all intentions and miscommunications get erased on "Your Love Will Set You Free." What sounds like piano strings one second morph into guitar strings the next, and synthesizers mimic organs, horns and wind chimes. Snaith's goal isn't to obscure. Rather, he lays all the sounds bare, using technology as an aural dissecting tool to get straight to the heart of the matter. —**Todd Martens**



Justin Townes Earle
Single Mothers
 Vagrant, LP or CD

In a recent interview, Nashville singer-songwriter Justin Townes Earle stressed the importance of writing about subjects he knows firsthand.

"I don't need to be writing about farming or riding four-wheelers out in the country, because that was never my life," he said. "I've never ridden a tractor, and when I was a kid I had no clue how big a goddamn cow was. I thought they were like a big dog or some shit."

The things this songwriter does know—heartache, busted families, suicidal thoughts, the pain of abandonment, and the unforgiving pull of addiction—formed the backbone of his most recent albums, including 2012's *Nothing's Gonna Change the Way You Feel About Me Now* and 2010's *Harlem River Blues*. Earle's latest, *Single Mothers*, doesn't stray far from this template. Yet a lingering sense throughout suggests the weather is finally starting to break.



©Photo by Joshua Black

Part of the change reflects the singer's current lot. He's been happily married for a year, and his wife's steadying presence caused him to go back into the material and, in his own words, "remove some of the bitterness." Which isn't to say the album is a jaunty affair—far from it, actually—and the lightest Earle gets arrives on the honky-tonk burner "My Baby Drives," about yielding some semblance of control in a relationship. The largely downcast tone is purposeful: Earle constructed *Single Mothers* as the first part of a double LP, and a second album, tentatively titled *Absent Fathers*, might be released as early as next year. Collectively, the two are expected to paint a picture of a fall into and steady climb out of depression.

For now, however, listeners are left largely with half of the equa-

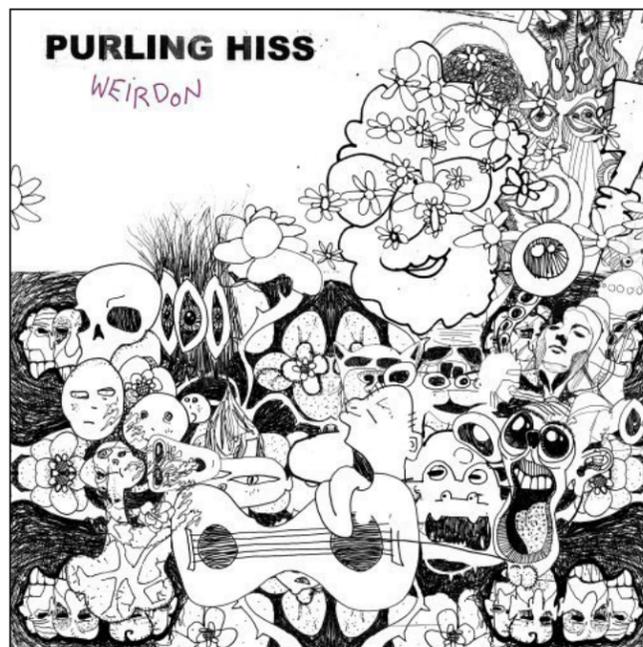
tion, Earle singing: "It's cold in this house/All the lights are out"; "Everyone who walks out takes a bit more of you with her"; "I'm not drowning/I'm just seeing how long I can stay down"; "It don't take a twister to wreck a home." Most songs here read as universal rather than baldly autobiographical, existing as snapshots or vignettes portraying a range of damaged characters. Vide, the guilt-wracked narrator excavating the remains of past relationships on "Burning Pictures," the lost soul searching for connection on the Billie Holiday-inspired "White Gardenias," the strangers seeking shelter from the storm on the simmering, country-soul-flecked "Worried Bout the Weather."

Occasionally Earle dips more explicitly into his own past. Such is the case on the achingly forlorn

title track, on which he appears to takes aim at his father, famed singer-songwriter Steve Earle, who left his mother when the younger Earle was only two, breeding a resentment Justin Earle has held to throughout his ascendant career. "Absent father/Oh, never offer even a dollar," the younger Earle sings, flashing a careful, nuanced approach to his vocal phrasing. "He doesn't seem to be bothered/By the fact that he's forfeit his rights to his own."

While the emotions in the songs can spike as the characters unravel knotty internal issues, the music remains even-keeled—and Earle's songwriting exhibits a steadfast and hard-won grace in the face of great turmoil. It may have taken some time, but it's finally starting to sound like the kid is alright. —**Andy Downing**

Purling Hiss' *Weirdon* opens with what has to be one of the most adorable garage-rock rave-ups made this year. After all, how many air-guitar-ready anthems begin with a pledge to "turn down the radio"? Such is life in this stream-first, EDM-dominant pop landscape, where a long-standing East Coast six-string slinger like Mike Polizzi and his trio Purling Hiss feel almost as if they're keeping alive a dying art form. Polizzi, like the West Coast's more prolific Ty Segall, is able to keep things chirpy—for much of the record, anyway—by keeping the approach varied.



Purling Hiss
Weirdon
Drag City, LP or CD

"Sundance Saloon Boogie" is all stop-and-start fuzz boasted by crunchy vocals and a straight-ahead, shout-along chorus. "Another Silvermoon" lets the bluesy strings crisscross one another like a train changing tracks, and comes complete with ringing notes that echo *Raw Power*-era Stooges. Or maybe that's the Rolling Stones' "Time is On My Side"? Take your pick, as heroes are all fair game for a re-imagining.

"Where's Sweetboy" doesn't waste nearly as much time with a buildup, as the song hits the pavement running like two motorcyclists drag-racing. Riffs double as skid marks, and cool, lazy-eyed vocals build to a shout-along chorus of "I have no inhibitions!" Later, "I Don't Wanna Be A..." lets the listener fill in the blank during a dead-eyed, call-and-response number. Throughout, Purling Hiss views scrappiness as the key to a full orchestral spectrum—the

harshly downtrodden feel of "I Don't Wanna Be A..." versus the celebratory fireworks of "Learning Slowly."

The album's first half is stronger, and the few slower-paced tunes drift more toward tea-time reveries than the stand-and-deliver punches on much of the record, but "Running Through My Dreams" and "Reptilli-A-Genda" are in the minority. Besides, the quiet moments are like breathers. With already about a dozen albums credited to the Purling Hiss name, *Weirdon* is as fine as place to start as any.

Just take the spacey jangles-in-knots of "Aging Faces" or clap-along rush of "Airwaves." The latter is in and out in 90 seconds, and as Polizzi shouts "this is my radio" over and over, it becomes a gleeful celebration of the guitar, bass, and drums. If you have the nerve to contradict him, shame on you.—**Todd Martens**



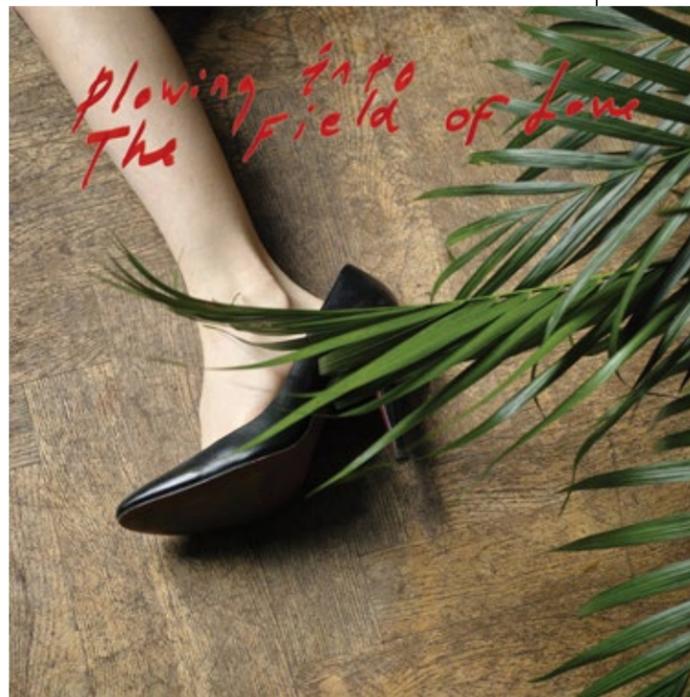
Chris Thile and Edgar Meyer
Bass & Mandolin
Nonesuch, CD

Both mandolin player/guitarist Chris Thile and bassist Edgar Meyer have been around more than a few different musical neighborhoods. Thile, a member of the recently reunited Nickel Creek and co-founder of Punch Brothers, has his own vision of bluegrass, rock, and chamber music. Meyer, who also doubles on piano, sounds just as comfortable as an improviser, having transposed and recorded Bach's cello suites on the double bass. The pair has sporadically performed together for about 15 years and recorded their duo debut, *Edgar Meyer & Chris Thile*, in 2008. They have also received the same distinction of MacArthur Foundation fellowships. And while they have little to prove with *Bass & Mandolin*, Thile and Meyer often perform with the energy of upstarts.

"Why Only One?" sets the tone, and like nine of the 10 tracks, Thile and Meyer share composition credit. The piece begins slowly, with Thile's determined-sounding downstrokes all based on single-note leaps that remain in unison with Meyer's arco bass lines. Similarly, on "Tarnation," Thile's bluegrass-tinged high-register forays are synchronized with Meyer's furious low-end bowing. Their fast-thinking improvisation also reflects jazz absorption. The duo even adds in bits of blues phrasing on "Big Top," the disc's best headphones track. Having the two channels pressed against your ears is the ideal way to hear Thile's plucking and sliding along with Meyer's simultaneous response.

Such high level of intuitive dialogue also works on slower tempos, as on "The Auld Beagle," which sounds based around Thile's use of space and Meyer's lyricism. On Meyer's "Friday," the drama stems from Thile commenting in the background over the bassist's series of low tones. Similarly subtle, the pair's creepy dissonance does wonders on "It's Dark In Here." Thile also quietly shows he can stretch his instrument with the same facility that he crosses genres, and makes the mandolin sound more like a Chinese *ehru* on "Monkey Actually."

Meyer switches to piano on "Look What I Found" and "I'll Remember For You," unhurried tracks based on his repeated motifs. While the parts fit together, and the musician accomplished at the keyboard, these tracks are not as exciting as when the two masters manipulate their strings in ways that are all their own.—**Aaron Cohen**

**Iceage**

Plowing Into the Field of Love
Matador, LP or CD



Know even the slightest bit about raucous Danish punk outfit Iceage, and you'd be forgiven for being conflicted. The bratty 20-somethings certainly understand how to critic-bait, citing influences as far ranging as dead French philosophers and abstract musicians such as Brian Eno. They also know how to provoke, early on pairing songs of young rebellion and recklessness with troublesome racist imagery. Question Iceage—or the band's PR folks or label reps—and the response is more often defensive rather than articulate, falling into some sort of justification that Iceage traffics in extremes and teenagers, especially teenagers with guitars, do dumb things.

That's true, and three albums into its career, the band continues to have the support of Matador, still one of the more esteemed and progressive indie-rock brands around. But if obnoxious kids with a penchant for surface-sloppy arrangements that are, in actuality, rather refined aggression don't exactly inspire you to head straight to the search engine, don't stop reading yet. With *Plowing Into the Field of Love*, the Copenhagen-based group, now in its early 20s, has made its best-ever justification for paying attention to what has thus far been an overly praised entity.

The key to the newfound success: a little Americana. If the dozen songs here aren't exactly a full-on mix of country and punk, this is hostility with

space, music in which a greater emphasis on rootsy, open-strung guitars—and even a flash of piano and the occasional stringed instrument—add a bit of heft to, generally speaking, working-class songs about drinking one's life away. "I keep pissing against the moon," sings Elias Bender Rønnenfelt toward album's end. If that isn't exactly Shane MacGowan-inspired lyricism, the *femme fatale* of a horn section that tries to lure him away into having one more round certainly does its part to add a dollop of late-night consequence.

Throughout, bad things happen to feral horses, and dead-beat dads try to pass on terrible advice, but the characters in *Plowing Into the Field of Love* all make bad de-

isions in the hope of some sort of redemption. "Let it Vanish" is a galloping churn of howls, charging bass notes, and fierce guitar breakdowns that lurk like vultures, all of it meant to wipe away one's one lineage of poor choices. "The Lord's Favorite" is evidence snarling punk rockers haven't yet tired of Johnny Cash, as Rønnenfelt slurs that he's "positively God's favorite one." It's unclear if he's trying to persuade himself or if that's a pickup line.

This effort is unlike anything Iceage has recorded to date, with drummer Dan Kjær Nielsen kicking out a rhythm built for wooden floorboards. There are even half-attempts at hard-edged ballads—the organ-added horror soundtrack

that is the walk-through-the-alley of "Stay" and elbows-on-the-bar bitterness of "Cimmerian Shade"—and tracks like "Simony" and "How Many" are high energy albeit plain-spoken, with saloon-like pianos and beats that sound as if they're scraping on barroom stalls.

It all adds up to an album that makes the case that these once-brash and problematically outspoken teens now deservedly have the floor. And the view from the gutter isn't all that bad. "When I fall, I'll bring it all down here with me," sings Rønnenfelt on "Abundant Living," a tale of anguish, sarcasm, and mandolins that does what rock n' roll at its best has always done: illuminate the lives of the forgotten.

—Todd Martens



GETTING PERSONAL

SINGER-SONGWRITER SHARON VAN ETTEN CONVERSES
WITH JAAN UHELZKI

EVERYTHING you need to know about Sharon Van Etten is contained in a bookshelf in her tiny jewel box of an apartment in New York's West Village. *Meditation for Beginners* shares space with *If Only the Sea Could Sleep*, a book of sacred love poems by Ali Ahmad Said, one of the great poets of Arab literature. There are the complete diaries of Anais Nin, and all of Sylvia Plath, and the *Tao Te Ching*. To lighten the mood, there's Pat Benatar's autobiography, *Between a Heart and a Rock Place: A Memoir* ("My mom bought it for me," Van Etten confesses), and *Love is a Mixtape: Life, Loss, and What I Listened To*.

Van Etten sees me looking at the latter 2007 tome by *Rolling Stone* contributor Rob Sheffield. "Embarrassing, I know. But haven't we all done that?" she asks, rather rhetorically.

Well, Van Etten has, certainly. But to be completely accurate, isn't that what she has been doing with every single album she makes—detailing the emotional geography of her heart, hovering somewhere between uncertainty and regret, without truly landing on either? Making the mystery of love even more inscrutable? "You'll never understand it," the 33-year-old singer tells me. "It's infinite."

Love is a subject she seemingly knows a little too much about. Her recording career was almost a non-starter after an abusive boyfriend tried to convince her she didn't have what it takes to make it, and more importantly, tried to tell her that her songs were too intimate. "It's funny because all the reasons that my ex disparaged me are the things that people like about my music now," Van Etten recently told the UK's *Daily Telegraph*.

"He used to say, 'You need to be a better writer because your songs are too personal.' But it's because they were all about him and how badly he was treating me. So of course he didn't like it."

Those songs ultimately became 2009's *Because I Was In Love*. Since then, Van Etten's career has been picking up steam. *(continued)*

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Her 2012 album, *Tramp*, sold double that of 2010's *Epic*. Her recent *Are We There* looks to continue the upward trend. While not yet a household name, Van Etten has expanded her universe with high-profile duets.

She's the only guest vocalist on the Antlers' breakout *Hospice* and sings with Rufus Wainwright on "Baby, It's Cold Outside" on the 2012 Starbucks Christmas-themed collection *Holidays Rule*. She also pairs up with J Mascis on John Denver's "Prisoners" on the Denver tribute album *This Music Is You*. And she perked up ears with her close, chilling performance with Justin Vernon on "Trials, Troubles, Tribulations" at a MusicNow event where artists re-imagined songs recorded by ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax.

Accomplishments aside, there's something very accessible about Van Etten. She's the good girl that lives next door, the smart girl that always did her homework but who flashed a wicked sense of humor and devilish glint in her amber-colored eyes. An old boyfriend used to say she looked like Suzi Quatro. Everybody seems to say she reminds them of someone, she tells me. "I have friends that say when their eyes are closed, I sound like Lisa Bonet." Despite all the comparisons, there really is no one like Van Etten. And that's a good thing.

JU: Have you always been this forthcoming in your songs and in your life?

SVE: I'm an open book. I think I've always worn my heart on my sleeve. My mom always said, "You're very vulnerable." I always told her, "Why hold back?" I want people to know who I am.

JU: That makes you a rare artist. That and the fact that you sell umbrellas at your merch table.

SVE: I just wanted to do something utilitarian. I don't want to sell anything that I wouldn't buy or use. You go to festivals in Europe and it rains, and they have wellies or whatever, but I think an umbrella is much easier to carry around than a pair of boots. Also, I decided it was funny, too, with the name of the record printed on it.

JU: Your new song "Everytime the Sun Comes Up" seems atypical for you. Are you moving into a new phase of songwriting where songs won't just be therapy for you?

SVE: Yeah, maybe. That one was really fun to write. I just thought we needed to end on a high note, because I was ending the shows with a piano ballad and I felt I was letting people down by ending the whole night with a real heavy song.

JU: But a lot of people go to you for the heaviness.

SVE: It blows my mind that that many people want to, especially coming out on Friday night in the rain to listen to this kind of music.

JU: Last year you were on tour with Nick Cave. What was the most profound thing you learned?

SVE: A lot of things. I remember I was in the airport on my way to Europe when I got the call to open up for him. He wanted me to support him for March and April. I called my boyfriend, whom I promised that I'd be off around that time, thinking he'd be excited. Because he's a huge fan of Nick Cave, too. But he wasn't okay with it. We had had problems before, but that was one of the last straws in us being okay [as a couple]. During that tour he would call me every day before the show just to make me feel bad for taking the tour. It's a lot more complicated than that, but I remember Nick saw me after one of those calls. (continued)

I'M AN OPEN BOOK.
I THINK I'VE ALWAYS WORN MY HEART ON MY SLEEVE.

I WANT PEOPLE TO KNOW WHO I AM.

He took me and my drummer Zeke out to dinner on the last day of the tour to say thank you for touring. So I said to him, "You fight with your wife, right? You tour, you write, you work constantly, and you must fight all the time, right?" "We fight, but never about work," he said. That whole month or two that we were with Nick Cave, it was like a journey of reminding myself that what I was doing wasn't completely selfish. It's also when I started asking myself questions about why I'm doing it and why I feel bad with my boyfriend. My friends and my family, they miss me, but they've never given me a hard time about what I do. They're proud. And it was something I just couldn't get past with him.

JU: I'm not sure if you've chosen your career over love, but what would be the perfect scenario for you?

SVE: I don't want stardom. I'm not a pop star. I don't write radio hits. That's not who I am, and I feel I've been pretty good about being grounded and surrounding myself with friends and family. If things grow at a rate that they've been growing, I don't think I'll be able to be true to myself. I like where they are if they could stay, and then I can just figure out my time off better. But I also think about going back to school and becoming a therapist, because I feel I've learned how much music has meant to me and how it saved me, and I want to help other people learn how to do that.

JU: Onstage, even if you're nervous, you're so funny, and then you let your darker personality out in your songs. Is it hard to integrate those two sides?



SVE: I think it makes me more comfortable, being able to joke. I've always done it. My banter is actually less now. I used to talk more than I played because I was so nervous. My friends and my family and even fans will say to me, "It's such a relief to hear you make a joke, as comedy relief after you play a song like *that*." Fill in the blanks. I also like it when I have interviews and people tell me that they're relieved that I'm a goofball. Usually they'll say, "I thought you'd be this dark, brooding goth girl that speaks behind a veil or something." I'm like, "No. That's one side of me, and if I didn't write music I might be that person, but that is just one side of me and I exorcise it." I'm many things: I'm funny, I'm sad, I get angry. I'm sentimental, I'm romantic. I'm all of these things and I think on this record, I feel I show more of that. I think seeing me live you get more of a full, visual experience of who I really am.

JU: In one article, you introduce yourself as the female Conor Oberst. Do you think you two share a similarity of spirit?

SVE: My friend used to call me the female Conor Oberst just to get to me. Mostly because I had a really short haircut and I used to wear cowboy shirts. All my old Tennessee clothes. I still have a lot of them.

JU: Funny you let go of the man but not the clothes.

SVE: When I was in Tennessee and all this crazy shit was going on, I called my high-school boyfriend for a reality check. I felt I was getting programmed to be somebody else, and I couldn't remember what I used to be like. I left this crazy message about all this drama that had happened and asked him: "Can you just call me back and tell me stories about who I used to be?" *(continued)*

9 THINGS YOU DON'T KNOW ABOUT SHARON VAN ETTEN

- She is a child of rock. Her parents' first date was at a Manassas concert in 1973.
- Her favorite chord on the guitar is C9. Why? "Because the chord itself is happy, but also kind of sad. It's not quite minor and not quite major."
- She is a hobby person, and very crafty. When she gave up smoking, she started knitting. "I can only knit scarves and I can crochet hats."
- Her cure for writer's block? Switch channels. "I go through old writing I haven't looked at for years and work on that. If I feel like I'm forcing that, I try other mediums. I read, I go to galleries or movies. I like to cook. And yes, I do love wine."
- She worked in two wine stores, and considered becoming a sommelier. Her favorite wine makers are Tony Coturri from Coturri Winery in Sonoma and Olivier Cousin from Anjou in the Loire Valley.
- Her merch is a cut above average. She's added a packet of tissues with her face printed on them, and an umbrella with *Are We There* stenciled on it, just in time for the festival season.
- The video for "Taking Chances" is inspired by Greek-French film director Agnes Varda. Van Etten is not really getting her tarot cards read. The cards were selected by the director because of their visual appeal, not metaphysical significance.
- She attended Middle Tennessee University to become a recording engineer. She left after a year.
- She has glow-in-the-dark toilet paper in her bathroom.

**I DON'T WANT
STARDOM.
I'M NOT A
POP STAR.
I DON'T WRITE
RADIO HITS.
THAT'S NOT
WHO I AM.**

Because I don't know who I am anymore." He never called me back, but his girlfriend called me back. She was so sweet and she said, "I listened to your message. It kind of freaked him out, but he gave me permission to call you, and if you just want to talk, I'm here to talk." My boyfriend in Tennessee found out that I did that and he was so furious. He said, "That's fucked up that you would do that." I had to hide the fact that we had these phone dates. I would go on walks and we would talk, and she would recommend me books that she thought would help me through something, and she was the one that encouraged me to call my sister, who ended up getting me out of there. I took my guitar and a bag of clothes and I left everything.

JU: You produced your latest album, *Are We There*, yourself. I read that you said after Aaron Dessner produced *Tramp*, you were worried that people just listened to it because the guy from the National produced it. Did that last long?

SVE: That's oversimplifying it, but I am a middle child, I have a lot of siblings, and in my life most of my friends take me under their wing. Everybody looks out for me. I am their little sister all the time. And I wouldn't take back working with Aaron for the world. I love what we did together, I'm really proud of what we did, but still I felt there were some sonic compromises, choices I wouldn't have made, things that I just ended up letting go. I was in his world. It was his studio. Then, later in interviews, everyone was asking about who played on the record, and asking me about how we all know each other instead of talking about the songs. Of course it's a publicist's dream: You got the guy from the National producing it and all these other bands are involved. It's great because this is our real circle of friends. But to a fan, it's a star-studded cast.

JU: You were afraid people paid more attention to that than the songs? So you decided to avoid that this time?

SVE: Everyone I work with has been amazing, so it's not like I ever felt that wasn't me or my song. I wrote all those songs and I'm really proud of it. I was challenged on every record, and I feel I've progressed on every record, and I hope I always do that. I don't want to put out the same record twice; it's boring. And I know that a lot of me wanting to do it myself is a mix of insecurity and also being proud because I know I can do this. Like that middle child: I can do this by myself.

JU: I see how fans walk up to you, like you're a soap star or something. It's like they already know you because of your songs.

SVE: My lyrics are so personal. When I go out to talk to people after a show—if my voice is okay and it's not too much of a crazy show—they come up to me and tell me what's going on with them, some really heavy stories to be telling somebody at a merch table. I love that, and at the same time, I don't feel qualified to hear those stories. But they feel they know me, they want to hug me right away.

JU: What's changed the most for you over your five albums?

SVE: I think it's important to get to a place to like who you are and like what you're doing and like letting yourself be. That to me is growing up. It's not about changing. It's about accepting yourself. You'll always be affected by the people around you. Someone shouted out something when I was playing at the Music Hall in Williamsburg. I said, "I wrote this about a love," and someone said something like, "He wasn't worth it." You know, it's *always* worth it. *(continued)*

Every love is worth it. Even if it doesn't work out how you want it to.

JU: Do you write all the time?

SVE: I'll sit down at the piano and hit "record," or pick up my guitar, or I'll put on headphones and do electronic stuff, just depending on my mood. If I'm not feeling inspired I'll go back to older ideas and work on them. But you can't force it. I'm just like, "this sucks." I'm banging my head against the wall, but you don't have to come up with something genius every day. I write a lot of garbage, but you know what, just try. But as soon as I feel like I'm forcing it, that's when I stop.

JU: You said you're always writing for therapeutic reasons. Do you think that will change?

SVE: I don't know...I don't plan it. I think I'll always write for me, but I think what I choose to share will change. I'm still experimenting with what I'm comfortable with, with how it affects other people, friends and family that know me and what's going on. I think for as much as I write from a really personal place, I wouldn't share it unless I thought other people could relate to it, and hopefully learn from it as well, and ask themselves the same questions, and also not feel alone. That sounds silly, but I mean it.

JU: Why is there no question mark on the title *Are We There*?

SVE: I wanted to leave it open-ended. I wanted people to ask themselves why I didn't use it. Because it's not really proper, and I just let it be improper. ●





She & Him

Classics

Columbia Records, LP or CD

She & Him's first album for Columbia Records, and fifth overall, is essentially the act's mission statement. Every song here stems from another era, some dating to the 30s. Whether tackling the jazz age or swing era, She & Him has always been the musical embodiment of nostalgia—nostalgia at its most swoon-inducing. So it's no surprise that the act feels at ease on each of these 13 tracks, diving into songs as recognizable and varied as the Righteous Brothers' "Unchained Melody" and Dusty Springfield's "Stay Awhile" with the same mix of conversational sweetness and starry-eyed effervescence.

Explaining the appeal and unexpected durability of She & Him, especially to the cynical, takes some doing. There's more at play than just the pairing of a famous actress, namely Zooey Deschanel, who has learned to market adorability, and an indie-rock musician, M. Ward, who traffics in endearingly vintage originals.

Since their 2008 debut *Volume One* on Merge Records, She & Him has taken a fantastical view of the past. That's no different here, as evidenced by the twinkling piano and wedding-day orchestra that sparkle-up Johnny Mathis' "It's Not for Me to Say" and the dreamy, stretched-out guitar notes

and tastefully placed cabaret back-up singers on "Teach Me Tonight." The latter, once in the more-than-skilled wheelhouse of Frank Sinatra, unfolds a cheerily spacious group effort here, glowing like the stickers of the sun, the moon, and the stars that adorn the ceiling of a many a child's bedroom.

Such innocence comes from Deschanel, whose approach to singing is relatively controlled. Her not-quite-high, not-quite-low voice is never less than engaging, at least if one takes their vocalists with a spoonful of sugar. Even in

moments in which others would go from drama, such as "Unchained Melody," Deschanel approaches it more like a lullaby. On "I'll Never Be Free," a song given an ever-so-slight punch by Van Morrison, Deschanel confronts hopeless devotion like a cool and confident slow-dance. On the jazzy standard "It's Always You," Deschanel isn't the sexy Jessica Rabbit/Lana Del Rey type. Rather, she's someone sitting at the table next you.

All of this plays to She & Him's advantage, as Ward peppers songs with unexpected guitar

shadings here and there. He's at his restrained finest on *Classics*, where songs are colored with flutes and horn sections, creating a brunch-in-heaven effect.

Think of the record as a fast-pass to "Dapper Day." If you're unfamiliar with the term, just know that it's an annual gathering at Disneyland in which guests are encouraged to don formal attire from the 30s, 40s, and 50s. Nostalgic? Yes. But there's an art to reminiscing, and if one is going to play in the past, it may as well be a fantasy version of yesterday.

—**Todd Martens**



Antony & the Johnsons

Turning
Secretly Canadian, CD

Antony Hegarty's songs often dwell on the concept of transformation. In the past, the Antony & the Johnsons frontman has penned tunes about shedding his male form—"One day I'll grow up and be a beautiful woman," he offered amidst the group's 2005 album *I Am a Bird Now*—and about the transition that takes place as one passes from this life to the next ("The Spirit Was Gone," off of 2010's *Swanlights*).

So it makes sense Hegarty's music is continually undergoing a similar evolution, with the singer rearranging, reworking, and refining the material in concert settings. *Turning*, the companion album to a stage show and a documentary of the same name, captures this ongoing process, often presenting songs drawn from the first three Antony & the Johnsons recordings in stripped-down form.

Born of a collaboration with conceptual video artist Charles Atlas, *Turning* was originally staged at New York's Whitney Biennial exhibition in 2004, though the live recording here was captured during an encore performance at the Barbican in London in 2006. In the production, Antony & the Johnsons provided the soundtrack for Atlas' visuals, which the auteur constructed by filming 13 women, some of them transgendered, and interweaving the projections with external images to create entirely new forms.

Songs like "Cripple and the Starfish" and "One Dove" undergo similar transformation, with the players stripping the tunes back to their austere, lovely bones. On record, Hegarty's music can occasionally come across as overly precious, with the singer handling tracks as delicately as rarified museum artifacts. In these live readings, however, the songs sound far more vital and immediate. "I am very happy, so please hit me," Hegarty begs on "Cripple and the Starfish," his voice quivering and wounded. It's almost impossible to not offer a comforting hug.

Musically, the arrangements tend to be sparse, and most of the songs are appointed with little more than cautious piano and resonant strings. The approach leaves plenty of room for Hegarty to roam, and the singer, whose Viking-esque physique belies the tender, feminine quality of his voice—think Nina Simone lurking in the frame of a six-foot-something androgynous white man—repeatedly delivers.

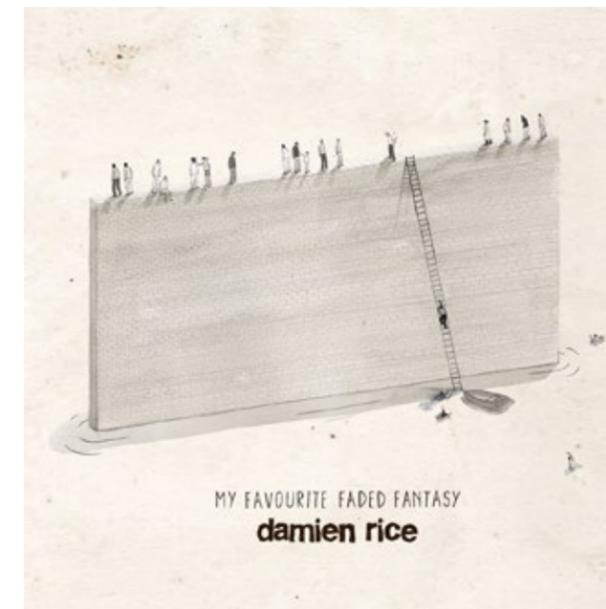
Throughout, Hegarty effortlessly swings between fare as fragile as Derrick Rose's ankles (the prayerful "Spiraling," the elegiac and heartbreaking "Hope There's Someone") and more forceful moments like "You Are My Sister," where he puffs his chest and sings with weather-altering power.

Songs find Hegarty confronting heartache, discomfort, violence, death, suffering, and, at times, joy. And while he's tread similar ground before, he's never sounded this relatable, this approachable, and, frankly, this human. Chalk it up in part to the presence of the female models, whose exposed forms serve as both a musical blueprint and source of inspiration, pushing the singer to leave some blood of his own on the London stage. —**Andy Downing**

In the second song on his third album, and first in eight years, Irish vocalist Damien Rice asks listeners to buckle-up. Clocking in at just a hair under 10 minutes, "It Takes a Lot to Know a Man" lays bare the record's ambitions.

First, there's Rice, a dusky-voiced singer/songwriter, singing quietly about gender relations. And then there's the arrangement, a violin-enhanced horror soundtrack of a ballad—a sound that promises a spectacle. At the end of some of the verses, Rice's vocals overlap to create a ghost-like effect, all while a choir lingers in the background. The whole episode disintegrates near the five-minute mark, at which the listener endures 20-30 seconds of raindrops before the orchestra goes all fire and brimstone.

(continued)



Damien Rice

My Favourite Faded Fantasy
Warner Bros., LP or CD



It's all built to seem rather important, and Rice does his part to signal significance. "The mother and the child," he sings, his voice patiently letting go of each syllable in an attempt to further draw the listener in. "The muse and the beguiled." Lyrically, it's not really a puzzle or all that revealing, as instead of looking inward, Rice comes off as detached. The calculated arrangement, full of digital ticks and symphonic flourishes, likewise tries to draw attention to itself, only to leave the listener out in the cold—or, in this case, soaked in a rainstorm.

Rice's press story has always made for a grand rock n' roll show. He's a hermit, a recluse, and an artist that hates interviews.

He regularly slams his record labels, but sold millions worldwide and ran away from it all. He's also a man with an acoustic guitar that sounds as if he took all the wrong lessons from Radiohead records: Namely, that left turn after left turn plus a lot of noise equals substance.

My Favourite Faded Fantasy is certainly darker and more experimental than Rice's previous records. The black-as-night strings and electronic soul of "I Don't Want to Change You" dig deeper than any of the artists Rice is blamed for influencing, be it David Gray or Ed Sheeran. But this is an effort that never stops telling us how hurt, how damaged, and how serious

it is without ever actually showing us or letting us in. References in "I Don't Want to Change You" pull from religion and nature—there are manglers, waterfalls, and more—but the closing realization that "if love is not for fun then it's doomed" equates to a shrug-inducing observation that's not worth the five-and-a-half-minute emotional workout.

Musically, there's quite a bit of tension throughout these eight songs and 50 minutes, Rice's first major solo work without bandmate and one-time romantic partner Lisa Hannigan. While he strays from the coffeehouse anger of some of his earlier work, Rice didn't trade-up in swapping Hannigan for superstar

producer Rick Rubin. The studio legend brings microscopic focus to nearly every sound—the twisted finger-picking of the title track, the panting falsetto on the same—to needlessly add pressure that Rice the songwriter isn't capable of matching.

In addition, there are some cheap juxtapositions. The warmest song, "The Greatest Bastard," is also its most crass, with Rice singing "I helped you open out your wings, your legs, and many other things" only to moments later turn out to just be a self-proclaimed bad boy begging for forgiveness. *Like all of My Favourite Faded Fantasy*, it's drama without a plot worth following. —**Todd Martens**

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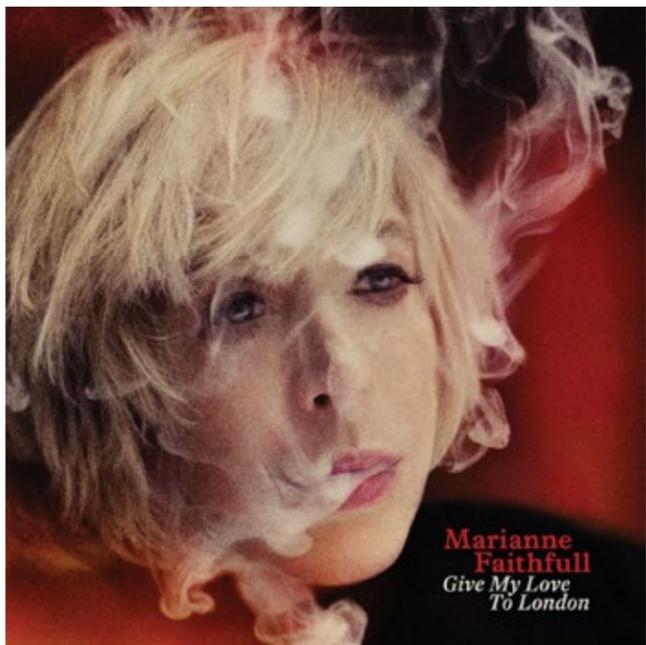


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Marianne Faithfull is celebrating 50 years in the music business, but there was a time when such longevity wasn't a given. It's actually hard to think of a more compelling rock n' roll comeback-cum-transformation story than that belonging to the British native.

Faithfull burst on the scene in the 1960s singing a cover the Rolling Stones' "As Tears Go By" and, for a time, was Mick Jagger's girlfriend. But hard living and a heroin addiction destroyed the waifish warbler. The artist that rose from those ashes was part damaged diva and part devouring goddess, confounding everyone with her 1979 record *Broken English*, a ferocious *cri de coeur* that ranks high among the rock's greatest reinventions.

Since then, Faithfull has released a string of albums that feature her singular scorched-earth alto. Like Leonard Cohen and Emmylou Harris, she's a heavyweight that seemingly only gets better with age. Unfortunately, her 20th studio album, *Give My Love To London*, is not the most cohesive showcase for her talent. Too often, hopscotching arrangements detract from Faithfull's main-event voice.



Marianne Faithfull
Give My Love To London
Easy Sound, LP or CD

Produced by Rob Ellis and Dimitri Tikovoi, and mixed by Flood, the set is packed with notable names—including co-writers Steve Earle, Nick Cave, and Anna Calvi and studio musicians Brian Eno as well as alums from Portishead and the Bad Seeds. Therein lies at least part of the problem. There are too many cooks in the kitchen, resulting in an effort that lacks focus and ranges across the map in too many different directions.

A few songs are great. Others, not so much. That latter category counts the sing-songy title track, written with Earle. Faithfull struggles to shoehorn too many words into a generic melody. Her producers also occasionally submerge the singer in too much studio business. Roger Waters' "Sparrows Will Sing" gets drenched in washes of pretty orchestral pop. Faithfull strikes a

ghostly tone, half-singing and half-reciting the words, but in the end, she's straining against a torrent of sound. On Hoagy Carmichael's "I Get Along Without You Very Well," the producers gild the lily by piling on reverb.

Faithfull is at her best when the studio guys back off from sonic noodling and frame her 100 proof voice in spare settings. The instant classic here is the exquisite and simply rendered folk song "Love More or Less," on which she emotes with touching melancholy. Other highlights include Cave's weighty gothic "Late Victorian Holocaust," and "Mother Wolf," a dark rocker that bristles with menace and righteous anger.

Less is more works best here. When an artist of Faithfull's caliber is present, nobody needs a crowd in the studio. —**Chrissie Dickinson**

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W

ith each release, Scott Walker ventures further from the polished 60s pop of his former group the Walker Brothers, plunging deep into dark, avant-garde sonic torture chambers. Considering the subterranean nature of his late-career explorations, it was only a matter of time before he crossed paths with drone-metal pioneers Sunn O))), a band whose black, bleak output stands in stark contrast to its light-producing namesake. Stephen O'Malley and Greg Anderson, the core anchoring the black-hole Sunn O))), provide an expectedly nightmarish backdrop for Walker's out-there meditations, building vibrating nests of ominous, down-tuned riffage that spread like thick, inky tar.



Scott Walker and Sunn O)))

Soused
4AD, 2LP or CD

At the age of 71, and after logging more than five decades as a recording artist, Walker has fully embraced the I-don't-give-a-damn-what-people-think-of-me stage of his career. He employs his still-killer voice as an operatic art project of sorts, turning melodies inside-out rather than charting a more predictable course. By comparison, the avant, mechanized explorations of his 1995 album *Tilt* now almost sound like the singer playing it straight.

Soused, in turn, rarely walks a straight line. The album-opening "Brando" sets the sludgy tone, with Sunn O))) constructing a droning guitar bed that crackles like low-burning coals as Walker lets loose tortured, emotive lines like "a beating would do me a world of good." The scene is interrupted only by the steady, sublime snap of a bullwhip wielded by circus performer Peter Gamble—an admittedly ridiculous touch that somehow works.

Elsewhere, Walker continues to explore familiar topics, be it governmental overreach (the mother hiding her children from "the goon from the

Stasi" on "Herod 2014," a song that comes on like Sunn O)))'s attempt to recreate the feel of a long, dread-filled night); isolation (the deeply unsettling "Lullaby," which could traumatize children if used as advertised); and the inherent cruelty of mankind, which surfaces everywhere from "Brando's" bullwhip-fueled beatings to "Bull," a theatrical cut that centers on a crucifixion.

As with *Lulu*, the late Lou Reed's much-maligned collaboration with Metallica, at times the ridiculousness of the lyrics upend the proceedings. To be fair, however, there's nothing quite so egregious as Reed's *Penthouse Forum*-esque outbursts ("I swallow your sharpest curdle like a colored man's dick") or James Hetfield repeatedly howling "I am the table" like the world's least-convincing character actor. Still, Walker's words occasionally come on like those of an English doctoral candidate trying a bit too hard to impress. "The nurseries and crèches are heaving with lush lice," he mews on one number, like a Cormac McCarthy wannabe.

The occasions on which Walker dials it back ever so slightly prove leagues more effective. Such is the case on "Fetish," a buzzsaw of a track where the singer delivers oblique poetry—"He feels it tugging and clinching/Hears it rustling and rising"—against a menacing backdrop that mimics the pull of his words, the latter shifting, moving, and receding like a stalker trying to hold to the shadows. It's a fitting visual for a collaboration between uncompromising artists content to exist on the darkest fringes, and a high point on a deeply unsettling album ideally suited to winter's deep-bone chill. —**Andy Downing**

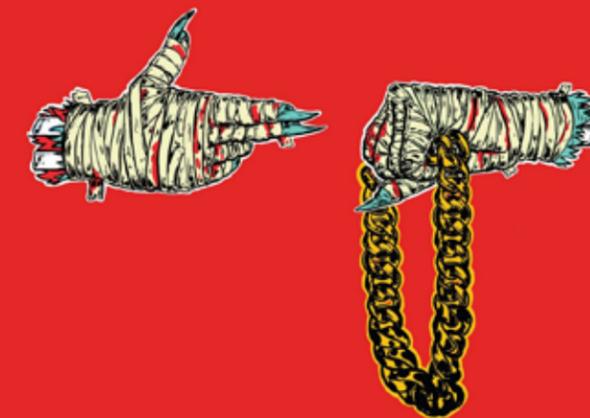
“T

he jewel runners," raps El-P on the first track of the second album from hip-hop duo Run the Jewels, "will always stay rude." Now that that's out of the way, it's simply a matter of how much abrasion and tension listeners can handle. But like British punk rock band the Clash, which declared, "anger can be power," Run the Jewels are fury with a point of view.

At times, it is thrilling. "Lie, Cheat, Steal" takes a panoramic view of the working class, with Killer Mike's voice rising as he fails to find a money trail worth following. "Who really run the man that say he run this?" he queries. It's not conspiracy-theory ranting, as the brutal soundscapes, buzzing amidst throbbing beats that emerge like drones hot on your tail, make it clear that the is a song about having no way out.

At times, it hints at violence. "Close Your Eyes (and Count to Fuck)" sees Killer Mike and El-P trading verses as if they're taking turns landing left and right hooks. Fashion, religion, the police, and more are just a sampling of the targets, as the track bustles along like a jackhammer being dragged by a fire truck. Rage Against the Machine vocalist Zack De La Rocha drops by on this corporate assault, which finds El-P slamming those that "look good, posing in a centerfold of a crook book."

No, nothing is taken lightly when Killer Mike and El-P, two heavyweights of independent hip-hop, get together. The pair's second go-around as Run the Jewels—El-P produced Killer Mike's politically scathing 2012 album *R.A.P. Music*—continues the duo's tradition of poking, prodding, and hollering at accepted truths. They do it so well, in part, because El-P as a producer is a master of mayhem. The rhythms of "Blockbuster Night Pt. 1" slide and bang like a 2014 makeover of the classic video game "Space Invaders." "All My Life" doesn't pound so much as hover, and



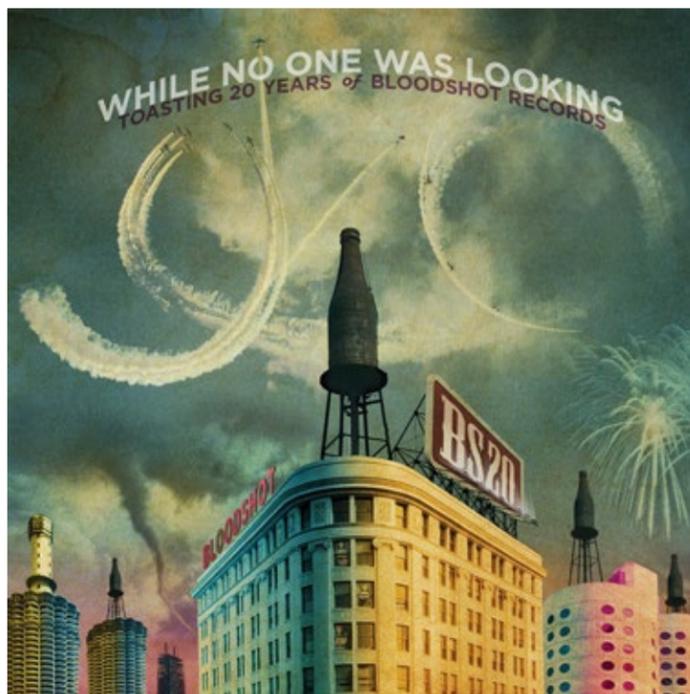
Run the Jewels

Run the Jewels 2
Mass Appeal, LP or CD

"All Due Respect" goes intergalactic just before what could have been a cheerleading routine gets sliced apart.

At times, it is topical, and eerily so. "Early" treats police brutality as an everyday occurrence, a causality of living in the wrong part of town. All the players are here—the nagging cops, the bystander recording with a cellphone, and the victim looking on in horror as his son screams out. Grunts and sirens resound in the background, but the feel owes more to that of stunned silence as the song takes a left turn into dreaminess with stretched-out synthesizers and hazy effects.

At times, it is frisky. "Love Again," punctuated by bracing horns that sound born in a subway, channels hip-hop misogyny and then, flips it on its back. Gangsta Boo provides a much-needed female counterpoint, treating the men like disposable toys all while a digital hum snakes underneath. Is the tune about swapping gender roles? A disavowal of male-dominated sexual aggressiveness? There's no right or wrong answer. Run the Jewels live in the space between, and it isn't gray. It's beautifully bleak. —**Todd Martens**



Various Artists
While No One Was Looking:
Toasting 20 Years of Bloodshot Records
 Bloodshot Records, 3LP or 2CD

In the mid 90s, Bloodshot Records felt like the start of a movement. At the time, Nashville was well on its way to what would eventually be a full-fledged makeover into top-40 adult rock, as the likes of Shania Twain and Garth Brooks brought twang—at least a dash of it—into arenas. The latter laid the groundwork for everyone from Taylor Swift, who took the crossover torch straight into dance-pop, to Darius Rucker, the one-time genial 90s bandleader for backyard-rock band Hootie and the Blowfish. Today, Rucker is still doing the same thing, only now it's labeled country.

That Bloodshot came into this landscape in 1994 is all the more admirable. Started by a trio of friends that had held various jobs in the indie music community, from drumming to publicity to promotion, Bloodshot could be viewed as a reaction, a chance for a misfit record label from Chicago to do for country what Nirvana's *Nevermind* did for rock n' roll.

But a revolution cannot be willed, and the niche Bloodshot soon began to fill was given various ill-fighting names, be it alt-country or insurgent country. All of the tags were a roundabout way of saying Bloodshot was the country music that time—and Nashville—had forgotten. Various names linked to the label over the years became stars, often of the cult variety. The distinguished list includes Ryan Adams, Neko Case, Old 97s, Alejandro Escovedo, Justin Townes Earle, and Lydia Loveless, among others. Snapshots of their work, and that of many other musicians, are represented on *While No One Was Looking: Toasting 20 Years of Bloodshot Records*, a compilation that sees other artists covering the Bloodshot stable.

How to connect two decades of Bloodshot's lineup? When it's done right, the best of Bloodshot is rootsy rock n' roll, with no filter, no filler, and often, too much sweat and too much booze. That's not to say it's always rowdy—this is country music, after all—only that Bloodshot likes its artists to build songs with a little elbow grease. "Plenty tough and union made," as Bloodshot regulars the Waco Brothers once put it, or artists out to "kill Saturday night," as another, Robbie Fulks, once sang. With that kind of attitude, it's no surprise that some of the artists who make the biggest (and loudest) impression on Bloodshot's nicely priced (\$17.99) 38-song collection are those with roots in punk.



Nan and Rob from Bloodshot Records

©Photo by Jacob Boll

Foremost among the standouts would be Superchunk, the anchors of venerable indie imprint Merge Records, that adds an electric jolt of bitterness to Adams' "Come Pick Me Up," as well as upstarts Diarrhea Planet, a group that treats the Waco Brothers' "Dry Land" as all high-energy longing. As a celebration of two decades of music from a label whose catalog stretches into the hundreds, *While No One Was Looking* is as fine as anniversary party as one can hope.

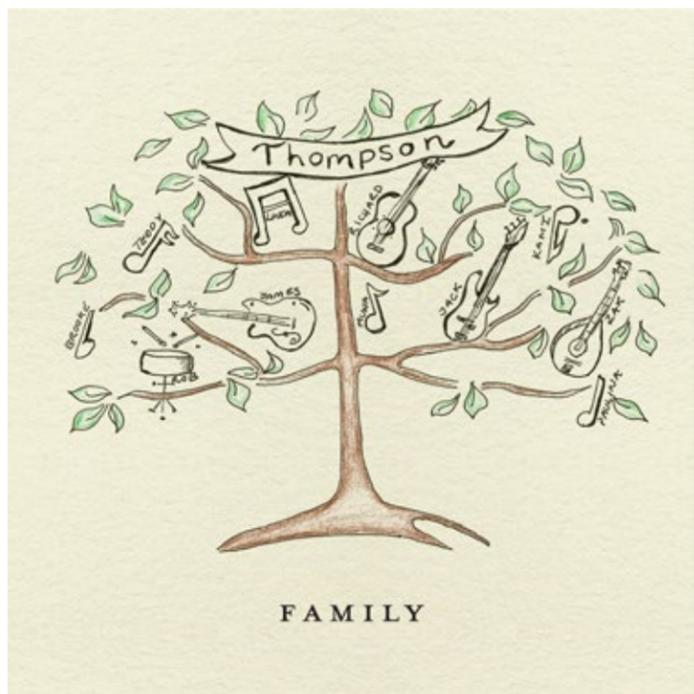
Eclectic compilations can be grab bags of hits and misses, especially a release with a track listing that stretches from folk rockers such as Blitzen Trapper

and Shakey Graves to Interpol drummer Sam Fogarino. But the over-arching accessibility is reflective of Bloodshot's emphasis on songwriting. Or, maybe it's the fact that most artists, many of whom are little known, don't try to get too pretty with the songs.

Still, there are highlights. The always-haunting Handsome Family turn the Bottle Rockets' "\$1000 Car" into a tale of pure comedic cynicism. Split Single, an indie supergroup featuring Spoon's Britt Daniel and Jason Narducy of Bob Mould's band, treat Nora O'Connor's "My Backyard" as an empowering anthem for singledom. Country singer/

songwriter Carolyn Mark breaks hearts with Escovedo's "Last to Know," and Ted Leo brings requisite working-class stomp to "Dragging My Own Tombstone," another from the Waco Brothers.

Ultimately, what *While No One Was Looking* indicates is that Bloodshot doesn't actually represent an alternate history. Hard-edged country didn't die, it just went underground, and Bloodshot isn't some sort of attempt by indie rockers to stage a mutiny on the Nashville establishment. Rather, Bloodshot's ambitions are as old as folk itself: It's simply keeping a tradition alive. —**Todd Martens**



Thompson
Family
Fantasy Records/Concord Music Group, CD

Singer-songwriter Teddy Thompson has built a respected music career in his own right, but for *Family*, he gathered together members of his illustrious musical clan. Performing under the collective name Thompson, the impressive crew here includes Teddy's towering parents, British folk-rock legends Richard and Linda Thompson. Also on board are Teddy's younger sister Kami and her husband James Walbourne, his brother Jack, and his nephew Zak Hobbs.

Teddy is the producer and project wrangler for these sessions. He asked his kin to contribute two songs apiece. The results are uniformly moving and cut from a similar cloth. Like the extended McGarrigle-Wainwright-Roche brood, Thompson family members make emotional folk-rock that is wholly their own.

Guitar virtuoso Richard Thompson began his career in Fairport Convention during the 1960s before going solo. He and Linda performed together to critical acclaim until their divorce in 1982. Both have continued their impressive bodies of work. Teddy addresses this legacy in the album's title track. A lovely acoustic track rendered in waltz time, it's an honest and moving assessment of his acclaimed parents and the rewards and burdens of his famous pedigree: "My father is one of the greats to ever step on a stage/My mother has the most beautiful voice in the world/And I am betwixt and between...born to the manor and never quite clamoring free."

Given these are all gifted musicians, it comes as no surprise that, across the board, the playing is superlative. The music leaps out with fresh vitality. Teddy's strong vocals mesh with the walking bass lines and bracing rockabilly-ish beat of "Right."

Kami's "Careful" comes on as a blend of sparkling pop and country-rock inflection. Richard offers up his own biting observations on the jangly and earthy "One Life At a Time": "If you're busy living yours, you won't be living mine."

Linda, meanwhile, is a force of nature, wielding a laser ability to reduce listeners to tears. Piercing like an arrow to the heart, "Bonny Boys" quivers with the concern of a mother sending her children off into the world. "Here you are my bonny boys/You're all dressed up to seize the world and all its toys/I hope it's roses all the way."

Intense, warm, introspective, and accessible, "Family" is a monument to generations of a talented family. Solo and together, these Thompsons know how to strike emotional bone. —**Chrissie Dickinson**

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The Afghan Whigs in 1993 by D.A. Fleischer

Warning: This review is going to briefly break any hints of objective criticism and momentarily use first-person. It will tell a story about Greg Dulli, the dapper, bar-owning crank that has anchored the on-and-off-again Afghan Whigs since the late 80s. The setting for this brief tale is the El Rey Theatre in Los Angeles, not more than a couple miles from Fountain and Fairfax, an addict's crossroads hangout memorialized/demonized at the midway point on the Afghan Whigs' 1993 masterpiece *Gentlemen*.

With the lights off, the El Rey is the sort of place you'd want to set a cabaret scene if you were filming a black-and-white noir film. The stage is draped in red curtains, which romantically glisten when the chandeliers are illuminated. It's as dank and dirty as any rock club, but like the Afghan Whigs, it cleans up nice, even if no one is fooled into thinking the grime is gone.

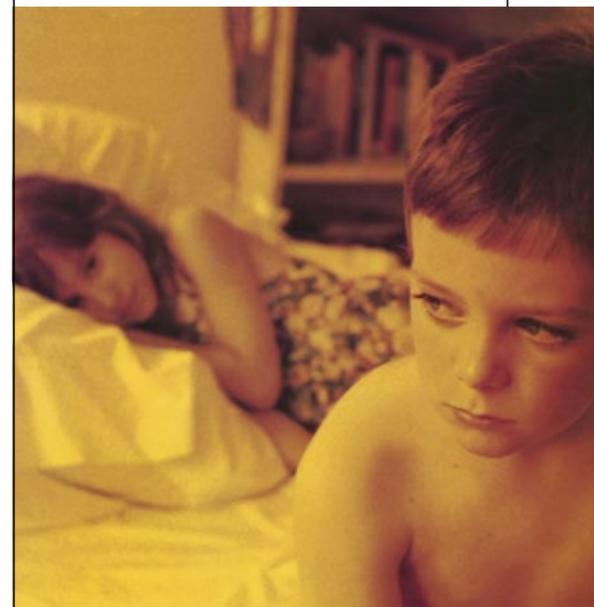
There, in the late 90s, a 20-year-old version of this writer stood holding a CD jewel case of *Gentlemen*, pleading a case to security that I needed to meet Dulli. The singer, I reasoned, could help me win back my ex. Dulli, the cad, was her rock n' roll dream man, and even in his late 20s, when *Gentlemen* was recorded, had a robust albeit scratched voice that was accelerating into the shadows of cigar smoke.

He also had a way with words. "She wants love," he sings on the seducer's strut "Be Sweet, "and I still want to fuck." Only Dulli doesn't say that last word so it come off as tactless. He lets air take over the middle syllable, as if it hurts to say it, and as if he has no choice. Guitars zigzag like drunks in a saloon. And wait, was that a piano, or the sound of bottles breaking?

The Afghan Whigs were her favorite band, not mine, and I desperately wanted to understand how this misanthrope had a hold over her. Was it the soul? There's plenty of soul in the Afghan Whigs. Recently, the likes of Usher and Van Hunt have played with the group, and Rhino's just-released two-disc collection *Gentlemen at 21* contains a bracing cover of James Carr's strutting rhythm & blues classic "The Dark End of the Street." If I had heard it at the time, it would have provided some clues to Dulli's appeal, as he rarely sounds as relaxed and as comfortable as he does when he coos "in the shadows, where we belong."

That night at the El Rey, however, what I really needed was Dulli to give me an autograph—and maybe, if I were lucky, vouch for me in his signature. She'd laugh, take me back, or at least have a conversation. The comeback story needs to start somewhere, right? Security seemed amused. I was told to hang around. An hour went by. Just wait, they told me. Eventually, I was whisked to the after-party, where Dulli, surrounded by empty glasses, a guy, and an older woman, waved me over. He asked me something, I don't remember what, and I told him I wanted to win back my ex.

"Can you sign this for her? Put in a good word for me?" Dulli took it, asked the waitress for a pen, and asked me where she was, why wasn't she here. I said, "Right now? She's at school in



The Afghan Whigs
Gentlemen at 21
Rhino, 180g LP or 2CD

Columbia, Missouri." Dulli wrote, "Nicole, meet me in St. Louis, Greg." No last name. He laughed, and handed me back the liner notes. To this day, this is what I remember most about Dulli. Ask the man to do you a favor, and instead, he'll flirt with the girl you like.

Then it started to make sense. In the past two decades since *Gentlemen* was released, there's been much written how the Afghan Whigs approach relationships at their most macabre. Not bloody, at least not always, just emotionally wrenching and, more importantly, painfully knowing. There's the redemptive piano that contrasts with Rick McCollum's serrated guitars on "What Jail is Like," and the shrewd snarl as Dulli sings, "If I inflict the pain, then baby only I can comfort you," on the hypnotic "When We Two Parted," where those same guitars of McCollum sound like birds circling overhead.

You can go track by track. How about "My Curse," where

drummer Steve Earle's jazzy groove scores opening verses in which Dulli is haunted by the smell of a lover's perfume. What follows is nearly six minutes of relationship theater—"kiss me," "scourge me," "curse softly to me"—and you don't know whether to help or run, all as the guitars get vague and the piano comes undone. Dulli doesn't sing it on the album. Those duties are handled with fire by Scrawl singer Marcy Mays. An outtake here presents an early version, one in which Dulli sounds like he's finally been broken. Even the beast has a heart.

By now, I've practically forgotten about the girl. You, reader, probably have, too. The autograph, which I had framed, worked. At least for a bit. Maybe she liked me. Maybe she wanted to be closer to the singer she idolized. Or maybe, like Dulli, deep down she knew all the best love stories have a little torment.

—**Todd Martens**



Foo Fighters

Sonic Highways
RCA Records, LP or CD

Congratulations, Foo Fighters. You are the first rock n' roll band in history to sell an infomercial masquerading as a documentary series to a major cable network. At least the feat brings something new to discuss when it comes to *Sonic Highways*, the Foo Fighters' eighth studio album and sixth consecutive work to sound almost exactly like its predecessor (1995's self-titled debut had a little rough-around-the-edges spontaneity and something-to-prove momentum).

The good news: Dave Grohl, the affable TV personality, today is more exciting than Dave Grohl, the affable rock n' roll bandleader. *Sonic Highways*/"Sonic Highways" is a combination album and HBO series in which the Foo Fighters explore the musical histories of eight different cities, including Chicago, New Orleans, Seattle, and more. Then, as either a homework assignment or a gimmick, Grohl and bandmates Taylor Hawkins, Nate Mendel, Chris Shiflett, and Pat Smear write a song supposedly based on what they learned.

Watching Grohl interact with cantankerous Chicago producer Steve Albini—the opinionated studio technician who worked on Nirvana's *In Utero*—or happy-go-lucky Nashville personality Dolly Parton brings a much-welcome sense of unpredictability to the Foo Fighters' canon.

The same cannot be said for the album. It also reveals a rather disappointing truth: You can put the Foo Fighters in eight different cities and with eight different artists—Cheap Trick's Rick Nielsen in Chicago, country star Zac Brown in Nashville, the Preservation Hall Jazz Band in Nashville—and while the setting and cast may change, the assembly line depressingly remains the same. An optimist may say that few rock n' roll bands are this consistent, as *Sonic Highways* contains more of the familiar loud/soft dynamics that Grohl has been professionally working out for the better part of the past two decades.

A realist may wonder if the Foo Fighters are out of ideas, as the eight songs on *Sonic Highways* plod too long and build too slow. "Something from Nothing," apparently inspired by Chicago (see the references to the Great Chicago Fire and Muddy Waters), has riffs that teeter like a rocking chair, hinting at a hard-rock breakout that takes forever to arrive and then, puzzlingly, includes a funky bass line. "I Am a River" is a string-enhanced hard rock ballad begging for a Grammy. "In the Clear" works overtime to dress-up a rather thin melody—horns from the Preservation Hall Jazz Band here, a chorus of "whoa-ohs" over there.

What we're left with is a series that laudably salutes a number of greats, and an album that doesn't deserve to stand in their shadows.—**Todd Martens**



The Kinks

Muswell Hillbillies (Legacy Edition)
Legacy/RCA, 2CD/1DVD

From the group's origins in early 60s London pubs to its unlikely '80s incarnation as arena rockers, the Kinks were always oddballs. And they were at their best when they may have been at their most isolated, especially on *Muswell Hillbillies*.

While the album's songs and Ray Davies' expressions of nostalgia for an imagined past sound as striking today as they did 43 years ago, how *Muswell Hillbillies* reflects the Kinks' estrangement from its contemporaries, as well as from the band's previous work, is equally remarkable.

This celebration of older traditions arrived just as glam rockers were starting to apply their makeup. And while Black Sabbath were cranking up the kind of effects that began when guitarist Dave Davies' slashed up his amp in 1964, by the early 70s, Kinks performances included a horn section and accordion. But the Davies brothers were also too quirky to fit in with roots-oriented bands that had sprung up across the Atlantic.

Muswell Hillbillies stands the group's first album for RCA and included relatively new bassist John Dalton and keyboardist John Gosling. But it also marked a continuation of Ray Davies' provocative conceptual ideas, which began with The Kinks are the *Village Green Preservation Society* three years earlier and continued through 1975's *Schoolboys In Disgrace*. If his lyrics revolved around big themes—the decline of British imperialism, bureaucracy replacing village idyll—he went for wry humor over bombast.

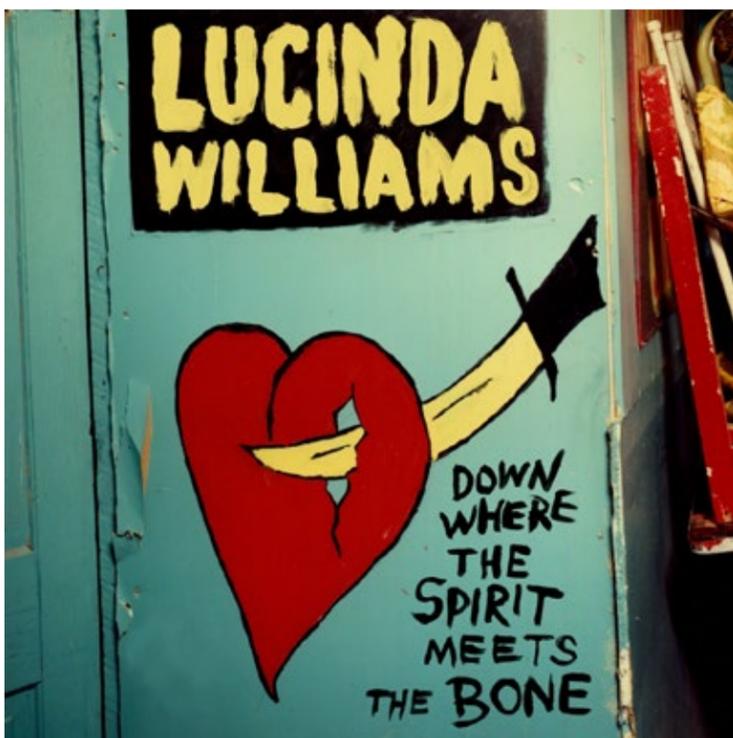
The music on this album serves as the ideal complement to such sensibility. On the opening track, "20th Century Man," that pointed understatement comes across through Dave Davies' acoustic slide playing, which warrants as much attention as his earlier electric innovations. His brother's vocal shifts convey a mix of fear and contempt with contemporary culture and institutions.

But while Ray Davies' plea to build a new world based on fantasies of the past or wanting to live in a movie Western ("Oklahoma U.S.A.") reverberate, the band's sense of empathy is expressed through a mix of early 20th century rags, Tin Pan Alley, and pre-World War II British dance halls—all of which are a tribute to vanishing generations. This approach is also key in how Gosling's different keyboards and the horn section (The Mike Cotton Sound) drive "Acute Schizophrenia Paranoia Blues" and "Alcohol." Drummer Mick Avory also deserves more credit for gently elevating the tempo on both "Here Come The People In Grey" and the title track.

The *Legacy Edition* reissue includes eight additional tracks and a radio ad. Some, like "Lavender Lane," had been previously unavailable in the United States. With its highlight on Gosling's organ, an alternate version of "Uncle Son" sounds better than the take on the original *Muswell Hillbillies*. A bonus DVD presents a few Kinks performances from 1972. These gigs are fairly low-key but also include "Waterloo Sunset," which remains more wonderful than worlds Davies could have ever invented.—**Aaron Cohen**

2014'S BEST POP AND ROCK ALBUMS

No single human being could hear the thousands of albums released in a single year. The best a critic can do is hear as much of the field as possible, keep an ear to the ground, and react accordingly. Here are the albums that most frequently caught and kept my attention during 2014, and which should enjoy long shelf lives in the years to come.
—Bob Gendron



1. Lucinda Williams
Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone
2. Sharon Van Etten *Are We There*
3. Run the Jewels *Run the Jewels 2*
4. The War on Drugs *Lost In the Dream*
5. Bob Mould *Beauty & Ruin*
6. Lydia Loveless *Somewhere Else*
7. Benjamin Booker *Benjamin Booker*
8. St. Vincent *St. Vincent*
9. Fucked Up *Glass Boys*
10. Protomartyr *No Passion All Technique*
11. Angel Olsen *Burn You Fire For No Witness*
12. Spoon *They Want My Soul*
13. Archie Powell *Back In Black*
14. Parquet Courts *Sunbathing Animal*
15. Cloud Nothings *Here and Nowhere Else*
16. The Afghan Whigs *Do to the Beast*
17. Leonard Cohen *Popular Problems*
18. First Aid Kit *Stay Gold*
19. Electric Wizard *Time to Die*
20. Kelis *Food*
21. The Muffs *Whoop Dee Doo*
22. Ex Hex *Rips*
23. Gary Clark Jr. *Live*
24. Drive-By Truckers *English Oceans*
25. Robert Plant
lullaby and...the Ceaseless Roar

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ON A CONTINUUM

A Conversation With Pianist Matthew Shipp

By Aaron Cohen

Pianist Matthew Shipp found himself in a somewhat unusual situation for an early evening solo performance a few months ago. The New York-based musician was in Chicago for a series of concerts. His first gig occurred in the PianoForte Foundation's recording studio, just south of downtown. Shipp had been invited to participate in the organization's salon series, which includes several notable classical and jazz artists playing a recital on its exquisite Fazioli grand.

For about an hour, Shipp performed a mix of original pieces, classics, and lengthy free improvisation, with standards like "My Funny Valentine" becoming almost unrecognizable via his dark, left-hand clusters and off beats. While his approach sounded furious on the surface, a strong melodic sense held everything together, even as the pianist twisted melodies around. His diverse audience comprised traditional jazz fans, a few well-versed in Shipp's own music, and the historic avant-garde lineage sitting alongside an older contingent of chamber-music followers. After the performance, he answered a few questions onstage, smiling as he suggested, "I put pieces in a new puzzle and come up with a Frankenstein." The response seemed to satisfy everyone.

©Photo by Peter Gannushkin



Even if Shipp had not provided such a description, his own career embraces the different factions the PianoForte crowd represented. His recent solo disc, *I've Been To Many Places*, is a look back on his three decades during which he remained a determined and singular voice on his instrument. And, if he had his way, this will be the last CD anybody hears from him. Now 53, he says he'd like to stop recording and just perform, preferably solo or with his trio. Or, the album title could mean that he has always looked at everything—especially his musical past and future—as one ongoing circle.

"My whole view of the universe is that it's one chip of information," Shipp said over coffee a few days after the concert. "It's a traditional mystic concept: That anything that exists within the diversity of everything is variation from that one chip of information. I view the piano that way, too. That it's on some other dimension, it's one continuum of whatever. And anything we extract from it, whether it's a Cmajor7 or whatever, is an extraction from that gestalt. I don't think you're ever supposed to get close to it. You can always deal within the realm of limitations you're entrenched in."

For Shipp, all the concepts began in Wilmington, Delaware. His parents had a few jazz and classical albums, and his mother went to high school with the brilliant trumpeter Clifford Brown. As a child, he wanted to grow an Afro similar to his heroes in the Jackson 5, but he also played piano in church while starting to study jazz history. Shipp still sees those two impulses—jazz and faith—as complementary.

"In all societies, music serves some type of function to deal with the mystery of life," Shipp said. "In jazz, it's interesting how there are very specific instances of that. John Coltrane took Hinduism and universal consciousness and geared it toward a very specific mode to explore those religious impulses. From my early beginnings with church music and then becoming a jazz musician, I naturally gravitated to the Coltrane type of mode of using music to explore those things. I don't think you can get away from that."

He also credits some early divisions within his home for his continued musical pursuits.

"I love my father, but he's an ex police captain and a little rigid in how he does things," Shipp admitted. "And my mother was completely not rigid in the way she saw things. He used to always complain about certain things she inculcated in me that would tend to make you believe more in your right hemisphere than left hemisphere. He'd say, 'Your mother taught you this and life is not like that.' I was very lucky to have a situation where I grew up and had parents who were stern about certain things and told you there were rules, but you have freedom to approach things in your own way."

Shipp delved deeper into jazz history on his own, and during the course of a conversation, the advances of Thelonious Monk and Coltrane frequently arise as topics. But so does Sun Ra, the focus of a centennial celebration at this year's Chicago Jazz Festival, which coincided with the pianist's visit. *(continued)*

“Sun Ra created a whole mythology around the language as a language and when he’s taking themes from Egyptian mythology, science fiction and the idea that jazz is this mystic language,” Shipp said. “And he put it together in this kind of stew, where the actual building of a musical composition or a musical universe can be seen the same way as building a pyramid. The language is trans-African and he created a figure of himself that’s past civilization. Where he’s giving Western Civilization the middle finger.”

Shipp briefly explored the Western method of education. He attended the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston for about a year to conceive his own style before relocating to New York. One day in August 1983, he realized he had “this stylistic thing that was mine—not as developed as it is now, but was always there.” Shortly thereafter, he moved to Manhattan’s Lower East Side, where he still lives.

“Even though the jazz thing was difficult, to say the least, there were all kinds of social things going on that were so exciting that mitigated it,” Shipp said. “I had confidence that today, or tomorrow, I would get that phone call. A lot was going on in my life at that time. Even if I didn’t become a jazz star like Wynton Marsalis, I was having a lot of fun.”

He also scored significant performance gigs. In the early 1990s, tenor saxophonist David S. Ware asked around for a pianist who did not sound like Cecil Taylor. Shipp filled that role and joined his quartet, which also included bassist William Parker and rotating drummers. While Ware had a wide, enveloping tone, the group’s melodic sense and Shipp’s chordal structures often served as the band’s anchor.



©Photo by Glen Tollington

“That quartet was just a whole matrix of paradoxes,” Shipp said. “David was a huge paradox within himself. He wanted people in the group who were strong and had their own way of doing things and gave us a lot of freedom. On another level, it was about David S. Ware. All the paradoxes happened simultaneously. That’s kind of where a lot of the magic came in.”

The Ware quartet’s audience drew from longtime adherents of jazz’s outer fringes along with curious younger people that experienced the volume of punk and indie rock and yet looked for something deeper. Shipp transformed that energy for his own small groups on dozens of recordings in the 1990s. Some include the duos with Parker, *Zo* (1994, Rise Records) and *DNA* (1999, Thirsty Ear), and one, a trio with Parker and violinist Mat Maneri, *By The Law Of Music* (1997, HatArt).

“All these opportunities came up and friends of mine said, ‘You may become the next David Murray,’” Shipp said. “I saw his ability to gig constantly and had the name recognition he did because he could record so much. Back then, you had what James Carter did, a deal with Atlantic, or you had to just generate tons of stuff and hope that opens up for you. Obviously, my choice was the second one. I was also trying to put income together to make a living and try to make it add up to something.”

With the subsequent major-label downfall, Shipp’s independent model—stemming from 20 years ago—turned out to be prescient. He became a director at Thirsty Ear, overseeing its Blue Series of jazz titles, which includes his collaborations with electronics programmers Antipop Consortium (*Antipop Vs. Matthew Shipp*, 2003) and FLAM (*Nu Bop*, 2002). He’s also inspired a newer generation of jazz musicians. While in Chicago, he performed at a series of open-ended jam sessions alongside drummer Mike Reed and such veterans as saxophonist Kidd Jordan at Reed’s venue, Constellation. And he’s also recorded with alto saxophonist Darius Jones on his *Cosmic Lieder* (Aum Fidelity, 2011) and *Cosmic Lieder: The Darkseid Recital* (Aum Fidelity, 2014).

“I’ve gained a lot from Darius,” Shipp said. “He makes decisions I would not have made, and I’m like, ‘Oh wow, I would never have thought of it.’ He’s very bright, very clear about what he wants to do and I think my example is helpful to him because he knows it can be done. It was hard in my generation, but I think it’s even harder for somebody of his generation to make a niche. It’s kind of weird when someone like him or [saxophonist] James Brandon Lewis said I was a formative part of their development. Because, in a certain way, I still feel like this kid who just moved to New York.” ●

2014's Best Rock Box and Multi-Disc Sets

By Bob Gendron

Packaged media may be on the decline, but an assortment of box sets issued during 2014 again prove that listeners opting only for downloads and streaming continue to miss out on more than high-quality sound. While many labels now realize that such releases need to feature an amalgamation of compelling music, excellent visuals, deluxe packaging, sought-after rarities, in-depth focus, and insightful liner notes—not to mention affordability—multiple sets, including the colossally overpriced second volume of *The Rise and Fall of Paramount Records*, opt for exoticism that generates short-lived buzz yet falls short in terms of practicality and repeat listenability. And still tens of other multi-disc releases either exclusively targeted an esoteric fan base or resorted to cheap content recycling that resembled early, outdated box-set releases from the late 1980s.

Chaff aside, many music lovers would like to own every box set manufactured. They're cool, and serve as an ultimate expression of fandom and seriousness. But a majority of record buyers have limited funds and time. In choosing this year's best sets, and deciding to omit the titles those you should ignore, we concentrate on high value as well as longevity potential. Like go-to studio albums, box sets should warrant interest for years to come and not simply set on a shelf as decorative pieces.



David Bowie

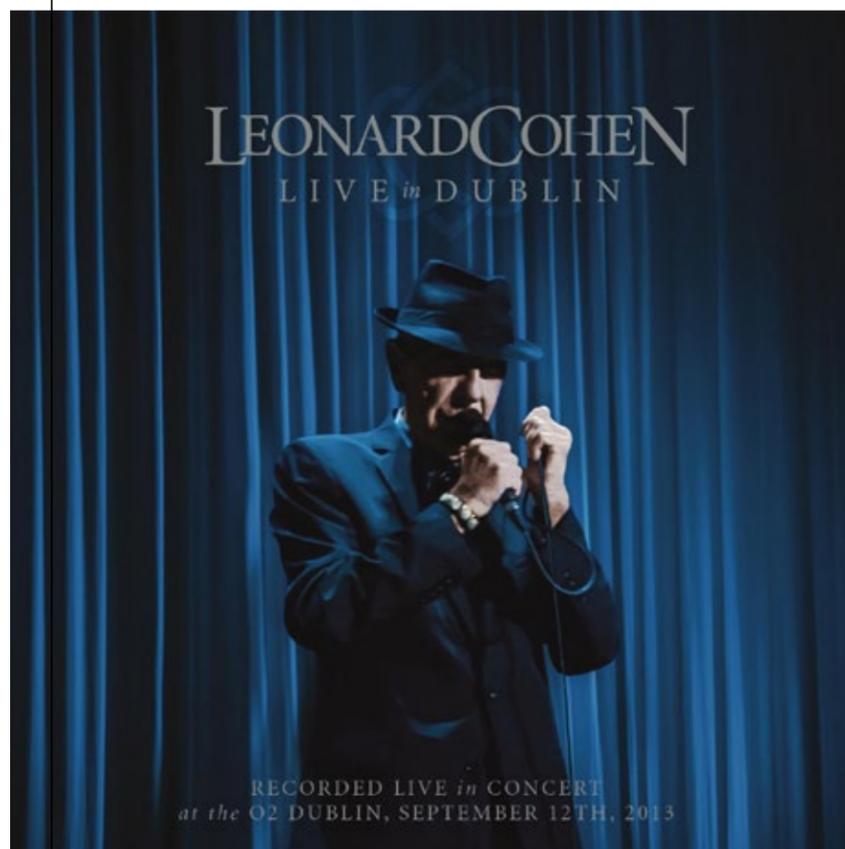
Nothing Has Changed
Columbia/Legacy, 3CD

The 49-track *Nothing Has Changed* overshadows previous David Bowie compilations by way of career-spanning breadth and ingenious organization that challenges listeners to view the sonic chameleon anew—no small feat given the familiarity of the Thin White Duke's fare. Nearly all of the requisite hits are here, but what really makes this triple-disc set a worthy endeavor is that it begins with the present (Bowie's brand-new "Sue (Or In a Season of Crime)") and ends with distant past (his somewhat obscure debut single, "Liza Jane"). By reversing the typical chronological order most anthologies follow, containing surprise arcana, and spanning every phase of Bowie's solo output—including 2013's winning *The Next Day* and still-underrated work from the 2000s—the compilation presents the singer in yet another, entirely different light.

Leonard Cohen

Live In Dublin
Sony/Legacy, 3CD/1DVD

What more can possibly be gleaned from Leonard Cohen's odds-defying, twilight-of-his-career tours after the release of 2009's transcendent *Live In London*? Much, as evidenced by the equally transfixing *Live In Dublin*. Recorded five years later than its live predecessor on September 12, 2013, this 30-song set finds the then-79-year-old singing with the expertise, rhythm, and poise of a vintage-era jazz crooner. Cohen's deep, craggy voice is huskier than on *Live In London*, and his pacing slightly slower, yet his rapport with his virtuosic band and soulful backing singers stronger. Given he issued another spectacular studio album in 2014 (*Old Ideas*), Cohen can't be ruled out from returning to the road. However, from the vocalist's old-school Sinatra-like phrasing to the culminating rendition of "Save the Dance for Me" and sense of finality that wafts through much of the performances, one gets the feeling *Live In Dublin* serves as Cohen's last stage bow. That we get to hear—and see—it all befits the classiness of an artist whose consummate skill, songwriting, and passion won't again be experienced anytime soon.

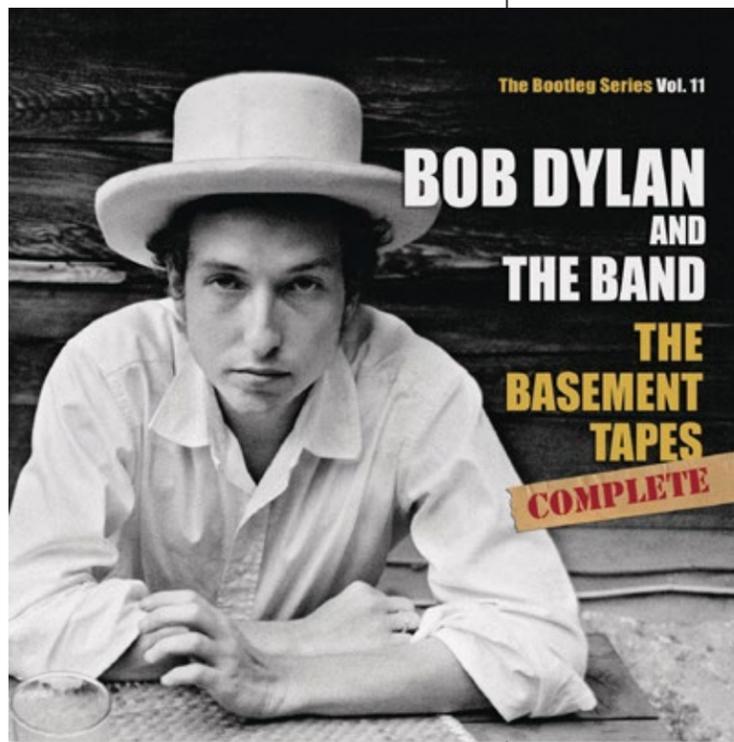


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Bob Dylan and the Band

The Basement Tapes Complete:
The Bootleg Series Vol. 11
 Columbia/Legacy, 6CD

Bob Dylan and the Band never intended what soon became dubbed “The Basement Tapes” to be heard outside their inner circle. Yet shortly after their recording during the summer of 1967—a period in which Dylan recovered from a motorcycle accident, retreated from the public, and enjoyed the company of musicians equally enthused about taking stabs at stripped-down originals and down-home, rustic songs largely lost to time and circumstance—the sessions gave birth to the bootleg industry. It’s likely no performances have been illegally copied and sold more times than these captured via loose, convivial interplay by the Bard and the Band. Even those in possession of the underground *A Tree With Roots* collection don’t have everything on the seminal *The Basement Tapes Complete*—138 tracks largely captured on Garth Hudson’s reel-to-reel tape machine, 117 previously unreleased in official form, nearly every one speaking to what Greil Marcus famously deemed “the old, weird America.” Inseparable from one other, the tunes and band channel an otherworldly innocence, mythology, coziness, freedom, and spirit that modern technology appears to have all but made impossible to witness again. Literal books have been penned about the music (start with the liner notes, then move to Marcus’ *Invisible Republic* for more) so what matters most here is the sound. Producer Steve Berkowitz and company did everything right, restoring the music sans overdubs (opposite the way it’s presented on the original, polished, 16-track 1975 *The Basement Tapes* album) and leaving it stand as among the catchiest, unbound material ever made by legends.



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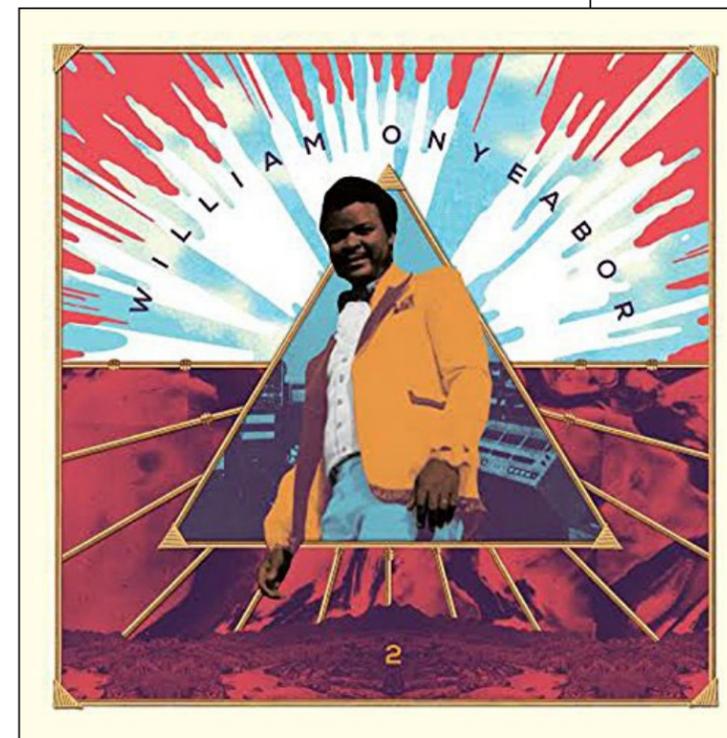
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William Onyeabor

William Onyeabor
Luaka Bop, 180g 4LP and 180g 5LP or 9CD

Arriving on the heels of last year's warmly embraced *Who Is William Onyeabor?* compilation, specialty label Luaka Bop goes whole-hog with analog and digital sets that chronicle all the albums the mysterious Nigerian cult figure released between 1977 and 1985. For the initiated, Onyeabor's appeal partially relates to his prompt decision in the mid-1980s to quit music in favor of devout Christianity and insistence to let the past live in the past. But there's no denying the inventiveness and persuasiveness of his electro-funk dance cocktails—unique aural blends of analog synths, African percussion, off-kilter rhythms, hypnotic melodies, trance-inducing psychedelic grooves, unfussy production, space-age textures, disco accents, and the occasional political lyric. So while the mysteriousness surrounding Onyeabor's biographical details and continued reclusiveness make for entertaining speculation, the visionary's music lingers long after his bizarre story is told. Still relatively unknown in his home country and in America, Onyeabor is the unlikely recipient of 2014's most irresistibly curious box sets.





Parchman Farm: Photographs and Field Recordings, 1947-1959
Dust-to-Digital, 2CDs

The slave-labor prison camp Parchman Farm remains one of the ugliest chapters in 20th century American history. Folklorist, archivist, and historian visited the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman on three different occasions, always armed with a reel-to-reel tape deck and, for his final visit in 1959, a camera. This striking 44-track set of work songs, chain-gang blues, and field hollers exist as examples of what Lomax correctly said is “a vivid reminder of a system of social control and forced labor that has endured in the South for centuries” as well as sobering lessons of inconceivable resilience, spirit, and humanism. Incredibly, the soul-affirming music on *Parchman Farm: Photographs and Field Recordings, 1947-1959* plays second fiddle to a 124-page hardcover book containing 77 stunning black-and-white photographs and three engrossing essays. Collectors might note that the latter and 32 of the songs were included on previous releases, yet everything from Dust-to-Digital’s top-notch packaging to Lomax’s images to the new remastering mutes any concerns of duplication.



Soundgarden

Echo of Miles: Scattered Tracks Along the Path
A&M, 3CD

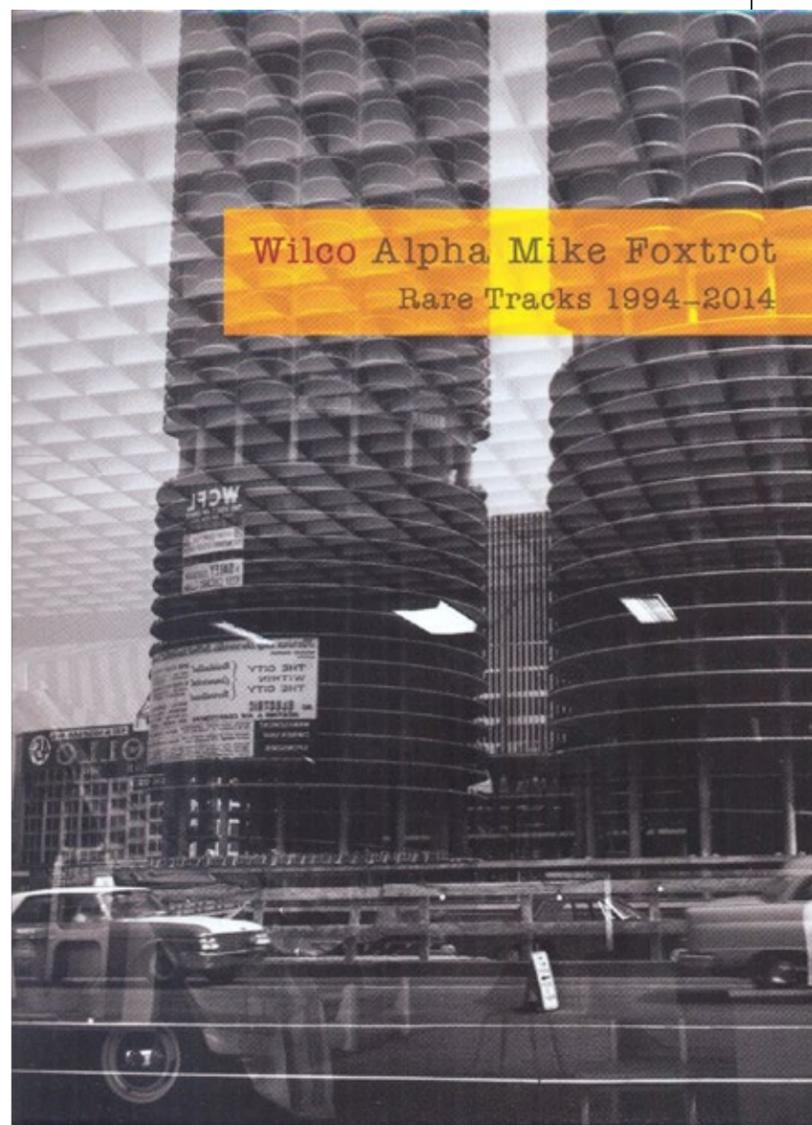
View *Echo of Miles: Scattered Tracks Along the Path* as the final word on Soundgarden, as the odds-and-sods compilation joins both greatest hits and live album releases since the ensemble’s 2010 reunion. While the Seattle band technically remains active, it’s safe to say the quartet’s fruitful period looms in the rear-view mirror. Intelligently organized across three themed discs (Originals, Covers, Oddities), these 50 tracks further attest that the group’s creative peak spanned from its late 80s inception through 1994’s *Superunknown*—after which its powerful mix of wailing hard rock, sludgy metal, basement-reared punk, and guitar-driven psychedelia devolved into blasé commercially minded fare that functioned as a clear transition for vocalist Chris Cornell’s tenure in the forgettable supergroup Audioslave. The good news is a majority of material here stems from the band’s resourceful heyday and reflects a sense of humor (live versions of Spinal Tap’s “Big Bottom” and Cheech and Chong’s “Earache My Eye”) absent on later studio efforts. Diehards might already own most of the excellent B-sides and choice covers—along with one-off tracks originally on compilations and soundtracks, they’re the highlights—but their relative obscurity makes their inclusion welcome. One caveat: Guitarist Kim Thayil’s haphazard liner notes appear in a minuscule font size, marring the otherwise stylish packaging.

Bruce Springsteen

The Album Collection Vol. 1: 1973-1984
Columbia/Legacy, 180g 8LP or 8CD

Sometimes it takes a box set to place what seems obvious back into a context that renews ongoing dialog and forces experts to reconsider where an artist stands—and what he or she represents—to history and culture. As the last superstar outside of Prince whose pivotal music lacked the remastering treatment given his peers and predecessors, Bruce Springsteen benefits from such a project in the form of the indispensable *The Album Collection Vol. 1: 1973-1984*. Doing nothing else than presenting the Boss' first seven albums (1973's *Greetings From Asbury Park, N.J.* through 1984's blockbuster *Born In the U.S.A.*) in audiophile-quality sound marvelously transferred from the original analog master tapes by Bob Ludwig with supervision from Springsteen and engineer Toby Scott, the collection makes a strong case for Springsteen being underrated and further implies that, due to the fact he's been a constant vital presence for more than four decades, the importance and genius of his initial-period music is taken for granted. The set's producers intimate as much by choosing to completely bypass traditional liner notes in favor of filling the accompanying 60-page book with a scrapbook assortment of memorabilia, photos, interviews, and reviews. After all, what can be said in a few thousand words about these quintessential works that hasn't already been stated? Here, wisely, the music speaks for itself, and it speaks volumes.

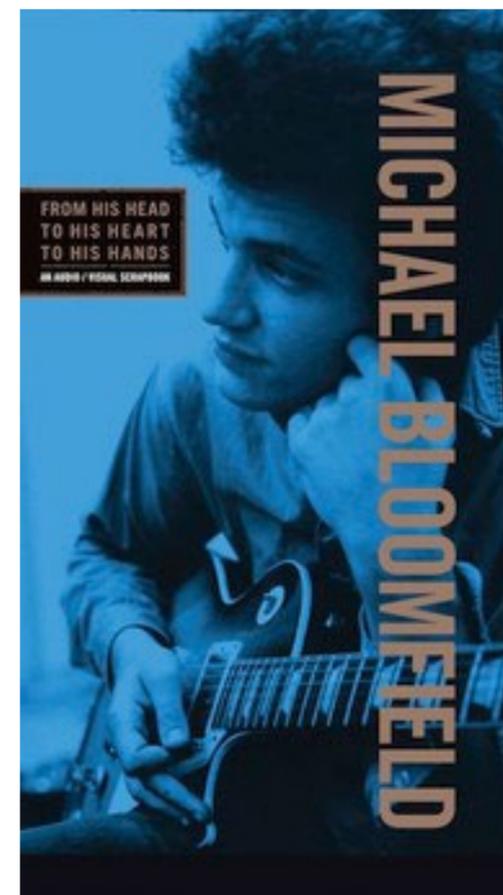




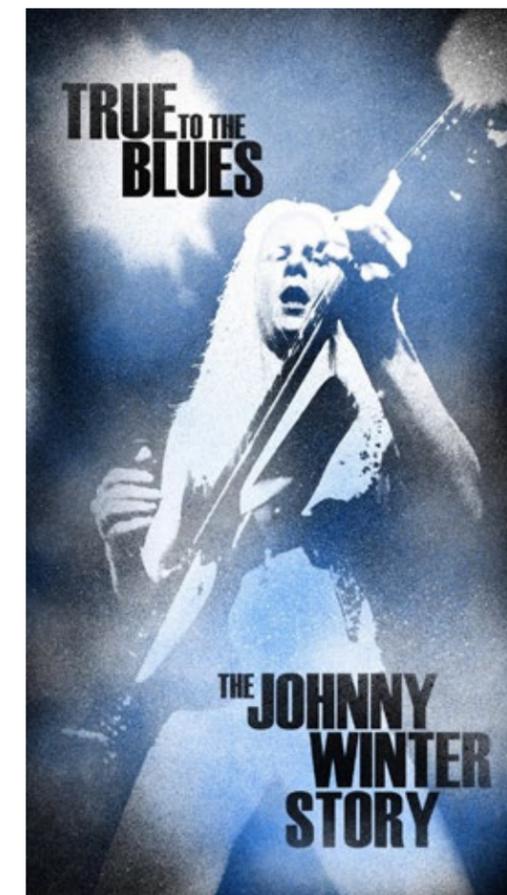
Wilco

Alpha Mike Foxtrot: Rare Tracks 1994-2014
Nonesuch, 4CD

For reasons pertaining to its comprehensive scope, under-\$40 price, handsome packaging, amusing track-by-track liner notes, and, above all, convincing manner of presenting the alternate history and evolution of one of the finest American rock bands of the last five decades, the honor of the year's best overall box set belongs to *Alpha Mike Foxtrot: Rare Tracks 1994-2014*. Stocked with B-sides, demos, live cuts, and one-offs, the four-disc compendium plays as an insider history to the inner workings, creative process, and musical progression of a group that retains just two original members and sounds almost nothing like the wet-behind-the-years, country-influenced roots quartet that rose from the ashes of Uncle Tupelo. "Listening back to stuff like this, I don't know how we got from where we were to where we are," writes leader Jeff Tweedy in his refreshingly frank and often humorous liner notes. Via song and text, *Alpha Mike Foxtrot: Rare Tracks 1994-2014* provides if not a conclusive answer than many satisfying hints to the singer's pondering remark. Wilco also deserves credit for including a few throwaways (chiefly, horrifying label-ordered remixes of *Summerteeth* tracks) that shine revealing lights on the group's development. Even with such misfires taken into account, nearly every note here—particularly the handful of pop gems that should've been put on the studio records—is worth hearing. Again and again and again.



Michael Bloomfield
From His Head To His Heart To His Hands
Sony/Legacy, 3CD + DVD box set



Johnny Winter
True To The Blues: The Johnny Winter Story
Sony/Legacy, 4CD box set

At some time in the mid-60s, Michael Bloomfield met Johnny Winter at a blues club in Chicago. The two would have stood out there for a number of reasons: Bloomfield was a Jewish kid from the city's privileged North Shore and Winter was a blonde albino from Texas. Both young men also played guitar with the energy and technique that earned them the respect of their heroes that would have been regulars at such clubs, especially Muddy Waters. A few years later, in 1968, Bloomfield helped give Winter a significant break: praising his prowess and bringing him onstage at New York's Fillmore East. Then, things turned out differently for both virtuosos.

Bloomfield and Winter's lives and work are celebrated on two new anthologies that highlight their individual approaches to a venerated American art form. Ragtime, acoustic folk troubadour tunes, and jazz-inspired drones all fuel Bloomfield's creativity. Winter set the stage for an arena-rock version of the blues that emerged in the 1970s, and which carries on today. But while Winter still tours the world, Bloomfield—who died in 1981 at the age of 37—is celebrated mostly among his contemporaries and hardcore fans.

So if *From His Head To His Heart To His Hands* merely repackaged Bloomfield's best tracks along with a thoughtful essay, it would have been a welcome show of respect. But the set goes much further, as its three CDs contain 11 revelatory previously unreleased performances. In addition, it includes a DVD of Bob Sarles' candid documentary, *Sweet Blues*. This is also one of the especially rare compilations to count an equally respected musician, keyboardist Alan Kooper, at the helm as producer. All of which makes this collection essential.

Three of the aforementioned newly unearthed performances stem from 1964 to introduce the set and show how, at a young age, Bloomfield already had a surefooted sense of blues history. These acoustic demos served as an audition for producer John Hammond at Columbia Records and feature Bloomfield's precise finger-picking on "Hammond's Rag."



©Photo of Michael Bloomfield by Mike Shea

Although a deal never transpired, Bloomfield hardly sounded despondent when he returned to Chicago and played lead in the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. His fast-tempo bent notes inspired bandmate and fellow guitarist Elvin Bishop, but the latter wasn't the only musician who noticed him. Bob Dylan recruited Bloomfield and Kooper for *Highway 61 Revisited*. The inclusion of the instrumental backing track for "Like A Rolling Stone" tells as much of a story as Dylan's words.

While Bloomfield continued building his reputation through his stinging electric leads with Butterfield and, briefly, Electric Flag, his ongoing partnership with Kooper proves the most rewarding. Along with drawing out Paul Simon's hit "59th Street Bridge Song," their own "His Holy Modal Majesty" and "Her Holy Modal Highness" take cues from John Coltrane's investigations of Indian music. About nine years later, Bloomfield sounds just as compelling accompanying himself on acoustic guitar and singing the hilarious original blues "I'm Glad I'm Jewish."

Afterward, the guitarist sporadically performed. But Bloomfield joined Dylan onstage in San Francisco in November 1980. Previously unissued, their rollicking performance of "The Groom's Still Waiting At The Altar" serves as the set's penultimate track. Michael Simmons' liner notes describing their final meeting is a heartbreaker. *(continued)*



©Photo of Bob Dylan and Michael Bloomfield by Don Hunstein



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MUSIC

The four-disc Winter collection, *True To The Blues*, does not present such an absorbing narrative and unveils only a few previously unearthed performances. But it's still good to have a summation of his work through the decades on different labels housed in one concise package. If Winter's mid-60s singles were included, the compilation could have presented a fuller picture, akin to the 2013 Duane Allman *Skydog* retrospective. Yet, it's understandable why any compiler would avoid such licensing headaches. Selections here include tracks from Winter's aptly named 1968 *Progressive Blues Experiment* album, Woodstock gig, 70s collaborations with Waters and James Cotton, and spirited 80s and 90s recordings on such imprints as Alligator.

In some ways, the set's title is a bit of a misnomer. No question that Winter has always been a lifelong student of the blues. But on some stand-out tracks, he draws on R&B (the live 1976 cover of Bob & Earl's "Harlem Shuffle") and rock (notably, his partner Rick Derringer's hit "Rock And Roll Hoochie Koo"). Still, Winter's electric and acoustic blues playing not only conveys unstoppable energy, but underlying finesse. As his recording career approaches the 50-year mark, this collection reminds that his steadfast integrity deserves a shout.

—Aaron Cohen

ELVIS

That's the Way It *Still* Is

By Aaron Cohen

Elvis Presley turned 35 in 1970 but had already led a life of constant reinvention when he staged a residency in Las Vegas that summer. His trajectory is as familiar as any American foundational legend: Rough origins in Southern rockabilly, sudden mind-boggling fame as part of the 1950s rock n' roll revolution, a misguided foray in films, and then a triumphant return to his roots via a 1968 television special. But even as Elvis continued basking in the acclaim from that television performance, he still faced a formidable challenge he helped create.

Popular music had gone through a series of evolutions since Presley first sang "That's All Right" in Memphis' Sun Studios 16 years earlier. And he had stopped trying to keep ahead of those changes or constantly create new ones, like James Brown (who he admired). But Presley's victory at the dawn of the 1970s came about because he sounded like he accepted this situation and knew how to adapt to it while keeping his integrity. His voice also conveyed deeper resonance than before, and while he was no longer a skinny heartthrob in stylish pink and black suits, Presley still had more than enough charisma to burn. *(continued)*

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MUSIC

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The collection *Elvis: That's the Way It Is (Deluxe Edition)* reaffirms how hard he worked in August 1970 to ignite that star power. Like Presley himself, this box does not shy away from extravagance and is clearly geared toward the fans: eight CDs present six concerts recorded across four nights, rehearsals, the original album, singles, and outtakes. Two DVDs include the concert documentary film originally released that November along with outtakes (Presley's manager Col. Tom Parker can no longer demand final cut). It's exhaustive, to be sure, but only in brief moments does Presley himself sound winded. This set's comprehensive approach also digs far deeper into the process of a Presley performance than the four-disc 1956-1975 overview *Elvis Live In Las Vegas* issued on RCA in 2001.

Peter Guralnick wrote in *Careless Love*, volume two of his definitive Presley biography, that the singer was enjoying himself during this summer. So was his band, which recalls that time as being part of a rambunctious family. *(continued)*



Elvis Presley
Elvis: That's the Way It Is (Deluxe Edition)
 RCA/Legacy, 8CD/2DVD box set or 2CD

Such lighthearted spirit comes through on the set's disc of rehearsals, but this CD reveals other strengths of the ensemble and its leader. His musical appetite remained omnivorous, as he knowingly ran through an array of gospel, rock, modern blues, and lesser-known gems from his own back catalog. As the group runs through these covers, guitarist James Burton provides some flashes of why he was such a favorite of future Voidoid/Lou Reed sideman Robert Quine. His bent notes complement Presley's voice, and his sudden dissonant shards must have kept him on his toes.

Once the ensemble took the stage, the musicians still sounded like they were having fun. Yet this box set also documents how much heavy lifting went into these gigs. After opening night, they had a series of dinner and midnight shows. Presley significantly pared down the repertoire. Most of the sets feature the same songs—a few of Presley's 50s hits and his more recent interpretations. But the way he performs them show he absorbed phrasings and techniques from all the idioms he ran through during the rehearsal. Inhabiting his own

range somewhere between tenor and baritone, Presley had also devised a singular delivery that blended late-60s soul and country, especially in his versions of Joe South's "Walk a Mile In My Shoes" and Tony Joe White's "Polk Salad Annie." Alongside the mostly tasteful orchestral arrangements, with Burton by his side, Presley still rocked—even through multiple renditions of "Hound Dog."

As strong as Presley sounds throughout *That's the Way It Is*, this set also conveys a bittersweet undercurrent given he tumbled from this peak shortly afterward. His infamous meeting with President Richard Nixon happened a few months later. There, the singer warned the Commander In Chief about the dangers of a cultural revolution that he sparked—especially concerning the Beatles. And the less said of Presley's indulgences and recordings later on, the better. But for these few nights, he justified his regal title. ●



Bedhead

Bedhead: 1992-1998

Número Group, 180g 5LP box set or 4CD box set

Dallas slowcore band Bedhead adopted the ideal name considering a bulk of its catalog sounds as if it's shaking off a deep, Rip Van Winkle-esque slumber. The impression reasserts itself time and again on *Bedhead: 1992-1998*, a comprehensive new box set assembled by Chicago-based label Número Group that—according to a press release—gathers “every cymbal crash, guitar brush and whisper” recorded by the group.

The collection, available as either a five-LP (limited to 2000) or four-CD set, includes the quintet's three full-length studio albums—*WhatFunLifeWas* (1994), *Beheaded* (1996), and *Transaction de Novo* (1998)—as well as a disc comprised of EP tracks, B-sides and bonus cuts. A 40-page book with photographs, poster reproductions, and an expansive 25,000-word essay courtesy of author Matthew Gallaway round out the package, similar in size and scope to the Codeine box released by the label a few years ago.

Bedhead emerged as a fully formed entity, and the crew's 1994 debut establishes the template to which it would hew for much of its existence. Songs like “Liferaft” and the slow-rolling “Crushing”—a title that references the tune's emotional impact rather than its sonic heft—tend to be reflective and restrained, combining patient guitars, shuffling drums, and frontman Matt Kadane's conversational, oft-whispered words, which he has a tendency to mumble like a cast member in an early Mark Duplas film.

Issues of faith loom large, and Kadane frequently fills songs with lines that paint a bleak picture for humanity and/or question the existence of any higher power. He softly sings: “In the ocean of the dark I...pray to god knows what”; “I've never known him to have anything to say/Which is why I've never felt any need to pray”; “Every time God makes a fist/He thinks of better things he's missed/And how he has messed up.”

At times, the music matches the ominous tone. Guitars gather like towering storm clouds on the horizon roughly three minutes into “Liferaft,” a moody, tension-building exercise whose musical DNA has filtered down into the likes of Explosions in the Sky. More often, however, Kadane's vocals offer a counterpoint to the guitars, which skip along cheerily on “To the Ground” and blossom like a spring garden on the oddly gorgeous “Powder.”

Beheaded further refines the group's approach, with songs such as “Withdraw” and “The Rest of the Day” finding the band stretching things out even further, teasing out long, winding intros that inevitably give way to crashing waves of guitar. There's also an increased focus on dynamics, with quieter moments moving as stealthily as a tiptoeing child and louder moments arriving akin to noisy houseguests stomping and hollering and crashing around the room with little concern for their surroundings.

As on *WhatFunLifeWas*, countless moments of beauty unfold—the slide-guitar-kissed “Roman Candle” and slowly dissipating “Smoke” are particular highlights—that can't quite mask Kadane's despondent words. “The light burned out,” he mutters in one typically downcast aside. “I couldn't see how to change it.”

On the band's third and final album, *Transaction de Novo*, the vocalist finally finds his way out of the dark, and his words often allude to some greater universal understanding. (*continued*)

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MUSIC



“My guardian angel has finally arrived,” he sings with previously unheard optimism on “Lepidoptera,” a meditative number built on loping drums, chiming guitar, and conversational vocals. The music, in turn, tends to be less chaotic, and most tracks are assembled with a craftsman’s eye. It’s an observation noted by producer Steve Albini, who is quoted in the liner notes: “No detail was too small to sweat, no crack in the veneer not worth gluing and clamping.”

There’s also a sense throughout *Transaction* that the band’s musical journey is nearing its end. The tone is deeply meditative—save for “Psychosomatica,” a punk-leaning rumbler awash in cranky, serrated guitar and rubbery drum volleys—and the last words uttered suggest a grim finality. “But this year I think I’d rather be a relic,” sings Kadane over gently buzzing guitars and warm, mutating organ, “than part of the present.”

The bonus tracks exert a similar pull, though, for obvious reasons, the collected songs are more scattershot than any of Bedhead’s carefully composed official releases. Even so, there’s hardly a tossed off number in the bunch, and the best—“I’m Not Here,” where the guitars make good on the title, gradually swallowing Kadane whole; the majestic “Dead Language”; and “Inhume,” a sonic sliding scale of sorts that grows in volume like a distant figure steadily making its way into the foreground—could slot comfortably onto any of the band’s studio albums.

—**Andy Downing**

CATCHING UP WITH SLACK-KEY VIRTUOSO MAKANA

By Jeff Dorgay

Back in Issue 15, we interviewed one of the world's top slack-key guitarists, Makana, who discussed his music and future projects. Needless to say, much has happened in the nearly seven years that have since transpired.

He's toured the world several times, released two more albums, and even put President Obama on the spot with his song, "We Are the Many."

After a recent performance in Portland, another meeting was in order. After a lively conversation over breakfast, Makana agreed to an in-depth email Q&A in which the musician addressed everything from the stigmas associated with Hawaiian music to the truth of analog recording.

TA: In light of Joe Cocker's passing, and your live rendition of "You Are So Beautiful" and recent video clip, do you feel serendipity is somehow involved? (Makana's Cocker tribute can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-3x3cD9y9U>.)

M: I see everything as serendipity. Everything is echoing. Life is a grand feedback loop. It requires being in tune with one's "na'au," as Hawaiians call it. It's the gut, the intuition. It is incredibly powerful, and I allow that force to guide my art and life. I didn't meet Joe Cocker in person but his vocal delivery expanded my palate from the moment I first heard him wail. I realized then that music isn't only about order and relativity of notes. Those notes also have a fluctuating intensity, and Cocker took that to the highest-possible degree.

TA: Does your show always split traditional Hawaiian music and contemporary music, or is every concert different?

M: With the exception of large-scale stage productions involving lots of moving parts and a cast, all my performances are spontaneous and differ according to a range of variables like the vibe of the audience, geographic location, my mood, whatever I'm going through emotionally at the time, and most of all, the acoustic character of the venue. The latter element seems to influence my song selection more than anything.

A common thread in all my gigs is that I always take a part of the show to honor my slack-key guitar masters, the Hawaiian legends, and the elders that influenced my art. I am very passionate about the idea of living traditions—celebrating how music evolves over time in the hands of consecutive generations.

TA: You once mentioned people don't always know what to expect when they hear you. Is this because Hawaiian music is largely misunderstood?

M: After years of touring around the world, I've come to find that Hawaiian music often carries a very outdated stigma—a sort of cheesy, hotel-lobby touristy vibe. This is probably due to the wild popularity of Hawaiian swing jazz, or “hapa-ha'ole” tunes, that were released in the 1920s and 30s. The music I create is very different from that, to say the least! My music is based on a unique, little-known, traditional guitar style that dates back 200+ years, perhaps before the blues. Just as Brazil has bossa nova and Spain has flamenco, Hawaii has slack-key. I play an old, beat-up 6-string acoustic guitar—nothing fancy. But the slack-key style allows me to turn the guitar into a symphony. Using various handed-down and original tunings, slack-key simulates three guitars by having the player simultaneously perform alternating bass lines, rhythm, and lead melodies.



The open tunings are tuned to chords so that most of the melodies are played on the higher strings while all the others ring open. This creates a beautiful droning effect that constantly resonates, evoking a grand sound, almost piano-like, from the guitar. I play the old traditional family styles as well as my own, which is a combination of those with influences from players like Richard Thompson, Leo Kottke, Jimmy Page, Dick Gaughan, Robert Johnson, Andreas Vollenweider, and many others. While I love playing the old music of Hawaii in slack-key, I also enjoy extracting the techniques from this Hawaiian art form and applying them to other styles like bluegrass, rock, and blues. I love to push the boundaries of guitar and voice in the absence of computers. So I work with the negative space, subtracting rather than adding, to create dynamics

TA: Do you ever take a band on tour?

M: I mostly tour solo but occasionally bring my trio. We never rehearse. As my bassist Lono says, “No need brah, I like to be excited when I see you.” We've found that if we rehearse, it kills some of the urgency when we play live. Not knowing where the music may go keeps us on our toes!

TA: Do you ever just want to rock out and get the urge to plug into a wall of Marshall amps?

M: I've recorded a few tracks with solo electric guitar. My approach has more of a Mark Knopfler/David Gilmour vibe. I'm not an electric-guitar shredder by any means. Loudness isn't really my way of moving emotions, but I do use distortion as a flavor at times. Beyond guitar, I love composing on piano. Most of my songs these days are composed first on piano. There's no greater joy than sitting at an old upright with some Lagavulin 16 and a pen and paper.

TA: What's the biggest obstacle to doing everything yourself? I'm guessing that the Web and smartphones make it all a lot easier than it was 25 years ago.

M: Building a business alone is no easy task. I can't count the number of times friends have called to invite me to surf or cruise and I say I'm working. They ask if I'm on the beach writing songs. No, I'm sitting at my laptop for the 16th consecutive hour managing lists, updating Web sites, doing social media, negotiating, adjusting tech riders, reviewing contracts, and booking flights, hotels, and rental cars. The hardest part has been the sacrifice of time that could have been spent creating, laughing, exercising, being with loved ones, enjoying nature, and building relationships. That being said, I am so very thankful for all that I have learned.

My dream is to create an online school to teach young artists about thriving in the music business without going into huge debt or having their financial streams pillaged by middlemen. I've been blessed to create a model for indie artists and want to share what I've learned with others.

TA: Name one musical and one non-musical thing about you someone would never guess.

M: I'm about to launch a completely independent brand of politically incorrect music that's a cross between the Flight of the Conchords and Frank Zappa. It won't have my name on it, so good luck on finding it. And my mother was Miss Hawaii International.

TA: What kinds of music do you enjoy that have nothing to do with the styles you play?

M: I love Enya and Ulrich Schnauss. I probably listen to those two artists more than anything. They cleanse my palate.

TA: Have you ever considered making a duets album?

M: I've written a few duets but haven't found the right singers for them yet. Dream duets for me include Alison Krauss, Alison Moyet, Kendra Morris, Anoushka Shankar, and Bebel Gilberto.

TA: You recorded 25 in analog and in stripped-down fashion. What did you take away from the experience? (continued)

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M: The entire process was a revelation. For years, fans had been asking for a live record, but I wanted to give them a live performance without the noise and chaos of audience presence. The approach was intended to showcase me as honestly as possible, without any studio trickery or manipulation. A year or so ago, I had publicly announced that for the rest of my life I will only record traditional Hawaiian songs to tape, as I felt the genre deserved that sort of treatment in order to stand up to the classics. My forthcoming album is actually a double: *Root*, Hawaiian with a touch of blues, and *Raw*, my singer/songwriter material. *Root* was captured in stereo through a vintage AMPEX tubed mic preamp straight into a 1/4" Studer tape machine. The *Raw* side is a monophonic recording. We set up a single AKG-414 in a basement, ran it into a UA tubed mic pre, and straight into the Studer. One mic, one preamp, one tape deck, one guitar, one Makana, and two bottles of whiskey. It sounds like I'm sitting right there in the room when it plays. In the future, I'll continue to do all my Hawaiian music this way. With other genres, I'll use analog and digital depending on the feel and complexity of the music.

But I'd like to expand on my choice to move to analog. I chose to move to analog recording because of how the music hits me when I listen to analog reproductions of it. Magnetic tape exudes a presence. I think it is because there are a lot of things going on in the music that we don't necessarily hear with our ears but are in any case an integral part of the

experience of the music. Analog recordings treat those subtleties with respect, whereas digital recording assigns them a number, generalizes their behavior, or leaves them out altogether. Music saturates into magnetic tape in a way that digital recorders don't absorb. There's a depth and dimension to analog reproduction that simply is unavailable through digital playback due to interruptions in the sampling process of audio data, assumptions (and ultimately distortions) made by quantization, and dithering, which removes harmonics and ultimately distorts the signal. I find this process similar to modern-day food processing: More fillers and less real ingredients. This is why they keep coming out with higher resolutions. They're admitting the problem: Digital is anything but accurate. It is in fact a binary interpretation of an analog waveform, demanding uniformity in reproduction, unable to accommodate the curve of Mother Nature.

Also, all of the music I obsess over was recorded to tape. Beyond its sonic character, tape demands more honesty from the artist. It is much more difficult to handle. Editing becomes laborious. The convenience of digital recording allows for infinite alteration to occur once the music has been captured, and as exciting as that may seem, it is that very convenience that led me to shy away from the medium. It is all too easy to lose the immediacy of a performance in that world. So what does this mean for the listener? More accuracy and authenticity. ●

TONE FAVORITES

BOB GENDRON'S FAVORITE LIVE ROCK ALBUMS OF THE LAST 25 YEARS

Everybody loves lists of favorite albums. But lists with context—selections justified by explanations—hold considerable more weight than simply those that index the names of a few records and assign them random numbers according to personal preference. However commonplace, picking ten favorite albums presents a daunting task to avid music lovers, not only because there are literally thousands of records from which to choose, but also because the scope and timeline are impossibly broad.

How, then, to limit choices and make the endeavor more meaningful? Assign strict parameters that restrict the era and type of album and/or genre, and, for good measure, operate outside of convention. For instance: Classic rock is always extremely well represented (actually, over-represented) in list-making exercises. Not that anybody needs to read more about masterworks from the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, or Led Zeppelin.

By contrast, despite yielding hundreds of worthy titles, the past 25 years primarily remain underserved or wholly ignored.

Still, when one is limited to just ten albums, a quarter-century seems like an eon. That's why other restrictions must enter to the equation, including criteria that add fresh perspective to long-debated topics such as "Best/Favorite Live Rock Albums of All Time." Sure, almost everyone knows about The Who's *Live at Leeds*, Kiss' *Alive!*, Thin Lizzy's *Live and Dangerous*, and other usual suspects. But what about concert records released from 1990 to the present? It's not that artists haven't released any great live albums during this period, but rather matters of lazy critics refusing to insert them into the discussion and flawed traditional thinking suggesting evergreens such as *Get Yer Ya-Ya's Out* can never be usurped because, well, they are classic, and therefore untouchable.

The following live rock albums issued during the past 25 years may lack the familiarity and cache of many of their predecessors, yet every one contains memorable performances, rewarding surprises, and historic merit that increase in stature the more they are played. Turn 'em up.



Ministry *In Case You Didn't Feel Like Showing Up (Live)*

No record—not even Nine Inch Nails' slow-growing breakthrough debut, *Pretty Hate Machine*, issued the same year—did more to put industrial music on the commercial map at the time than Ministry's 1989 studio grenade *A Mind Is a Terrible Thing to Taste*, which beat all odds by entering the *Billboard* Top 200 despite receiving virtually no airplay. While a cultural sea change would rapidly occur two years after its release, and Ministry itself would later secure a prominent spot on Lollapalooza, the rock/pop environment in which Ministry toured the record was one dominated by plastic pop, hair metal, and conservative politics. In other words, conditions ideal for sonic brutality and lyrical savagery, the likes of which few outside the underground and college scenes had ever witnessed.

In Case You Didn't Feel Like Showing Up (Live) progresses at such a breathless clip, it doesn't feel like it should last more than its 39:47 running time. Fewer albums' content is truer to the record cover art. Recorded in February 1990 at the Holiday Star Theatre in Merrillville, Indiana, just outside the group's home base of Chicago, and released in September, the explosive record oozes hostility, tension, and intensity. A collision of goth, dance, metal, and electronic disciplines filtered through a cracked lens coated in concussive distortion and amphetamine highs, the set culminates with one of the most antagonistic and profane performances caught on record, as bandleader Al Jourgensen launches a tirade against everything under the sun and, in typical Ministry fashion, smiles at the lunacy of it all.





Keith Richards

Live at the Hollywood Palladium

Recorded in 1988 during the *Talk Is Cheap* tour, and released in December 1991, this 13-track set stands as one of the most convincing arguments that Keith Richards should've left the Rolling Stones after *Dirty Work* to log at least a decade as a solo act with his ornery backing band, the X-pensive Winos. The case for Richards' uninterrupted independence becomes even stronger when this dynamite record is measured against the Stones' subsequent offerings during the period, namely 1989's *Steel Wheels* and 1994's *Voodoo Lounge*. While we'll never know what might've happened had Keef stepped out, *Live at the Hollywood Palladium* at least allows fans to imagine. (Richards explains his bond with the X-pensive Winos in great detail in his excellent biography, *Life*.)

Swaggering with fun, spontaneity, and first-rate playing, it's spiked with roll-up-the-sleeves looseness and shot-and-a-beer rawness. Richards is clearly in fine spirits, as are his colleagues, particularly drummer Steve Jordan, whose snare hits sound like a whip snapping against wet pavement. The songs largely draw from Richards' solo work—the one-two punch of “Take It So Hard” and “How I Wish” rival anything the guitarist's main group has done in the last three decades—and include a few Stones covers, not the least of which is Richards' signature “Happy,” here given extended treatment by a man that knows a thing or three about knotty riffs.

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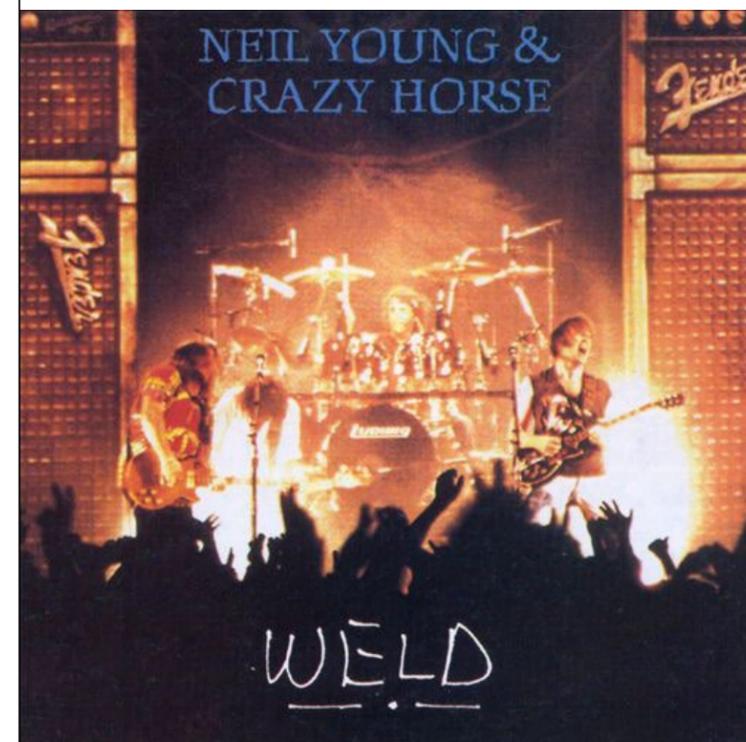
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Neil Young *Weld*

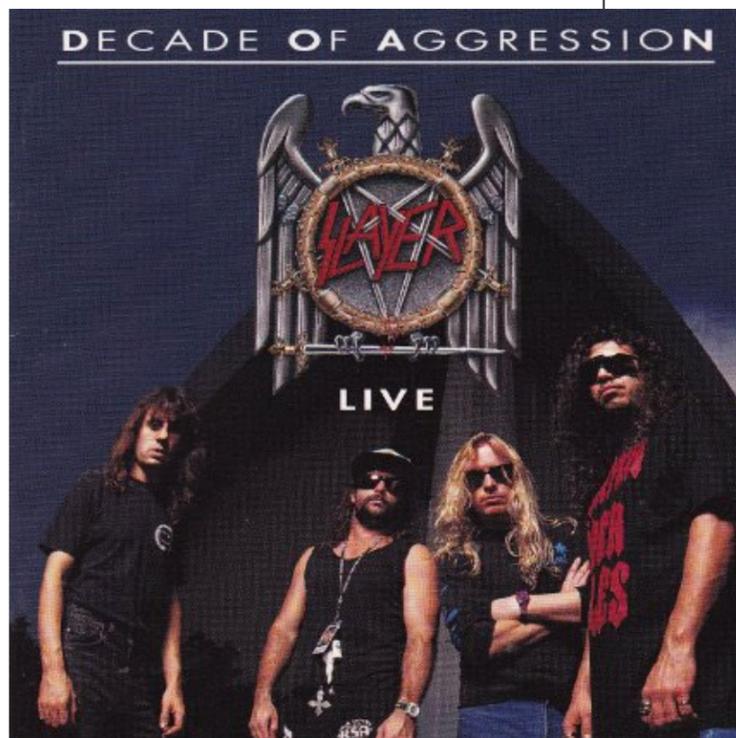
Staples of the 1970s, and indicative of why the then-relevant *Rolling Stone* crowned him Artist of the Decade, Neil Young's *Live Rust* and *Rust Never Sleeps* regularly materialize on most greatest live albums lists. Young has since considerably added to his live catalog, unearthing such ear-bending archival releases as *Live at the Fillmore East* (1970), *Live at the Cellar Door* (1970), and *Live at Massey Hall* (1971). The cantankerous Canadian native also hasn't been shy about documenting later tours on disc, be it *Year of the Horse* (1997) or scattered *Road Rock Vol. 1* (2000). None, however, tower above the scorching *Weld*, an all-electric double album released in conjunction with the instrumental and experimental *Arc*.

Recorded on Young and Crazy Horse's *Ragged Glory* tour from February through April 1991, and mainly during the Gulf War, an event that doubtlessly fueled the headliner's anger and purpose, the feedback-crackling *Weld* serves as a blistering snapshot of the long-running, on-again-off-again band at its peak. At once serious and humorous, rehearsed and improvised, the 16-song effort finds Young and fellow guitarist Frank "Poncho" Sampedro stretching out on tweeter-blowing solos and pushing then-recent fare such as "Love to Burn" and "Love and Only Love" to their in-the-red-distortion limits. Eleven tracks eclipse the six-minute mark, and while "Welfare Mothers," "Cinnamon Girl," and "Like a Hurricane" also appear on Young's better-known live records, they sound wilder, hungrier, and far more ferocious here. Add in Young's searing protest rendition of Bob Dylan's "Blowin' In the Wind," complete with air-raid sirens and gunshots, and *Weld* looms as his pinnacle live statement.



Neil Young





Slayer *Live: Decade of Aggression*

Common sense holds that 1991 will always be better recognized as the Year Punk Broke. (The designation refers to a smart documentary from filmmaker Dave Markey, who followed the likes of Sonic Youth, Dinosaur Jr., and Nirvana around on the road just as “alternative” music entered the popular parlance.) Yet the year also yielded one of the most memorable metal package tours ever assembled in the United States. Joined by Megadeth, Anthrax, and Alice In Chains, and picking up where it left off the previous fall in Europe with a similar bill, Slayer reached its widest audience to date while simultaneously supporting its commanding *Seasons In the Abyss* album and celebrating its tenth anniversary together.

Live: Decade of Aggression doesn't completely capture what exactly what it was like to be present at one of the quartet's exhilarating shows that spring—really, no album could—yet it comes close enough, placing listeners in harm's way of a merciless, violent, cohesive, and melodic attack that no thrash band has ever equaled. The colossal feats singer/bassist Tom Araya, guitarist Kerry King, now-deceased guitarist Jeff Hanneman, and drummer Dave Lombardo—who departed the group after the tour's completion, only to return in 2006 before leaving again in 2013—achieved onstage in terms of uncompromising power, frenetic velocity, lockstep virtuosity, jazz-like precision, limits-pushing extremity, and rhythmic architecture come across sans overdubs or mixing-board tricks. The first disc focuses on songs Slayer played on a nightly basis (largely from the unholy trinity of records released between 1986 and 1990) while the second spans selections rotated in and out of setlists. Listen, and understand why Slayer once truly was the most dangerous band in the world.

Big Black *Pigpile*

Steve Albini's perceptive, savvy, and unflinchingly frank liner notes personify the harsh attitude, polarizing milieu, and sly humor abundant on *Pigpile*. A sampling of the then-Big Black guitarist/vocalist and now-famous recording engineer's observations on his group's inexorable lyrics: “Anybody who thinks we overstepped the playground perimeter of lyrical decency (or that the public has any right to demand ‘social responsibility’ from a goddamn punk rock band) is a pure natural dolt, and should step forward and put his tongue up my ass. What we sing about is none of your business anyway.” Albini's prose on the band's history, approach, and demise is equally witty and relevant. Similarly, his commentary on each of the record's dozen tracks doubles as a lesson in wry satire.

The sensory-overloading experience that is 1992's *Pigpile*—recorded in London on Big Black's final tour in the summer of 1987, before which the trio had already announced its breakup—deserves nothing less. While descriptions such as “ahead of its time” and “innovative” have largely been sapped of meaning due to ubiquitous and undeserved usage, they apply to every note here. Albini's guitar isn't so much a guitar in the traditional sense as it is a shock-wave-inducing bone saw or shrapnel-dicing razor blade, designed to shred and slice the coarsest and densest alloy. Pulverizing Roland drum-machine beats complement the drill-press grind, skull-smashing harshness, decibel-heavy blare, and industrial menace. Big Black's abrasive, unsettling music would alone be enough to satiate even the most aggressive appetites. Yet when Albini's acerbic barks, bloodcurdling yelps, and detached musings enter the fray and report on all manner of taboo themes (rape, molestation, arson, racism, murder) with sinister casualness, *Pigpile* morphs into a disturbing, provocative, intelligent assault with few peers in the art world.



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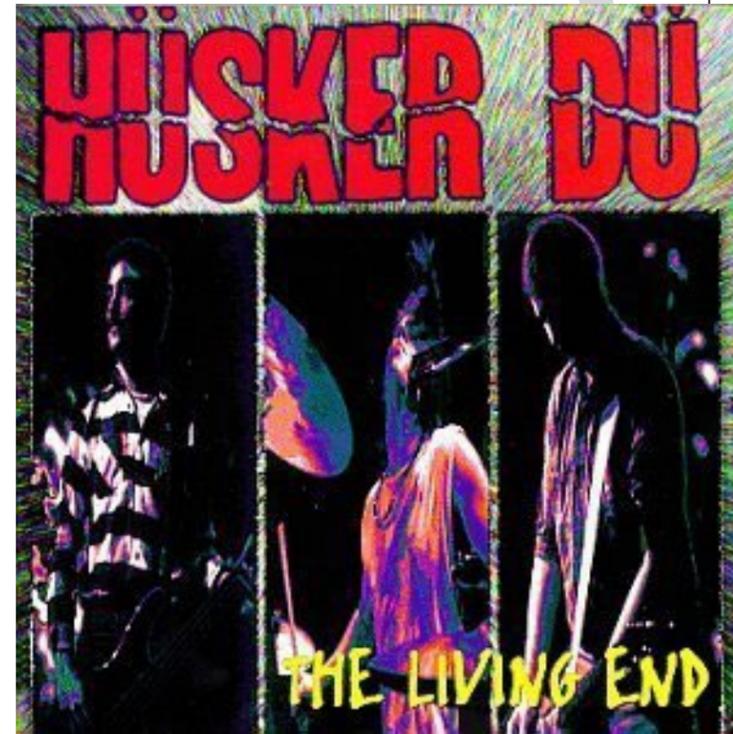
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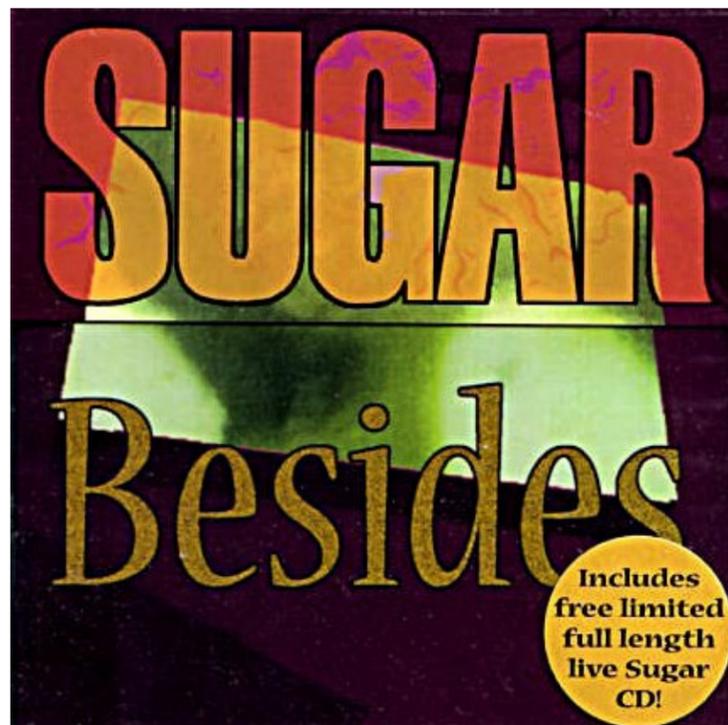


Husker Du *The Living End*

In the liner notes to this live release, Husker Du guitarist/vocalist Bob Mould sums up his band's performances by saying, "The music was so strong, everybody got caught up in it. It was easy to say, 'Fuck all this other shit' for an hour." Humorously, Mould later told another outlet he's never even heard *The Living End*, which Warner Bros. issued out of the blue in October 1994, nearly 17 years after the inimitable trio broke up. Longtime fans won't be surprised by Mould's admission. Like Morrissey, he's nearly alone in standing on the sidelines as virtually every act big, medium, and small has elected to mend old wounds and reunite. Husker Du fans know that no such reconciliation among the members is in the offing. Which makes the existence of *The Living End*, despite a few small quibbles about production, all the more valuable.

Assembled from a variety of dates on the collective's final tour in fall 1987, this 24-track set comes on like a fleet of 747s roaring down a runway and barely avoiding collision with everything in their path. Mould's log-splitting sheets-of-sound guitars cut, saw, and trample, while drummer/vocalist Grant Hart matches him pound for pound, the two nemeses competing with each other as they rip hardcore songs such as "Divide and Conquer" and "Data Control" apart limb by limb, and in land-speed-record times. Bursting with passion, sweat, and bit-terness, *The Living End* isn't just noisy. Husker Du's visionary punk wraps its proverbial arms around catchy pop throughout the disc, whether on the rushing "Ain't No Water in the Well," giddy "Books About UFOs," or romantically tinged "Girl Who Lives on Heaven Hill." These invigorating readings, along with the relentlessly hammering "New Day Rising" and bare-naked introspection of "Hardly Getting Over It," make it almost impossible to believe this band would call it quits less than a month after most of these recordings were made.





SUGAR

Sugar *The Joke Is Always On Us, Sometimes—Live at First Avenue*

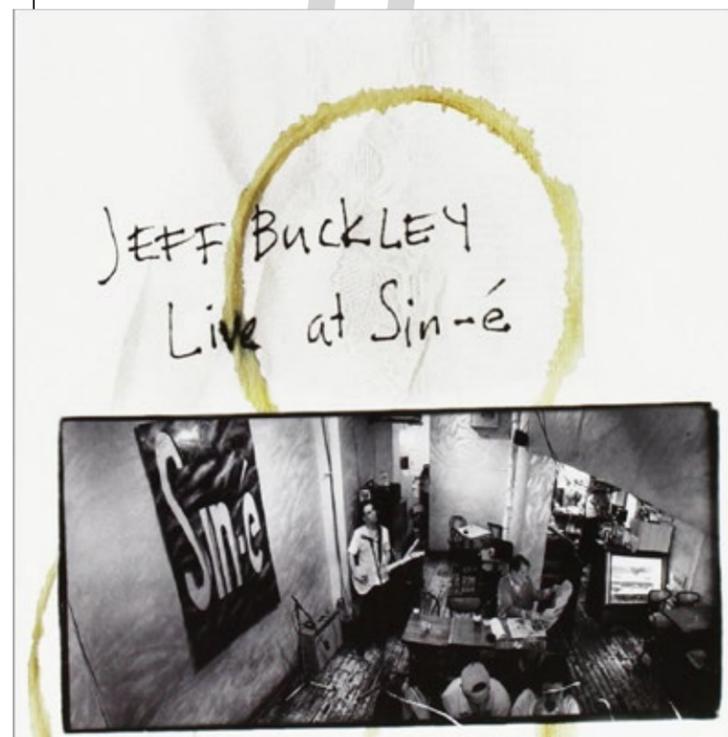
Technically, *The Joke Is Always On Us, Sometimes* was never conventionally released as an album. Included as a bonus disc in the initial run of 1995's odds-and-sods compilation *Besides*, the torrid set far outshined the main attraction and became a collector's item among Sugar devotees, particularly after it went out of print nearly a decade ago. Fortunately, Merge Records reissued the short-lived power trio's entire catalog in deluxe fashion and paired the concert set with Sugar's swan song, *File Under: Easy Listening*.

Recorded in Minneapolis in early November 1994—shortly before leader Bob Mould dissolved the ensemble that re-introduced the former Husker Du member to loud, buzzing rock n' roll in a group setting—*The Joke Is Always On Us, Sometimes* qualifies as the most desirable “secret” albeit officially sanctioned live record of the modern era. This is the sound of a band straining at its leash, constantly threatening to break free of any tether, and seething with primal emotion. Mould's vocals erupt with uncontrollable energy. Guitars sting, ring, rattle, jangle, and chime. Swirling melodies soar almost to the point of exhaustion. Assertive harmonies work in tandem with crunchy feedback and thunderous beats. While Sugar's studio fare remains a nearly infallible blueprint for fusing sweet bubble-gum pop, aggressive power pop, and controlled chaos, such possibilities are further heightened on this night in Mould's adopted hometown. The music is supercharged, tightened, and afforded a visceral edge that cuts especially deep on songs about frustrations, cycles, and traumas associated with distressing relationships and their outcomes. No wonder why Mould's wrenching, painful, from-the-gut screams on a combustible reading of “The Slim” still leave emotional bruises two decades later.

Jeff Buckley *Live at Sin-é (Legacy Edition)*

Music-industry veteran and early Jeff Buckley admirer Mitchell Cohen aptly describes the departed singer's solo performances at New York's tiny Sin-é café in the early 1990s as “daredevil cabaret.” Buckley played the East Village spot on a weekly basis, and continued to do so even after he scored his deal with Columbia Records, testing out new material, turning cover songs inside-out, and chatting up crowds utterly transformed by what they witnessed. Indeed, Columbia actually introduced Buckley to the greater public by releasing the four-song *Live at Sin-é* EP in November 1993—preceding his now-legendary *Grace* debut by nearly a year.

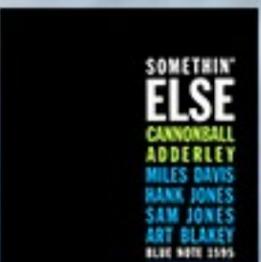
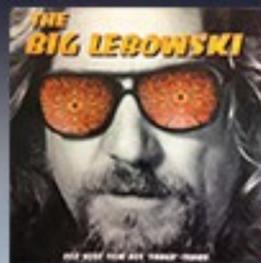
Revamped and sizably expanded in 2003, *Live at Sin-é (Legacy Edition)* seems a gift dropped from the heavens by Buckley himself. Chronicling two afternoon shows recorded on July 19 and August 17, 1993, the set comprises 34 tracks and, most importantly, documents a remarkable singer-songwriter operating without a net. Channeling the spirits of the likes of Led Zeppelin, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, and Nina Simon, and delving into early versions of originals such as “Lover, You Should've Come Over” and “Last Goodbye,” an unencumbered and uninhibited Buckley seduces, transfixes, haunts, and charms all the while effortlessly toying with his vocal range and clean-reverb Fender Telecaster as if they were putty in a child's hands. Due to the intimate sonics, Buckley sounds as if he's standing before you, an angelic figure whose soulful timbre and astonishing falsetto teem with naturalism, purity, and uniqueness, and a human being doing it all simply for the love of music.



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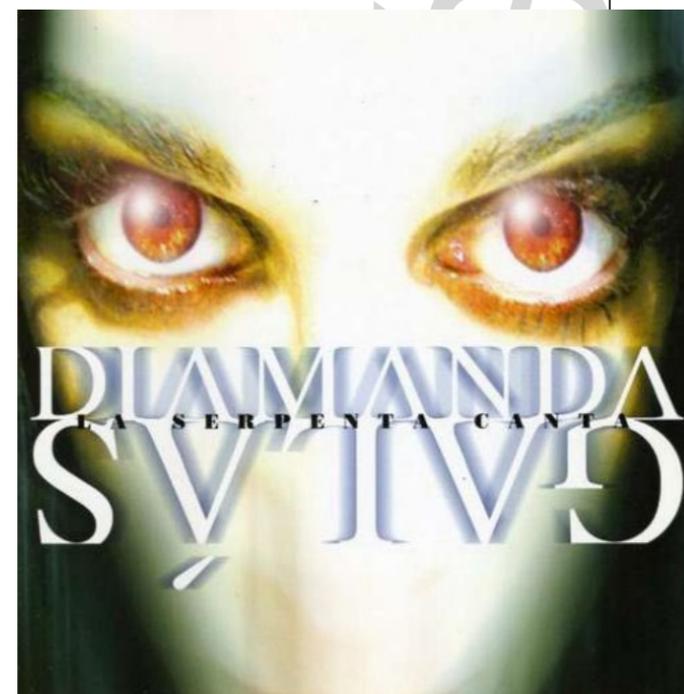


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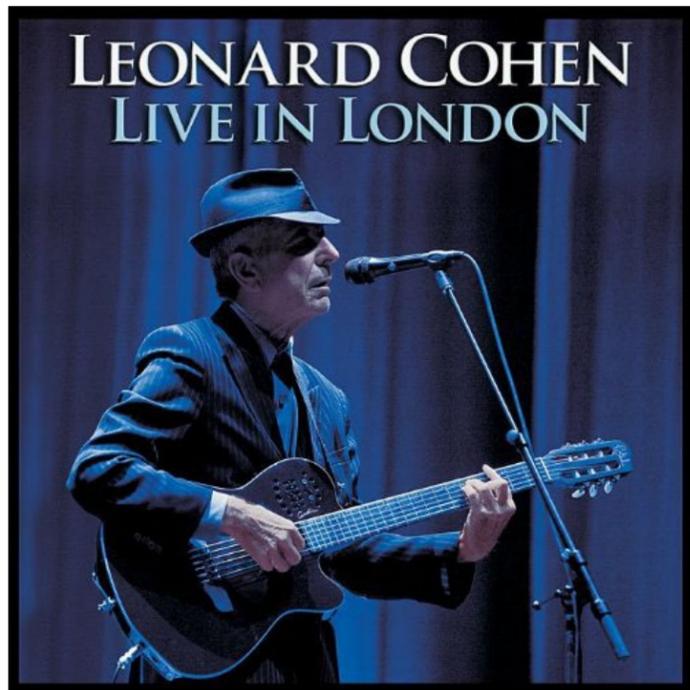


Diamanda Galás *La Serpenta Canta*

An inimitable performer whose confrontational methods and avant-garde approaches are nearly as famous as her disarming four-octave vocal range, Diamanda Galás was trained as a classical pianist and ultimately rebelled against a conservative upbringing. She drew notice after recording a trio of opera-inspired records in the mid-80s, chronicling her brother's battle with and eventual death from AIDS. Ever since, she ventured into uncharted realms of pop, gospel, opera, jazz, and blues that, until 2003's double album *La Serpenta Canta* (and its simultaneously released operatic companion, *Defixiones: Will and Testament, Orders From the Dead*) hadn't fully harnessed the spellbinding character of her arresting concerts.

A solo record of voice and piano, *La Serpenta Canta* arrives as a harrowing set of blues, spiritual, soul, and country covers that Galás' fiery voice makes shiver, shriek, and bedevil. Fiendish, mighty, terrifying, and delicate, her radical reinterpretations of traditional American song—Hank Williams' "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," John Lee Hooker's "Burning Hell," and Dan Penn's "At the Dark End of the Street" are among the standards overhauled—probe the psychological depths of loss, death, and horror with stark, sacrificial vision. To wit: Galás' shattering rendition of the traditional "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean" witnesses her extreme cadence ricocheting as if the song's two white horses are being tied together and pulled in opposite directions until all that remains are shallow pools of blood. Not for the faint of heart.





Leonard Cohen *Live In London*

By now, the story of why Leonard Cohen returned to the road in 2008 after a 15-year absence is relatively familiar. Having spent the first part of the turn of the century living as a monk in a Buddhist monastery, Cohen learned that his former business manager pilfered nearly every dime of his savings. Then 73 years old, Cohen was basically forced back into touring in order to secure his future. From a ticket-buyer's perspective, an artist's need for cash isn't an appealing motivating factor. Cohen, too, already possessed a reputation for dourness, further stacking the odds against a singer that, at his age, couldn't possibly match the vigor of his youth, right? Wrong. Acclaimed by both fans and critics alike, Cohen's concerts became must-see events around the world, impacting not only onlookers, but the vocalist himself, who was obviously moved by the enthusiastic reactions and grateful receptions.

Recorded July 17, 2008, *Live In London* survives as a souvenir of the spectacular yearlong trek, a 26-song set infused with top-notch playing (Cohen's band is magnificent); droll humor (who know until then that Cohen was so funny); compassionate, poignant, somber, and eloquent singing (the headliner's voice is deep, and occasionally gnarled, but it's never sounded better); unmistakable warmth (what transpires doubles as a model of an ideal artist-crowd relationship); and one outstanding song after another (from the nuanced "Who By Fire" and graceful "Take This Waltz" to the menacing "Everybody Knows" and insistent "Dance Me to the End of Love," Cohen's songbook remains grossly underrated). Any conversations about the best live albums of all time that ignore *Live In London* are best ignored. ●

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AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS

2014

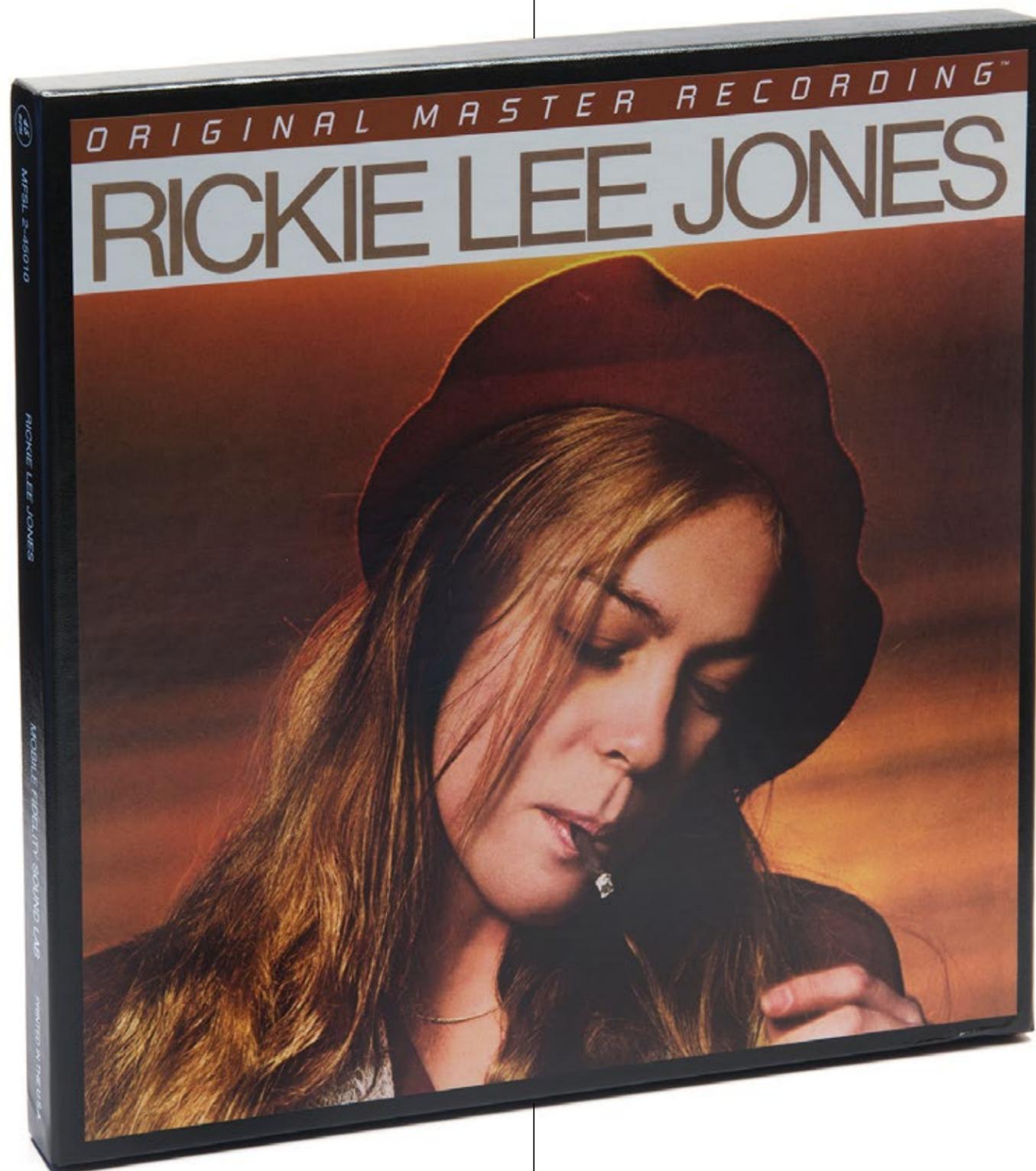
What more can be said about the vinyl resurgence that hasn't already been spouted by nearly every significant media outlet on the planet during the past decade? Nothing much, except to say that analog continues to capture the hearts and minds of the record-buying public in such a way that pressing plants and labels cannot keep up with demand.

Of course, there are negatives to every positive. The sound quality of new LPs continues to be as big of a concern as the avalanche of needless reissues of titles readily available in used bins for less than the price of a cup of coffee. Major labels are increasingly protective of their catalogs and want to do everything in-house, robbing audiophiles of the chance to hear some of these albums pressed by proven imprints such as Mobile Fidelity or Speakers Corner. Fortunately, these labels (and a few others, including a handful of major efforts by Warner Bros. and Columbia) continued to deliver a surfeit of treasures over the course of 2014, reminding us all once again why we labor over every nuance related to our systems. Every detail matters. The same also applies to the growing high-resolution digital market, where determining the parent source and/or generation remains a problematic issue. Just because an album is available as a 2.8MHz DSD download doesn't mean it's taken from the master tape. *TONEAudio* challenges all download sites and sellers to disclose mastering and source information.

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. Congratulations to those in the former camp, and no apologies to the labels that refused to do due diligence.

KISS

AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS



Rickie Lee Jones
Rickie Lee Jones
 Mobile Fidelity, 180g
 45RPM 2LP box set

RICKIE LEE JONES

Three times a charm for *Rickie Lee Jones*. Back in the 1980s, Mobile Fidelity released the eponymous album as one of its earliest productions. While the original Warner Bros. pressing is pretty damn good, the reissue quickly became the record that many audiophiles dragged into their favorite high-end audio shop. Between radio stations playing the hell out of “Chuck E’s In Love” and customers at the local hi-fi store that signed my paycheck, I came to dread anyone I saw walking in the door with the record under their arm.

But like Pink Floyd’s *The Dark Side of the Moon*, time heals all wounds. A 25-year hiatus has made this debut record listenable for me again, and last year, Mobile Fidelity produced a single-LP remaster. Remarkably similar to the original Mobile Fidelity version, albeit slightly noisier, the recent LP offers a bit more dynamic range. However, because the grooves now go almost all the way to the label, increased inner-groove distortion arises on the last track of each side.

This new 45RPM version takes care of the problem and boasts a more solid foundation, with a solid bass groove that doesn’t exist on the other MoFi pressings or WB original. No substitute for sheer groove volume, this copy really swings, with significantly more drive and a more expansive soundstage, to boot.

While a tad noisier than the original, the delicacy by which the acoustic bass gets reproduced on “Easy Money” should surprise those who have heard this record countless times. The percussion floats in with a gentleness that comes damn close to the experience provided by tape. All the acoustic instruments tout more space and shape. Yes, this is analog done to perfection.

For those wondering, “Chuck E’s In Love” still gives me an anxiety attack, but it sounds better than ever. If you love this record, you will not be disappointed. —**Jeff Dorgay**

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MUSIC

BILLY JOEL

I'd give Mobile Fidelity a swab of my DNA if the label would work its magic on Billy Joel's *Streetlife Serenade*, but I don't think it's going to happen. So we'll need to settle for the Grammy-winning *The Stranger*. Part of the imprint's ongoing Joel reissue campaign, this 45RPM edition of *The Stranger* sounds incredible. If this record—ranked by *Rolling Stone* among the 100 Greatest Albums of All Time—is your jam, call Music Direct right now. Dragging out the Columbia original from my archives instantly reminds me how dreadful the original sounds: two-dimensional, lifeless, flat.

A two record set, this version of Joel's biggest-selling record (it was available on 8-track, back in 1977!) lords over the original. The 45RPM platters really make transients jump. Where the original is congested, Mobile Fidelity's edition does justice to Joel's piano playing by giving it more of its own space and texture. In addition, his band is much better represented. Now, it's easier to give Joel and producer Phil Ramone credit for the arrangements.

By record's end, it becomes clear MoFi ticked all the boxes. Big, big sound. Super-quiet surfaces. Excellent artwork. Another boomer favorite reborn. —*Jeff Dorgay*



Billy Joel
The Stranger
Mobile Fidelity, 180g 45RPM 2LP

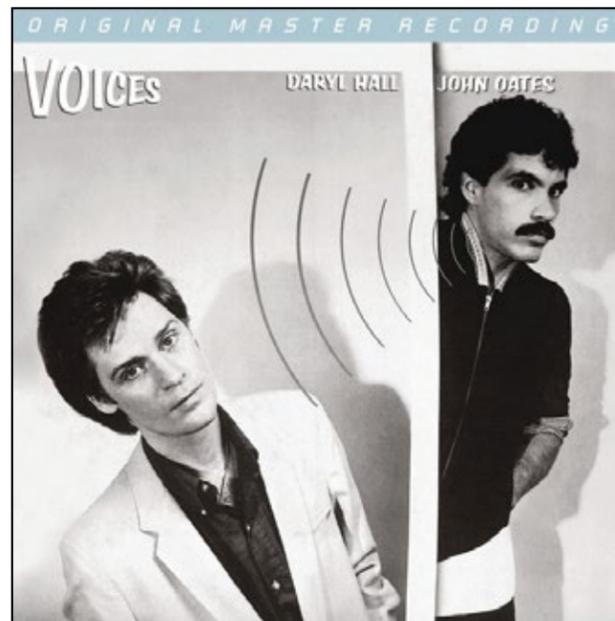


Carole King

Tapestry
Mobile Fidelity, 180g LP

Here's an interesting pressing of a major classic. Of course, books have been written about Carole King, her genius, why this record is a landmark, so there's no need to blather on about those topics here.

Bottom line: Mobile Fidelity hits upon an excellent compromise with this version by putting it all on one slab of vinyl. Remarkable dynamics remain, even though they aren't quite as abundant as on the out-of-print Classic Records reissue. However: This LP provides an open, natural top end that no other *Tapestry* offers to such an extent, save the recent ORG pressing, which was limited to 2000 copies and is getting tougher to find. All the other copies of this record I've heard possess a slightly to moderately rolled-off treble. For this reviewer, bringing this quality back makes the album, and makes this Mobile Fidelity reissue the version to own if you don't want to go the 45 route. —**Jeff Dorgay**



Hall and Oates

Voices
Mobile Fidelity, 180g LP

Hall and Oates' ninth album is brought to life like never before on this Mobile Fidelity pressing. The group's first self-produced work, *Voices* presents the duo embracing a more commercial sound defined by the addition of slightly more pop and funk interacting with the harmonies that made the pair famous.

Moving straight to side two and cueing up "You've Lost That Loving Feeling" reveals how desolate the original RCA pressing sounds. Bereft of dynamics, the old LP sounds like an mp3 file. This new version is awash with depth and nuance, and the comparison makes it easy to hear the truly great musicianship Hall and Oates brought to the songs.

The piano on "Kiss On My List," nearly gone on the original, now occupies plenty of space just to the left of center, right behind Hall's lead vocal. Throughout, you can noticeably hear the vocal banter between Hall and Oates, with the latter having more presence than before. Here's an enjoyable trip down memory lane, especially with the sonics returned to what they should have been all along. —**Jeff Dorgay**

KISS



Kiss

Alive!
Universal, 180g 2LP

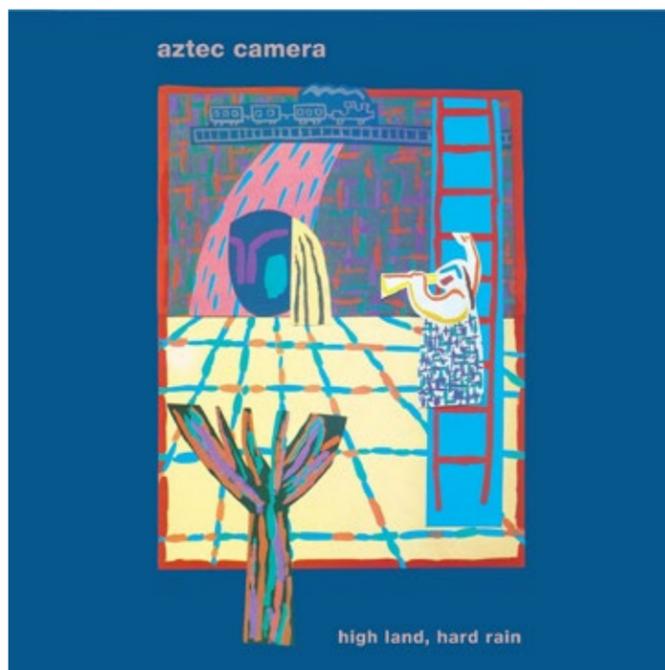
One of the things I've always admired about Gene Simmons is that he's straightforward about being in the game for the money. Record labels aren't always quite so forthright about reissues and such. But this is pure blasphemy. Sorry folks, I've been there from the beginning, and I have every pressing of *Alive!* around, and this one is a dud. A \$50 dud no less, pressed at the vaunted QRP plant.

Granted, *Alive!* has never been a sonic masterpiece, but the Japanese CD collection from a few years back does this classic major justice, revealing what little dynamics do exist. There's also some halfway decent separation between lead guitarist Ace Frehley and rhythm guitar Paul Stanley's playing, with a bit of soundstaging, to boot.

Pulling out the original Casablanca pressing to do a direct comparison, even the original, which you can usually find (albeit often well-worn) for a few bucks at used record stores, blows this remaster away in every sense of the word.

So to the very small subset of audiophiles that happen to love Kiss: If you want the best, you won't get it here. —**Jeff Dorgay**

AZTEC CAMERA



Aztec Camera
High Land, Hard Rain
Domino, 180g LP

Among guilty pleasure albums from the 1980s, Aztec Camera's debut *High Land, Hard Rain* maintains a surprisingly regular appearance on my turntable. Over the years, my copy of the 1983 LP from Sire Records sustained a fair amount of needle time and admittedly, isn't the pristine pressing it used to be. When listening, I took the lyrical advice of Aztec Camera's song "We Could Send Letters" by closing my eyes and waited until things got better. Finally, patience persevered! Domino Recordings obtained the original analog masters to create a 30th anniversary reissue on 180-gram vinyl.

Compared with the original LP, the album art appears identical, except for the not-so-surprising omission of the tagline "also available on cassette." The new pressing replicates the track listing of the original LP. For those seeking bonus songs, be sure to check out the digital download enabled via the vinyl purchase or pick up the CD.

Most importantly, the sonics get a significant upgrade. Domino made a concerted effort to give the album the respect and long-overdue update it deserves. Roddy Frame's vocals boast inherent passion, and the reverb is more apparent. The perceived room around the vocalist also seems larger. Acoustic guitars, the driving force of the album, retain their energetic and upfront placement, and are flanked by deep, tight, and supportive bass. No, cymbals and tambourines don't have all the subtle ring and decay I hoped to hear, but are on par with earlier releases. Perhaps the original recordings didn't allow much more detail to be retrieved without the introduction of unwanted artifacts.

For *High Land, Hard Rain* fans, this reissue is a must. If you are not yet a fan of Aztec Camera, the pressing provides a great opportunity to start. —**Rob Johnson**

LEONARD COHEN



Leonard Cohen
The Future
Columbia/Music On Vinyl, 180g LP

Leonard Cohen's *The Future* first hit my audio radar as a result of the *Natural Born Killers* soundtrack. "Waiting for the Miracle" first captured my attention, but it didn't take long for the rest of the songs to develop a tight grip on my senses. Cohen's deep and commanding vocals, accentuating his contemplative and sometimes haunting lyrics, draw forth an unexpected range of emotion.

Previously, my sole exposure to this album came via 16-bit /44.1k CD-quality sound. Stumbling across Music On Vinyl's analog reissue was a happy accident. The LP meets my high expectations in two important ways. It has more presence, and sounds as if I stepped a few rows forward in the auditorium. The second notable improvement pertains to the vocals. The digital glare on the CD pleasantly disappears. The range and texture of Cohen's voice is beautifully rendered, and front and center in the mix. It's also appropriately "sized" in the stereo image.

Disappointments exist, however. Like those on the CD, instruments still can sound repressed. While drums, piano, and guitar offer a reasonable level of realism on "Always," the same instruments lack detail and presence on other fare. On the title track, for instance, cymbal strikes offer little impact, ring, and decay. The tambourine's sparkle outshines them. Strings are also hit-and-miss. On the instrumental "Tacoma Trailer," both piano and strings illustrate a step-up in sonics when compared the CD. However, it's still not transparent enough to be mistaken for live sound.

Perhaps the source material has inherent limitations, and there's little else to dig out of it. Or perhaps vocal quality remained the absolute top priority for the reissue, even if it meant some tradeoffs were necessary. Truth be told, the captivating vocals initially sold me on the album, so the latter scenario is an acceptable compromise. While the overall experience leaves me wanting more, having *The Future* available on a good vinyl pressing makes up for the deficiencies. —**Rob Johnson**

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—Sam Tellig, *Stereophile*, June 2013

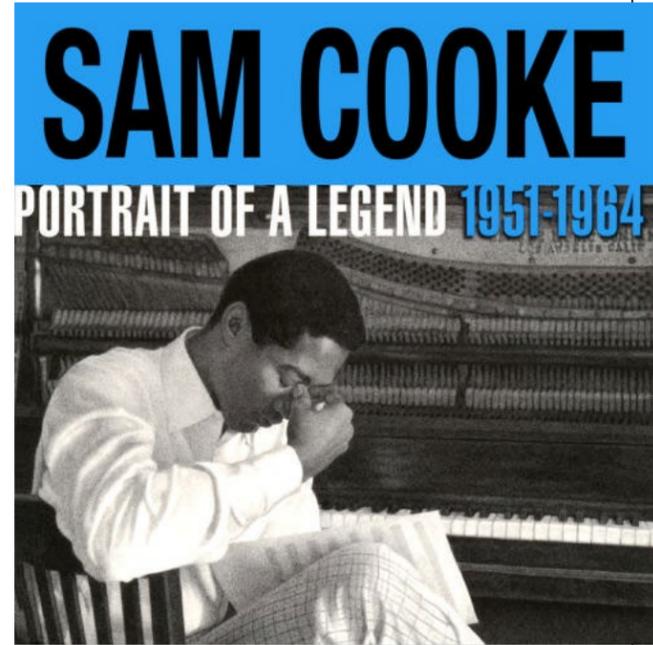
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—Dick Olsher, *The Absolute Sound*, Issue 233 • May/June 2013

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Sam Cooke
Portrait of a Legend: 1951-1964
ABKCO, 180g 2LP

More than a decade ago, during the brief window when it appeared SACD stood a chance to gain a foothold in the mainstream, ABKCO released two of the finest-sounding and musically seminal reissue series the format has seen to date. The Rolling Stones' early-career work came first, followed by five titles documenting the similarly crucial output of soul great Sam Cooke. Both are long out of print. But, to quote one of Cooke's snappy hits, “(Ain't That) Good News,” the label is now restoring the crooner's albums on vinyl.

Presumably taken from the same masters as the corresponding SACD, and making its debut in analog, the 180g 2LP version of *Portrait of a Legend: 1951-1964* sounds just as divine in analog. Pressed at QRP, the gatefold edition contains a small essay by Cooke biographer Peter Guralnick as well as the latter's track-by-track histories. While solid, the outer jacket isn't up to par with, say, Mobile Fidelity's supreme standards, yet the dead-quiet and ultra-clean LP surfaces more than meet audiophile demands. Spanning 31 of the Chicago native's best-known sides—ranging from the full-on gospel “Touch the Hem of His Garment” to the soaring equality anthem “A Change Is Gonna Come”—the collection possesses incredible transparency and tonal balances.

As heard via these grooves, the purity, clarity, richness, and deceiving complexity of Cooke's voice will strike even fanatics. His phrasing, control, smoothness, range, and verve are front and center, unimpeded by artificial ceilings or interference from instrumentalists. And yet, the placement and imaging of the musicians is equally notable. Much

of it is owed to the direct simplicity of the original production. Whether the swaying snap of a snare drum, rhythmic call-and-response of backing vocalists (check out Lou Rawls during “Bring It On Home”), silkiness of tasteful orchestral strings, or jazzy counterpoint of horns, the passages are all impeccably shaped and located. Soundstage width, too, surpasses that of the excellent SACD.

Yes, *Portrait of a Legend: 1951-1964* skews towards Cooke's tamer side that helped him attract white audiences during a period when most of his now-legendary soul contemporaries failed to do so. Yet that's a small quibble. The emotional impact of being brought closer to the majesty of Cooke's singing, and his seamless blend of secular and spiritual, isn't something that happens everyday. Revisiting these classics on this pressing strengthens the case for fans that believe Cooke, who died a truly tragic and largely unresolved death at 33, was the best soul singer not only of his era, but of all time. —**Bob Gendron**

JUDAS PRIEST

A Mobile Fidelity Metal Trilogy



W

ith so much dreck posing as metal these days, it's refreshing to go back to one of the main sources to get needed perspective. Drinking in three of Judas Priest's finest metal albums afforded audiophile care by Mobile Fidelity is a headbanger's delight. So put away those Jacintha records, break out some Priest, and crank it up. MoFi couldn't have chosen three better Priest albums to showcase. *Metal Hammer* magazine bequeathed the honor of "heaviest metal album of all time" on *Stained Class*, and *Screaming For Vengeance* remains Priest's best-selling record, earning double-platinum status. Many of the tunes on these platters became the core of the band's live set for a decade.



Judas Priest
Stained Class, Killing Machine,
and *Screaming for Vengeance*
Mobile Fidelity Silver Label, LP

The biggest dilemma is where to start. Priming the pump, "Before the Dawn," the only slow track on any of these three records, clearly illustrates the low noise floor in the remastering process. Rob Halford's lead vocal shines through and is clearly separated from the acoustic guitar work, sounding much more dimensional than the original pressing.

Alas, the original pressings in my collection do not do this band justice, as they lack in depth and dynamics—essential to heavy rock music. Restoring the dynamic range to these recordings unlocks their power and offers better insight into the synergistic playing of lead guitarists Glenn Tipton and KK Downing. The title track on *Screaming For Vengeance* is now beyond awesome. *Stained Class* may be the heaviest album of all time, but this has to be one of the best metal anthems, with each of the master guitarists taking up residence on each side of the stereo system, just as they do in concert. Amidst the bite of the guitars, Halford's blood-curdling scream toward the end of the song truly delivers the goods.

But Priest is not all shrieks and blistering guitars. The bass line on "Devil's Child" is no longer buried in the mix as it is on the original, and it is equally liberated on all three records, giving them added weight and punch. Isn't that what metal is all about?

If you are a metal aficionado, consider these three releases from Mobile Fidelity a must. The louder your system will play, the more you will appreciate them. —**Jeff Dorgay**

NO STAIRWAY

Led Zeppelin Super Deluxe Editions

Atlantic, 180g multi-LP/multi-CD/download box sets

High-res downloads also available separately from HD Tracks

Well, there's no stairway yet, but Jimmy Page informed us in a recent press conference that he is going to oversee the rest of the Led Zeppelin catalog and release it in the same grandiose fashion achieved on the recently released Super Deluxe Edition reissues of the band's first three records. Yes, \$140 is a lot of money for a single album, but there is quite a bit more included with the price—namely, a “companion” album featuring outtakes, matching CDs of the original and companion album, 24/96 downloads, a book and memorabilia.

Using the original analog masters, Page worked with Metropolis mastering in London, trying to get as much information as possible out of tapes now more than 45 years old. Analog enthusiasts often talk about tape degradation, and I suspect that's probably a big part of what's happened to these classic records. *(continued)*





Photo Courtesy of Atlantic Records

Much like the audience for the Beatles reissues, three distinct types of people will buy the bulk of these mega-box sets: completist collectors, those hoping to improve on Zep vinyl already in their collection, and vinyl newbies that think these reissues are cool. First, the good news.

Group A will likely love these versions because the team responsible for production did a brilliant job aesthetically recreating every aspect of the originals. The printing is superb, full of color and contrast, with a wonderful UV overcoat. These will last much longer than the originals did. And, the material on the companion discs is fun,

much like the Beatles *Anthology* volumes, uncovering bits and pieces that previously hadn't seen the light of day. Group C will love them because they look great and, since they don't have ten other pressings of the albums to compare, the sonics will be more than acceptable. My copies were perfectly flat, perfectly centered, and extremely quiet.

However, Group B will most likely be disappointed. If you've got rare, early stamper originals of these records, these reissues lack in oomph—and dynamics are a lot of what Led Zeppelin is about. In its time, the quartet pushed louder, harder, and with more distortion than its peers.



Regardless of whether you're spinning *I*, *II*, or *III*, the fine detail, spatial cues, and ultimate dynamic crush just aren't there.

But remember, even though the grass is greener on the other side of the fence, it usually has to be mowed and watered more often. Are you willing to pay the price? If these three records are part of your holy grail, spend the \$500 (or more) apiece it will take to get mint originals. You will not be disappointed. And then consider these records your go-to communion for when you just can't be otherwise transfixed at your audio altar. Save the precious for when you can give them your full, undivided attention.

If you aren't locked into vinyl, or you have mediocre pressings, consider the 24/96 downloads—they are the best value of the lot.

When A-B'ing the LPs and high-res files on the dCS Paganini stack against the AVID Acutus Reference SP/Tri-Planar/Lyra Atlas combo, the sound quality of the digital files is so close to that of the LPs, it makes the vinyl pointless. A similar conclusion came via the opposite end of the financial spectrum with a Rega RP3 'table and Oppo 105 universal player, a competition almost too close to call.

It's commendable of Page to want to polish these classics and take them out for one last, glorious test drive. On one level, they are exquisitely produced and packaged, certainly setting a standard for future audiophile releases. Unfortunately, there is only so much life left in these old tapes. A+ for effort and execution; B for results. —**Jeff Dorgay**

TONE FAVORITES

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By Jeff Dorgay

With no disrespect to our friends in the industry producing fantastic remastered records, giving us a chance to revisit recordings we may have missed out on the first time around that often sound as good as (or even better than the originals), I'm focusing my list on a few records that I love that are not from these imprints. Like our Music Editor Bob Gendron confesses with his list, there are no Beatles, Led Zeppelin, or even Steely Dan here. And there will definitely not be any Jennifer Warnes, Jacintha, or the like. We've either heard such records too often, or are fully aware of them. I'm instead talking straight-ahead rock records I've always enjoyed, and which are well-recorded, well-mastered, fun, don't cost more than a set of tires to acquire.

Never released on CD, Tim Curry's final record for A&M is spectacular, with a great mix of originals and some very creative covers, ranging from the Zombies' "She's Not There" to the Squeeze track "Take me I'm Yours." Curry's tunes are no stinkers either, from the playful "Working on My Tan" (an 80s mixtape favorite) to the introspective title track.

Recorded at the Hit Factory and mastered by Bob Ludwig, there's no shortage of talent on either side of the console, with Curry's backing band including Earl Slick on guitar, Michael Kamen (who also produces) on keyboards, and David Sanborn on saxophone. And there isn't a hint of digital anything anywhere. Between the choruses of "Working on My Tan" when Curry croons, "take a boat, take a bus," the city bus panned wide right sounds so real, you're ready to jump on board and follow him.

The breathy voice that Curry launched in the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* is honed to perfection four years later with 1981's *Simplicity*. His treatment of the John Sebastian classic "Summer in the City" makes you wonder what made Curry go Disney in the end.



Tim Curry
Simplicity
A&M, LP only

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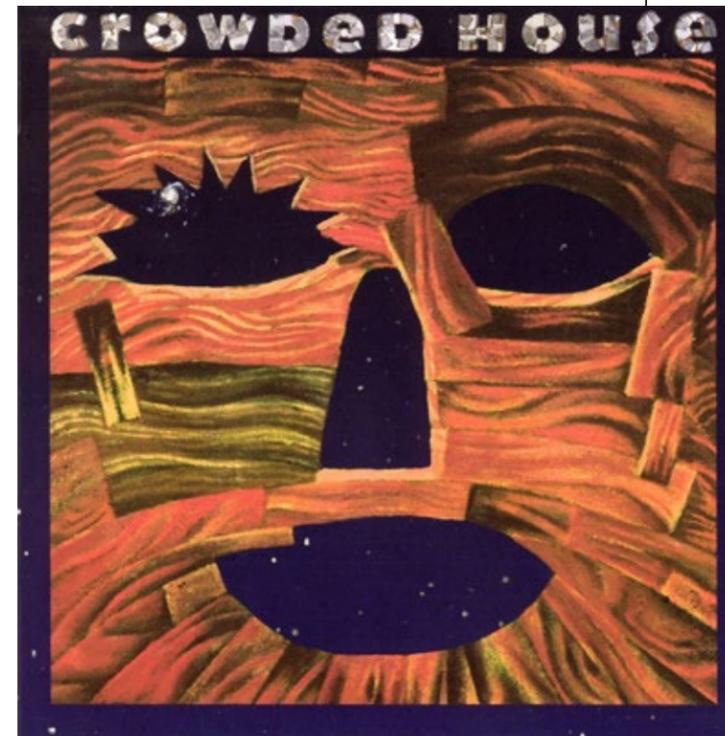
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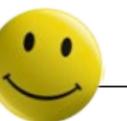


Crowded House
Woodface
Capitol, LP and CD

Crowded House's third album, while not receiving the major acclaim of its first two records, is arguably the band's finest. The songs are bright, perky, quirky, and clever, opening with the silly "Chocolate Cake" on which the Finn Brothers take a poke at the Big Apple as they sing, "Not everyone in New York would pay to see Andrew Lloyd Weber." Finn brothers Neil and Tim are joined by core Crowded House members Paul Hester and Nick Seymour on drums, the last record produced with this lineup. The group's sound would significantly change on its next release, *Together Alone*.

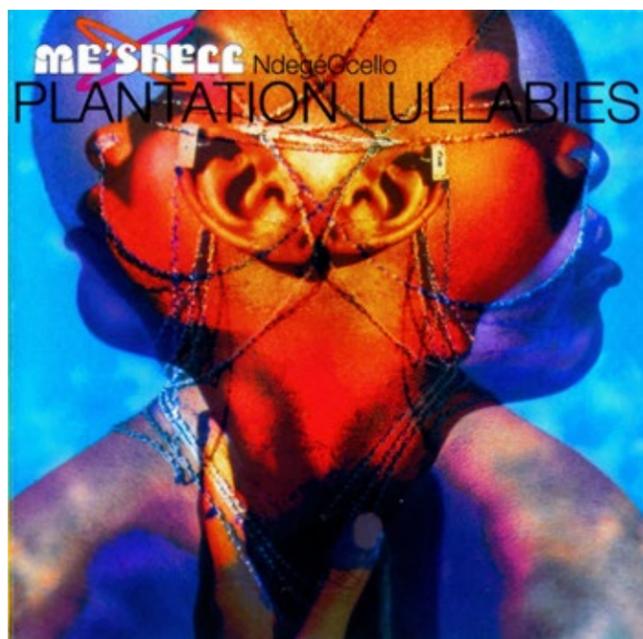
Woodface fills the bill for those wanting something more than a standard pop record and the recording is brilliant. Produced by Mitchell Froom and Neil Finn, and mixed by Bob Clearmountain, the LP is the copy to get if you can find one. Forget the version done a few years ago by Pure Music: It's garbage, sounding like an early MP3 from the iTunes store.

Credits don't say whether Bob Ludwig at Masterdisk mastered the CD as well as the LP, but the CD is smooth and dynamic. However, the EMI imported vinyl is wonderful, with a soundstage in which you can swim, a lush midrange, and excellent dynamics. A clean copy will set you back about \$35, but if you love this record, it is worth seeking out.



I was hooked on Meshell Ndegeocello the first time I spotted her on “Conan” going crazy with a fretless bass with a Grace Jones kind of anger and intensity, singing, “If that’s your boyfriend, he wasn’t last night.” (The tune was nominated for a Best R&B Grammy in 1995, before her famous duet with John Mellencamp.) *Plantation Lullabies* put a spin on R&B that, quite frankly, she’s never been able to equal.

The CD is magnificent, and usually languishes in the bargain bins for about three dollars, while the double LP is tough to find and usually fetches about \$50.



Meshell Ndegeocello
Plantation Lullabies
CD and LP



Brand X
Livestock
CD and LP

Ok, ok, I’m a sucker for fusion music. So shoot me. If you share my affliction and you haven’t heard of Brand X, which incidentally includes, of all people, Phil Collins on drums, this is an incredibly well-recorded live album, half of which is recorded at Ronnie Scott’s jazz club in London.

So many live albums sound lifeless, either in recording quality or performance, but *Livestock* thrills on both counts. The tracks are well-chosen, rearranged somewhat, and played with enough enthusiasm to not only convey a great feel for what the band was like live but also show this wasn’t just an excuse to totally recreate the studio album onstage—something many prog bands do.

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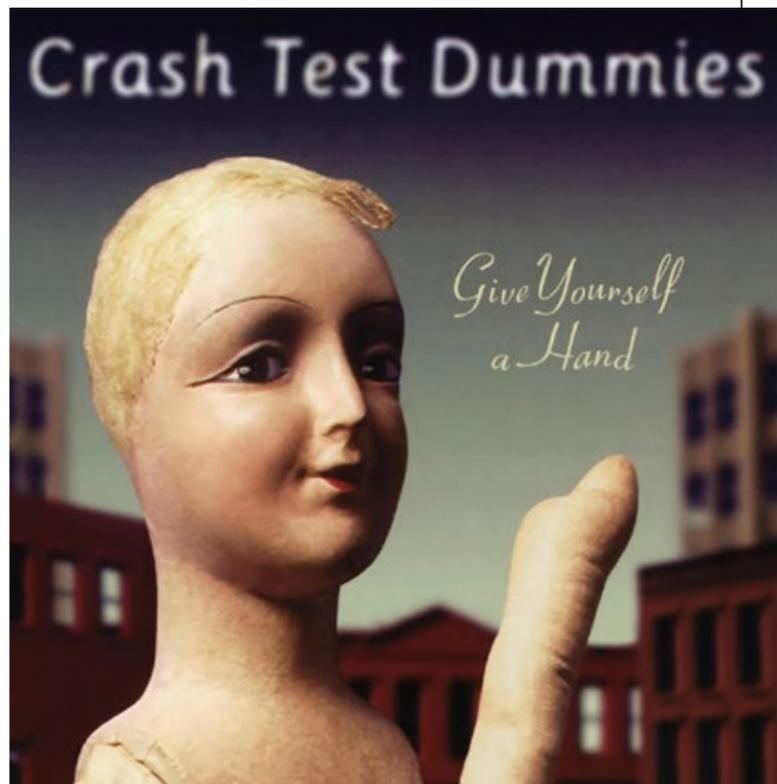
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Crash Test Dummies

Give Yourself a Hand
CD only

This quirky Canadian band received heavy airplay on MTV in 1993 with the big hit “MMM MMM MMM” from the triple-platinum album *God Shuffled His Feet* album. A big part of that unique sound comes from lead singer Brad Roberts’ deep voice. Riding the success the band subsequently produced *A Worm’s Life*, which tanked its popularity.

The collective’s fourth and final album for BMG/Arista took a major stylistic detour with Roberts singing falsetto, something he said he did “in the shower a lot” in an interview with NPR shortly after the record was released. *Give Yourself a Hand* also features backup vocalist Ellen Reid taking the lead on a couple of tracks, mixing up the usual repertoire even more. “Just Chillin’” features an obtuse arrangement, with lightly placed keyboard riffs that sound as if they’ve come straight out of *Twin Peaks*. And it just gets better, as the Dummies deal with anger, jealousy, and mixed-age relationships with aplomb.


Prince

One Nite Alone (Bonus Disc)
CD only

Sold as a bonus disc in the first 1000 sets of Prince’s 2002 three-disc live box set of the same name through his NPG online store, this is the only record on my list that isn’t reasonably priced or easy to find. When available on the used market, an unsealed copy can reach \$500.

The album features Prince on piano, with a little bit of accompaniment by his “doves,” Divinity and Majesty. Prince’s usual high-powered combination of jazz, funk, rock, and whatever else he cares to add to the mix at the time is gone here: *One Nite Alone* is miles away from the little red corvette you remember. Arrangements are sparse, moody, and dramatic, yet very delicate. Prince even pays homage to Joni Mitchell with an incredibly sexy rendition of “A Case of You,” subtly retitled in Prince fashion to “A Case of U.”

The recording itself is exquisite, sounding like Prince has moved his piano into your listening room to give you a private concert, with the first two tracks featuring deep bass lines that will give even the best subwoofers a major workout. ●



Kraftwerk

**DISNEY CONCERT HALL
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA
MARCH 20, 2014**

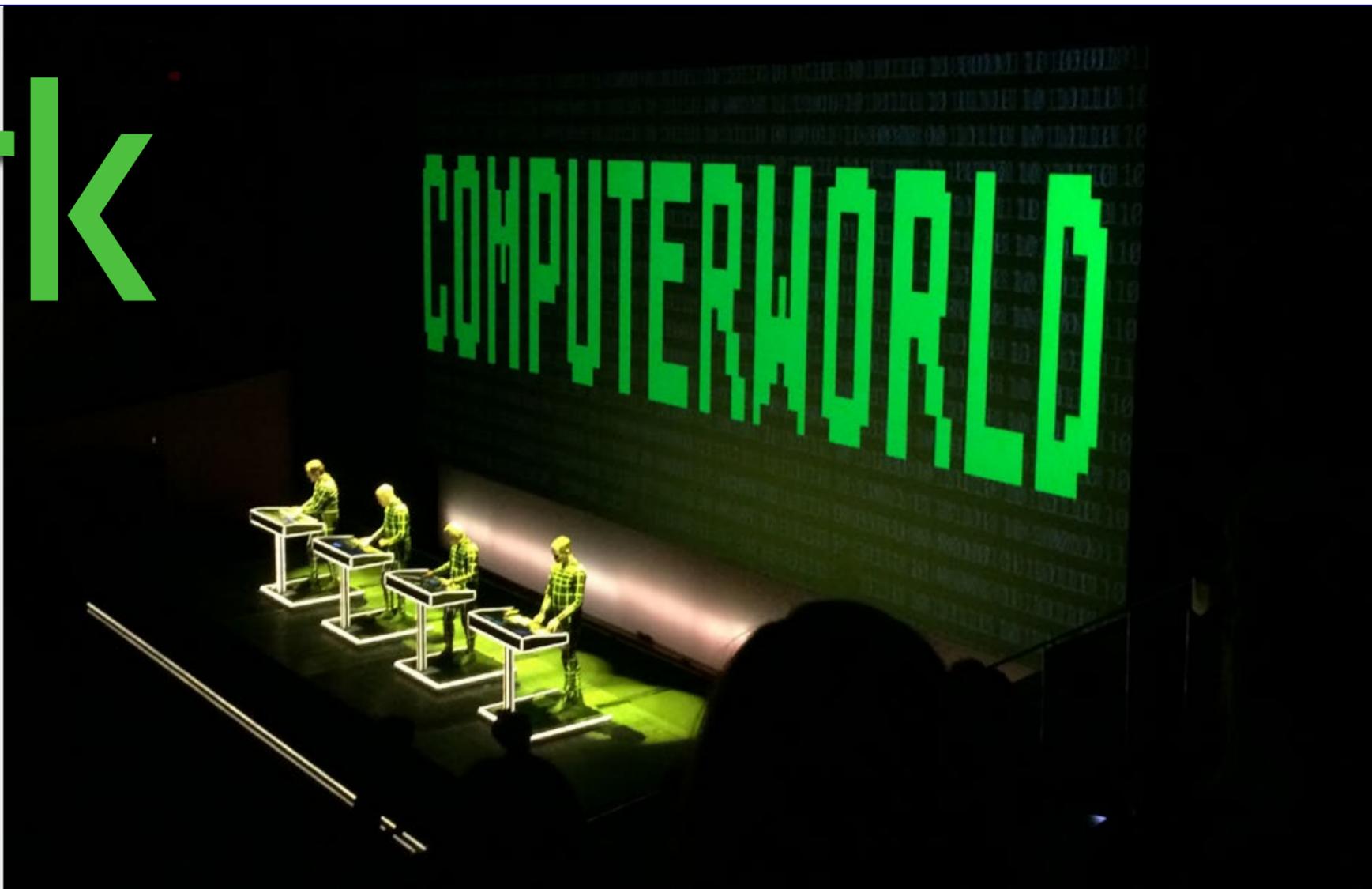
By Jeff Dorgay

With all the precision of the PDK transmission in a Porsche 911 Carrera, Kraftwerk took the stage at precisely 10:00pm to perform the classic album *Computerworld* as part of its three-day tenure at the tres-hip Disney Concert Hall in downtown Los Angeles. Each night, the legendary electronica pioneers gave two concerts, each highlighting a different album.

Upon entering the hall, fans were handed a pair of 3D glasses in a stark, black holder. Considering *Computerworld* only has a playing time of 37:44, audience members shared a similar sentiment: Would the show only consist of the album on the ticket?

Today, Kraftwerk consists of original members Henning Schmitz, Fritz Hilpert, and Ralf Hutter. Falk Grieffengagen replaces Florian Schneider, who left the band in 2008. All four musicians played synthesizers and dressed in black body wear that resembled motion-capture suits with a *TRON*-like graphic motif, crafted to work with the evening's three-dimensional presentation.

The bold shape of the Frank Gehry-designed auditorium made for an engaging acoustic experience, combining an ideal volume level with an ambiance that felt as if the show was mixed in surround sound. Kraftwerk's signature synth riffs and sound effects bounced around in psychedelic fashion. This came in stark contrast to the all-black stage with four starkly lit keyboard podiums. A massive screen sat behind the quartet.



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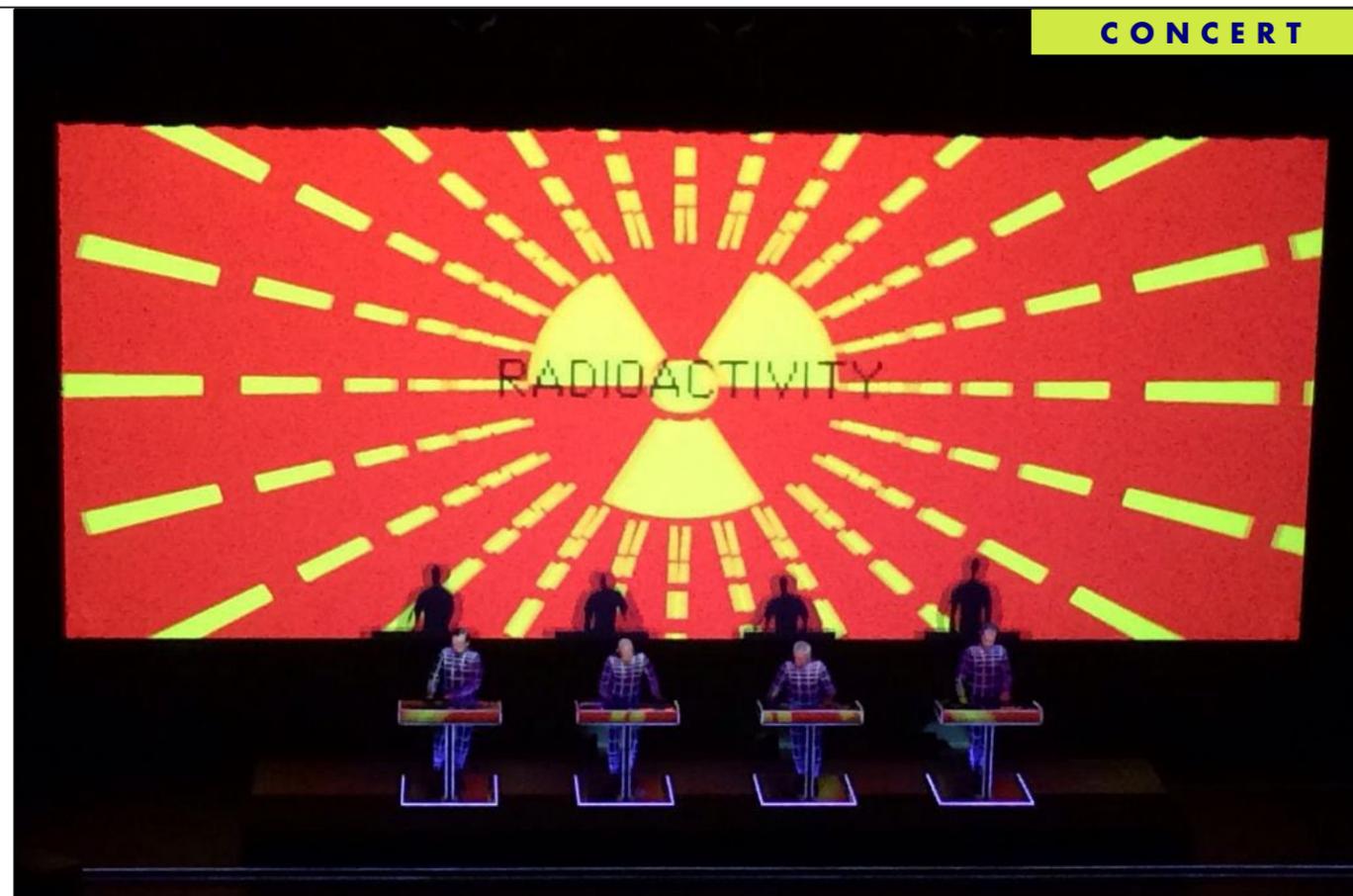


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CONCERT



After three songs from *Computerworld*, the foursome made their intentions known, deviating off the path by adding the title track from *Tour de France* to the agenda. As the performance unfolded, it became like a greatest-hits show, with *Computerworld* woven into the mix. The band primarily stayed close to the original themes of the original tracks. Kraftwerk's excitement was tough to contain, with the members progressively loosening up and jumping around. But not too much. While Kraftwerk did not take extensive license with the material, the auditorium and volume presented its music in an engaging way you can't get from a home stereo. Hearing and feeling the deepest synth bass notes along with the huge sound field made these tunes even more spectacular.

Visually, the big screen was used to excellent effect, featuring what seemed almost like 8-bit, 70s-style graphics—much like the cover of the *Autobahn* album. The presentation featured bits and pieces from Kraftwerk's entire catalog, as well as a number of driving scenes, featuring Mercedes, Porsches, and early VWs driving down a road to a cheering crowd. Other graphics were big, bold, and dimensional, much like monsters in a scary 3D movie. Such objects seemed as if fans could reach right out and touch them.

Almost 90 minutes later, each member took a bow and walked stage, the sound diminishing as each left, with Hutter last to exit, everything fading to black. ●

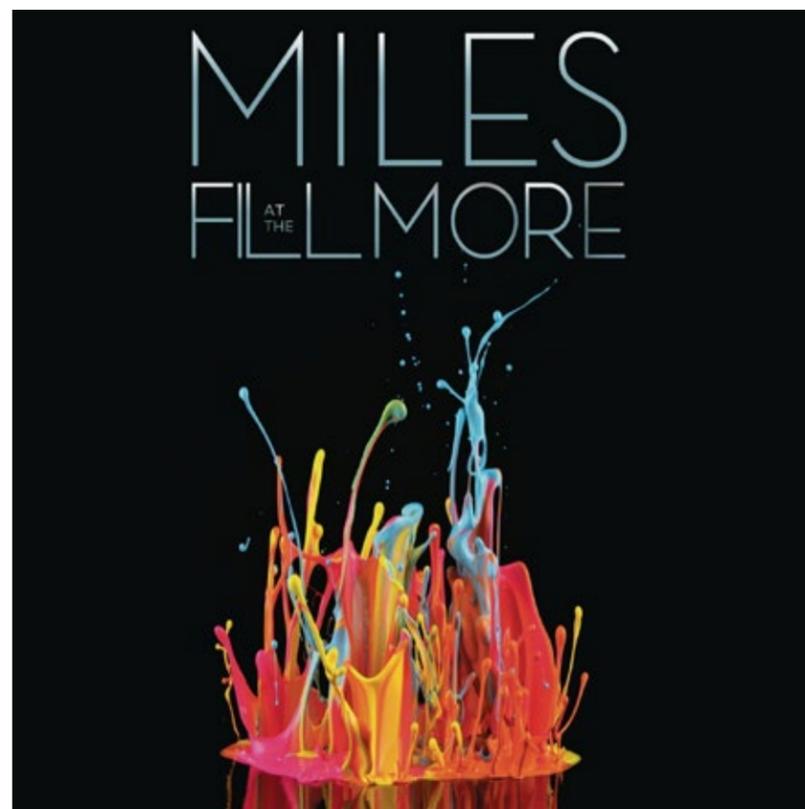
JAZZING UP

2014

We can't imagine what life would be like without jazz. It's why we continue to provide in-depth reviews of select new releases (and a few reissues) that bend our ears. With special thanks to the astute listening and vivid prose of veteran journalists Jim Macnie and Aaron Cohen, who anchor a small albeit vital section, *TONEAudio* presents a choice smorgasbord of jazz records issued over the course of 2014 that will encourage your imagination to run free and renew your faith in music.

©Photo by Clay Patrick McBride

Jason Moran

JAZZ &
BLUES**Miles Davis**

Miles at the Fillmore: Miles Davis 1970—The Bootleg Series Vol. 3
Columbia/Legacy, 4CDs

During the handful of times I saw the Replacements, singer Paul Westerberg had his vocal mic higher than need be. He chose to stand on tiptoe and crane his neck a bit to have his mouth in the right place to get the job done. It seemed a mistake when I first noticed it, but by the third or fourth go-round, a theory hatched: The positioning was purposeful, a chance to juice the yearning aspect of his performance. And it worked. When that trademark rasp blasted from the PA, it had I-can't-get-it-all-out poignancy.



Along the pathways of this four-disc set, Miles Davis does something similar with his horn. True, he plays plenty of phrases in mid-register, a spot where his attack is vicious enough to be punitive. But during the zenith of his electric period, from 1968 to 1973 or so, one of his go-to ploys was a keening shriek that spoke volumes in emotional currency. Sometimes it's just one note—a stab in the heart. Sometimes it's a blast of blats that trail off into a wounded yelp—an extended wail. Always, it's a jolt. He's trying to articulate something seemingly ineffable, and listening to him come close is about as engrossing as jazz gets.

At this late date, we know the bandleader's electric era centered on physical impact. Inspired by the power of rock and funk, he

had his musicians plug in and freak out. Since most were skilled improvisers, the results moved from ornery to sublime. Cranking the volume on this stuff reminds us just how communicative a player Davis himself was, and how he nurtured the same effort from his cohort. Together they create a savage backdrop for the leader's trumpet exhortations.

Recorded at Bill Graham's famed Fillmore East in New York, these gigs are typically turbulent. The group's personnel were in steady flux during this era. By the summer of 1970, the band contained a wildly aggressive rhythm section of keyboardists Chick Corea and Keith Jarrett, bassist Dave Holland, drummer Jack DeJohnette, and percussionist Airto Moreira. Saxophonist Steve Grossman shared the front line with his boss. *(continued)*



Previous albums offered music from these shows, but this package debuts the unedited tapes. The band, whose searing sets won recent acclaim from pop audiences, grinds through some seriously engaging episodes. The ensemble started on a Wednesday and rocked 'til Saturday, picking up steam with every show. Having the music united in one package (previously unissued pieces cut at the San Francisco Fillmore two months prior round out this collection) details the creative process and nuanced shifts from night to night.

The set lists don't change much, but in the interplay remains deft enough to keep

every performance distinct. Holland sets up bedrock grooves, Moreira throws in splashes of color, Grossman snarls in stormy whirlwinds, and Corea and Jarrett cross swords while their instruments speak in tongues. DeJohnette is ferocious, bent on exploding each crescendo into a thousand bits and instantly resuscitating any sluggish passages. Davis was proud of his music's flexibility (could this Fillmore set be the hippie version of *Live At The Plugged Nickel?*), and its dogged sense of exploration is one of its defining traits.

From the audacity running through the second night's encore of "Spanish Key" to the

Ra-like jumble of keyboards that marks the third night's spin on "The Mask" to the final show's "Willie Nelson" and its ominous blues lingo, we hear inquiries posed as proclamations. Davis' temperament guides the action, vulgar one second, vulnerable the next, and the band shadows him even as they throw up its own version of defiance. A few of my favorite moments come when Moreira adds a police whistle to the mix. The sound enhances the sense of mayhem the band generates with regularity, and offers a touch of irony as well. Not a chance in hell a simple traffic cop's tool could ever straighten out the glorious snarl of this bunch. —**Jim Macnie**

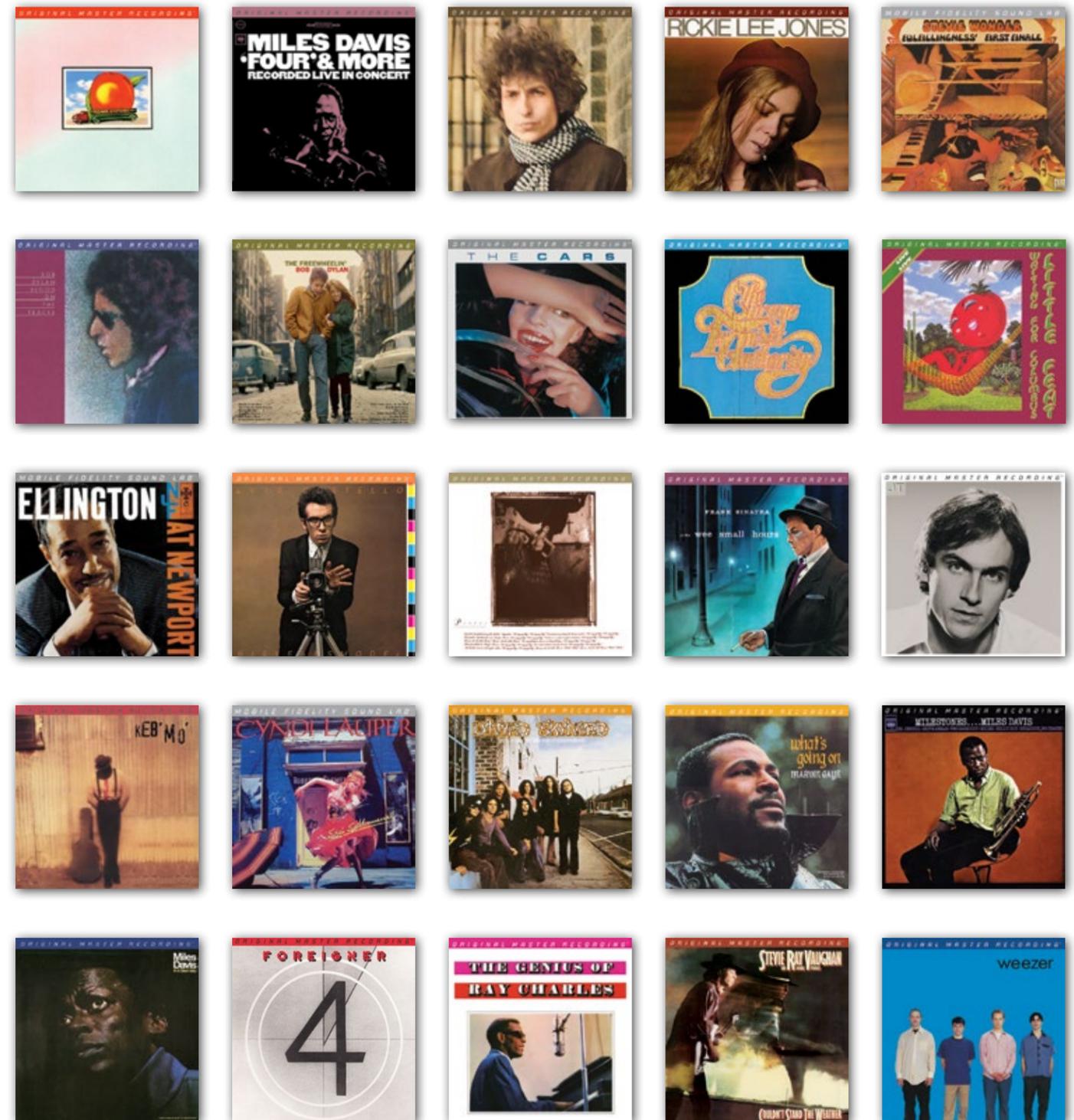
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Tom Rainey

Obligato
Intakt, CD

In the best of circumstances, jazz is a music where simultaneous contributions by a knowing squad drive the action towards a destination. The finale may be a grand crescendo, an offhand phrase, a rhythmic insinuation, or some seismic tempo shift. At times, the music can feel like a puzzle whose main attraction is the taunting riddle at its center.

Tom Rainey, surely one of improvisation's most engaging percussionists, likes the idea of music as mystery. A player dedicated to dodging clichés, he feels his way through situations, betting the farm on the fact his band mates will refine the group coordination as the action unfolds. *Obligato*, high on the list of 2014's most fetching jazz albums thus far, centers on this process.

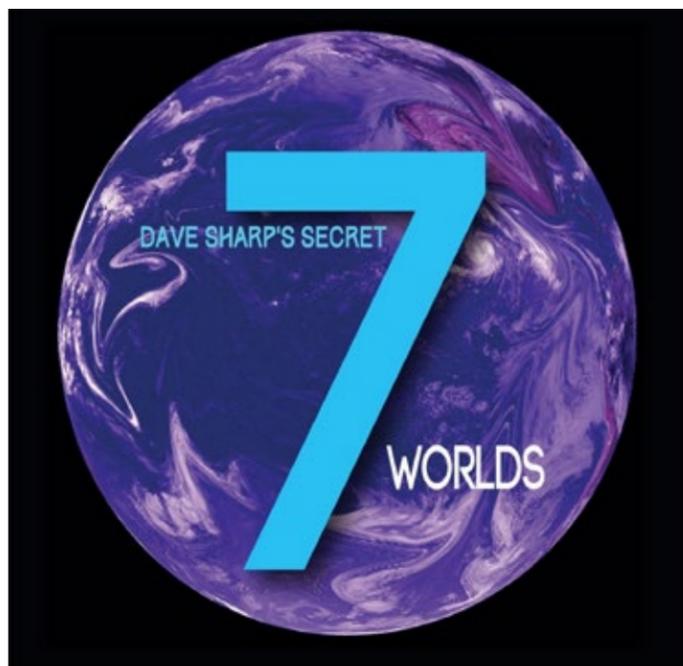
The drummer has deep skills at freely improvised music, but here, he's assigned his group a series of standards to realign. "Long Ago And Far Away," "You Don't Know What Love Is," "Just In Time"—the melodies warm a listener's ear to the familiar while his team recalibrates the songs' structural DNA. Gone is the head-solo-head dynamic. In its place is a nod to polyphony that has footholds in both Louis Armstrong's Hot Five sides and the Art Ensemble's collective rambles. These nine themes are sliced and diced, then put back together in a way that should tickle kaleidoscope fiends. A love song's traditional mood may be upended, soaked with wry humor rather than romance. Often, decla-

ration is ditched for a more cagey approach, one that gives each member of the quintet member a chance to wax equally expressive.

Comprised of a cohort Rainey's run with for a while, the band feels natural weaving its way through these pieces. Trumpeter Ralph Alessi, saxophonist Ingrid Laubrock, pianist Kris Davis, and bassist Drew Gress use their familiarity with each other to bump up the eloquence quotient. As each makes lyrical comments in "If I Should Lose You," they parlay their individuality into a true ensemble statement. It's literally refreshing. Ralph Rainger's 1936 film ditty, a staple of jazz bands for decades, now sounds enigmatic rather than obvious.

What the band doesn't dodge is swing. Time and again there's plenty of rhythmic liftoff at play. On "Secret Love," it's in the form of a sideways rumba. On the two spins through "Just In Time," it's overt. This isn't a record about injecting old-fashioned nuggets with dissonance. It's about peeling back the top skin of such pieces and revealing a series of possible architectures.

The familiarity is actually a key attraction, and Rainey banks on it. By the time the quintet is done with "Prelude To A Kiss," Duke's age-old beauty has received a bit of scrutiny, but it's also been genuflected to as well. —**Jim Macnie**



Dave Sharp's Secret 7

Worlds

Vortex Jazz Recordings, CD

Bassist/guitarist Dave Sharp was born in Detroit, and after a few years on the West Coast, he returned to his home state where he has lived for the past 15 years. But the impression that comes across on his Secret 7 disc is that inspiration comes from anywhere.

Sharp has enlisted some heavy hitters from around the world to realize his vision, and mentions in the liner notes spending time in Dakar at the home of vocalist/songwriter/drummer Cheikh Lô, who performs on this disc. (No mean feat getting him on board, as Lô is one of the most prominent artists from Senegal.) The ensemble also includes Iranian and Indian musicians along with Eenor, who infuses his guitar manipulation with various ideas from global electronica. There's no clearly identifiable point of origin here—and there doesn't need to be. For the most part, Sharp's own voice as a player and composer resounds among the panoply of influences.

Even though Sharp plays mostly stringed instruments throughout *Worlds*, the strongest tracks emphasize intertwined drum patterns. That percussive stress works best on pieces that reflect African and African-American traditions. Opener "Sherehe" is upbeat and immediately infectious, via a horn section that mixes R&B precision with hints of Nigerian highlife. On "Nu Africa," Gayelynn McKinney's assertive drumming gets answered with a sharp counterpunch of staccato saxophone and trumpet bursts. That horn section consists of trumpeter Walter White and Chris Kaercher. The latter plays tenor, alto, and baritone saxophones, and co-composed the piece along with about half the other tracks.

Sharp's pieces that draw from Bollywood and Asian traditions offer mixed results. His combinations sound lively on "Mystery Blues," which the bandleader describes as influenced by Charles Mingus and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. The tune is worthy of the men that inspired it, with co-composer Parthiv Gohil's fast vocal syllables set against Gary Schunk's deep bluesy piano lines. On "Kalinjar," Sharp's electric and upright bass lines seamlessly glide into Indro Roy Chowdhury's sitar. But Kaercher becomes an unwelcome distraction from Jonita Gandhi's lovely vocals on "Eastern Flame." Eenor's processed guitar also adds little besides vague enhancement to "Rain Raga."

Worlds concludes with three different versions of "Nu Africa," listed as "bonus tracks." These radio edits aren't an essential conclusion, but, like much of the disc, they're fun to have around. —**Aaron Cohen**



Tord Gustavsen

Extended Circle

ECM, CD

Improvisers that willfully tilt their music towards a meditative state are a ballsy bunch. One wrong move and focused introspection crumbles into the tedium of navel-gazing. Tord Gustavsen has been examining the landmarks around this thin line for years. Whether leading a trio or quartet, the Norwegian pianist makes it his business to dance in a spot that seeks a trance-like atmosphere. Sometimes it's done with flourishes, sometimes all it takes is a mere note or two. In the large, and that includes most of his new ECM date (his sixth for the label), he's found a way to give his ethereal approach enough tension to keep the action engaging.

To some degree, this victory is a testament to lyricism. From the balm of the traditional hymn "Eg Veit I Himmerik Ei Borg" to the stark solo musings of "Silent Spaces," the dreaminess celebrates the way a simple phrase can define itself with lilt. Inflection is paramount in Gustavsen's foursome, a well-seasoned piano trio augmented by tenor saxophonist Tore Brunborg. Each member dedicates himself to enhancing the music's buoyancy.

The group sound is well considered. Like a ballad-smitten version of Keith Jarrett's famed European Quartet, this crew eschews abrupt changes. The music's transitions—from hush to crescendo, from bass soliloquy to band surge—all naturally develop, making one measured step after another. That feeds the flow and helps support the leader's celestial narrative. Occasionally, it also puts a certain demand on the audience. Time can move slowly in Gustavsen's world; the "meditative state" phrase mentioned above is his, used to explain his artistic tack.

Brunborg's keening on "Glow," the rhythm section's fluid contemplation on "The Prodigal Song"—each is an apt example of the way the pianist likes his music to have as much as mood as it does rhythm. Some believe that characteristic to be an ECM hallmark, but Gustavsen isn't just another ambassador of ambiance. He's genuinely found a way to have his whispers counted breath by breath. —**Jim Macnie**



Brad Mehldau and Mark Guiliana

Mehliana: Taming The Dragon
Nonesuch, 2LP/CD or CD

Brad Mehldau has never chosen an easy route. One of the most acclaimed and popular jazz pianists to emerge during the 1990s, he has refused to stick to the acoustic trio or solo formats that fill major concert halls and festival stages. He has collaborated with guitarist Pat Metheny, as well as opera star Renée Fleming, and recorded his own chamber music compositions.

For the past few years, he's also toured with drummer/electronic music creator Mark Guiliana, who describes his own work on his Facebook page as "experimental beat music." Mehldau also emphasizes his own electronic playing here, especially synthesizers and a Fender Rhodes. But while the pianist deserves credit for continuing to reinvent himself—and, along the way, bringing his formidable technique to an audience a world away from the traditional jazz crowd—*Mehliana: Taming The Dragon* is a letdown.



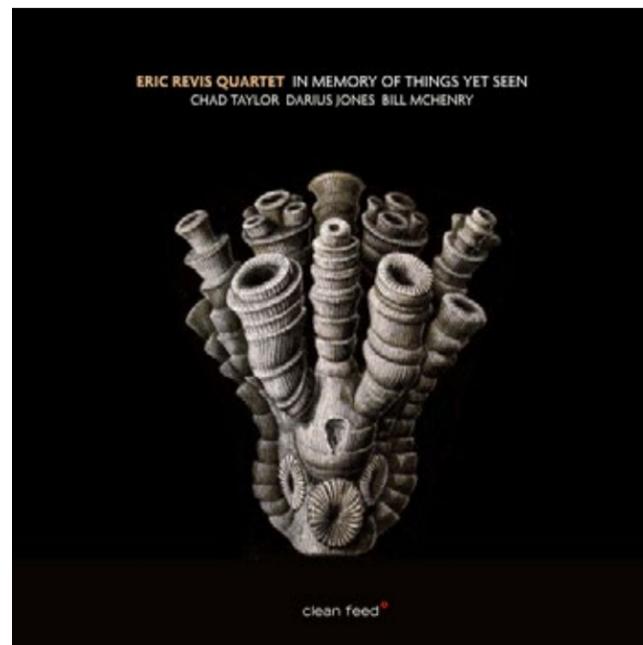
©Photo by Brantley Gutierrez

In some ways, this is not Mehldau's first foray into what could fit under the prog-rock rubric. The pianist already covered, and transformed, Radiohead's "Paranoid Android" and "Exit Music: For A Film." And while that British band never sounded far removed from Pink Floyd, here Mehldau displays more affinities with groups that sprang out of 1970s England, frequently using long-careening high notes that echo Keith Emerson. It's also probably no coincidence that Guiliana's press material contains praise from Yes/King Crimson drummer Bill Bruford. While the era offers rich ground for exploration, this duo could have taken that road much further and come up with the sort of interstellar voyage that might have rivaled Hawkwind.

Without going that far afield, much of Guiliana's effects come across as diversions. Mehldau's lyrical single-note melodic lead lines are effective on "London Gloaming" and "Sassyassed Sassafrass," but the added electronics are more a distraction than an addition of interesting, or provocatively contrasting, harmonies. Too many layers also reduce the emotional pull of "Elegy For Amelia E." The piece, a remembrance of the groundbreaking pilot Amelia Earhart, would have been far more compelling with a direct focus on Mehldau's stark Moog lines.

The Earhart homage also includes a spoken-word recording that is presumably a discussion about technology from Earhart. Other spoken-word tracks include "Taming The Dragon," in which Mehldau relates a dream about driving around Los Angeles that could have come from a David Lynch movie. The narrative of continues with "You Can't Go Back Now." Both pieces blend the dialogue with Mehldau's brooding romanticism on synthesizer, but quick shifts in tempo and sudden bombastic tone seem haphazard.

All these elements work on some tracks and, perhaps, the disc serves as a template for how the duo can blend stretch out more in a live setting. Guiliana's drums enhance "Sleeping Giant" with compelling off-beat funk. And Mehldau's technique emphasizes welcome subtlety over flash on "Hungry Ghost." They also have a cool sense of humor on "Gainsbourg," a variation on the French pop icon's "Ford Mustang." It does not improve on the original, but would certainly command movement in any club. —**Aaron Cohen**



Eric Revis Quartet

In Memory Of Things Yet Seen
Clean Feed, CD

For a decade or so, when Eric Revis was largely perceived as the bassist in Branford Marsalis' Quartet, he was often cited for the agility he brought to the cohort's brawny rambles. Instrumentally, Revis has long been a pivot expert, nudging the group action in a variety of directions with an unexpected harmonic gambit or a surprising tempo shift.

While he's still part of the saxophonist's feisty squad, for the last three years he's earned a larger profile as a bandleader, and it's been as terrific to see him clock the acclaim as it has to absorb his creative music. 2012's *Parallax* connected him with the titanic presence of multi-reedist Ken Vandermark and brokered a limber spin on aggression. Last year's *City Of Asylum* is a triumph of ensemble synergy that opts for the soft touch and genuflects to the kind of poetic abstraction Andrew Hill favored. With the arrival of *In Memory of Things Yet Seen*, we have another Revis ensemble, wholly separate from the sound of its predecessors—and equally impressive.

Variety defines the disc. With a two-reed front line of Darius Jones and Bill McHenry, the bassist sets up the group to freewheel through myriad territories. There's no piano involved, so the harmonic terrain remains comparatively unencumbered. And while obviously distinct, McHenry's tenor and Jones' alto share common ground. Each loves to entwine with the other and neither is afraid of harsh declamation. With drummer Chad Taylor pushing hard at every turn, they quickly reach such regions. Sometimes that yields full-throttled blowing, the kind that drives the enticing squall of "Hits." But clamor is only one hue here. The lithe bounce of "Something's Cookin'" and breezy stroll of "Hold My Snow Cone" testify to the band's interest in graceful introspection.

Because the rhythm section is so adamant about bringing a handful of swing variants to the table, the music possesses plenty of liftoff. When Marsalis sits in on "Unknown," the term freebop is cast anew, with plenty of emphasis on the second syllable. The three reed players pinball off each other, effecting a balance even as the action turns frenzied. Taylor's pummel has a deep thrust, so forward motion is always in the air. By the time they rage through Sun Ra's "The Shadow World," it's all about propulsion.

Playing 13 tracks of singular pieces—tunes with quaint melodies sharing space with more blustery maneuvers—Revis makes a statement about breadth and its usefulness. Here's a group that sounds masterful regardless of which way it pivots. —**Jim Macnie**



Pat Metheny Unity Group

Kin
Nonesuch, 2LP or CD

As an engaged Pat Metheny fan ever since I heard the opening riff of "Bright Size Life" leap from the speakers in 1976, I've always raised an eyebrow towards the guitarist's work with his Group, the ensemble that took a big chunk of his time in the 80s and 90s. With the leader's lines rounded out by gauzy keyboards, the music wears its heart on its sleeve, but is overly generous when it comes to sharing its sentimentality. Because Metheny's a better guitarist than a composer, the Group's book often seems too saccharine by half. And while impressive interplay takes place within the performances, the defining tone comes straight from Hallmark—the gooey parts swamping the gorgeous parts.

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Made with an entirely different lineup, *Kin* falls victim to several of the same traps. A notable fierceness churns within the swirl of lines by saxophonist Chris Potter, bassist Ben Williams, multi-instrumentalist Giulio Carmassi, and Metheny himself. Yet it's blanketed by the grandeur that's central to each song. Taken singularly, the anthemic sweep that gives most tracks their personality is enjoyable, if a bit obvious. But as the nine pieces unfold during the hour-plus program, the emotions repeat themselves and dilute the overall impact.

The music—regardless of how fetching it may be moment to moment—turns mechanical and predictable. Majesty dissipates into pomp, and the orchestrations wax grandiose. Tellingly, "Rise Up," the album's second track, has a "closing credits" finality to it. By its conclusion, it feels like the band has examined enough dynamic space to credibly call it a day.

Respite from such overblown intricacies are welcome, but even a relatively demure ballad like "Adagia" reveals its heavy heart. And when it trickles into "Sign of the Season," the cycle of ostentatiousness starts anew. The low-register guitar lines on the reflective "Born" are appealing enough, as is Potter's tenor, which makes hay with the track's negative space and gets a few moments to put the instrumentalist's eloquence up front.

Mostly, however, *Kin* extends the Group's tradition of exacting elaboration and maudlin expression that harks back to the aptly named "The Epic" from 1979's *American Garage*. Metheny calls the new album an IMAX version of the Unity Group's previous disc, and he's right: everything is a bit too florid. If you're on the hunt for music that's equal parts stadium jazz and yacht rock, you're in the right place. —**Jim Macnie**



Jenny Scheinman
The Littlest Prisoner
 Sony Masterworks, CD

Jenny Scheinman's boundless imagination as a storyteller should come as no surprise, even if it has been hidden underneath everything else she's accomplished. The violinist began garnering applause from jazz critics about a dozen years ago when her inventive melodic lines enhanced a wide range of groups, mostly associated with New York's loosely defined downtown scene. She continually asserted herself as a formidable improviser and bandleader on such discs as 2005's *12 Songs* and on 2011's self-released *Mischief & Mayhem*. Around 2008, she also started recording as a vocalist, and continues to alternate between emphasizing the two instruments on different projects. Her striking compositions tie everything together.

On *The Littlest Prisoner*, Scheinman primarily sings, with the instrumental parts contained in short interludes or a few brief solos. Emphasis is placed on the songs themselves, and her lyric writing is no longer a secret strength. Scheinman writes love songs, but they're loaded with dark underpinnings—even pastoral images never seem safe. It's not the first time she's penned her words or focused on the verbal: After leaving the Oberlin Conservatory, she went on to graduate (with honors) from University of California, Berkeley, with a literature degree. But on the new disc, Scheinman's narratives hit harder than before.

"Brother," which opens *The Littlest Prisoner*, sets the tone. Scheinman imagines if her lover would be more considerate if they were siblings. No doubt, the sentiment is somewhat creepy, but, ultimately, the song's indelible melody and her understated delivery make the whole proposition actually sweet (someday, another literature student will write a term paper comparing/contrasting this song with Prince's "If I Was Your Girlfriend"). The title track begins with hopes for an infant



©Photo by Joshua Black Wilkins

daughter before taking a turn toward noir. "Just A Child" looks at the rural West Coast that blends nostalgia with wry commentary without flinching. Similarly, her sense of urgency doesn't overdo the pathos on the breakup tune "Run Run Run." And her gentle high voice doesn't shy away from relating that aromatic cedar and pine trees are used to build coffins. Upcoming country singers like Lindi Ortega should be taking notes.

But it's also difficult to imagine any other singer delivering these lines with the stunning inflections that Scheinman does throughout. On "Houston," she pauses in the right places that make the line "delicious little hurt" stab without lingering. In the same song, she's able to make the word "acupuncturist" flow with understated grace.

Guitarist Bill Frisell—a long-time collaborator—is part of the group alongside drummer Brian Blade. Frisell's single-note lines

provide the ideal accompaniment to Scheinman's higher-pitched voice on "Sacrifice." When Scheinman does pick up the violin, her slight dissonance and Appalachian inflections fill in the guitarist's open-ended spaces. Blade's background on "My Old Man" adds one more argument that he may be the best colorist currently working behind a kit. Ultimately, these musicians know their presence here is to help Scheinman breathe. —**Aaron Cohen**



The Bad Plus

The Rite Of Spring
Sony Masterworks, CD

A little more than 100 years ago, Russian composer Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite Of Spring* debuted in Paris. The reaction has been held up as a textbook example of the Shock Of The New. The piece was dissonant and rhythmically jarring. It generally messed with conceptions of what was popular in classical dance music. The audience responded with a near riot. Nowadays, such techniques are the norm in modern music, and the composer's later years—spent delving into jazz and Hollywood scores—contributed to such mass acceptance. While this classic work has been recorded innumerable times since, the Bad Plus brings a new vibrancy to it.



© Photo by Jay Fram

Ironically, the Bad Plus had a polarizing impact itself when it emerged at the turn of this century, inciting controversy among jazz critics rather than French classical elites. As a piano trio using rock anthems and rock energy to fuel its improvisations, the group drew a wide and youthful following, causing chagrin among some music journalists. Still, classically trained pianist Ethan Iverson has proven to be more erudite in discussing music than most scribes (check out his blog, *Do The Math*). Drummer David King and bassist Reid Anderson are just as thoughtful, even if not as publicly verbal. So this group is a perfect match to interpret *Rite Of*

Spring, which Duke University commissioned in 2010 (the year earlier, the trio recorded Stravinsky's "Variation d'Apollon"). On this recording, it's not just about emphasizing the volume, but showing how these jarring dynamics add up to tell a compelling saga.

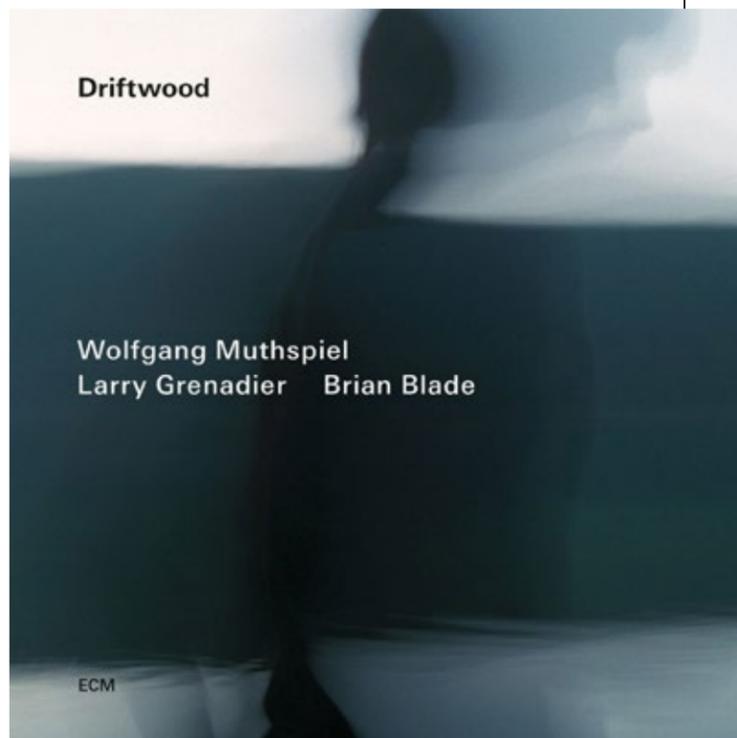
Essentially, the Bad Plus knows *The Rite Of Spring* is a ballet, and the group never loses this sense of musical choreography—even when it seems like it's wildly shouting at each other. That comes through when King's crashing intro on "Games Of The Two Rival Tribes/Procession Of The Sage" engages with Iverson's ostensible delicacy.

Somehow, a funk backbeat also fits well into the conversation. The pianist and drummer also deliver an exciting sense of pacing as they circle around Anderson's repeated two-note motif on "Evocation Of The Ancestors/Ritual Action Of The Ancestors."

When the trio takes liberties with the score, the innovations enhance the ritualistic imagery that Stravinsky likely envisioned. The composer created a stir when he had horns featured in passages of contrasting ostinati on "Mystic Circle Of The Young Girls." Here, Iverson pulls off that effect through his own forceful technique. Anderson's electronics

also add an ominous tone, while his bass lines add a bit of swing to "The Sage/Dance Of The Earth."

With a playing time of slightly less than 40 minutes, some may feel including extra tracks would have enhanced the disc's value. But that would be missing the point. This version of *The Rite Of Spring* expresses a strong narrative, and that includes the ideal conclusion. —**Aaron Cohen**



Wolfgang Muthspiel

Driftwood
ECM, CD

Austrian guitarist Wolfgang Muthspiel wanted to think differently for his debut on ECM, which is also his first recording with the ace rhythm team of bassist Larry Grenadier and drummer Brian Blade. Playing electric and acoustic, he has said that he wanted to reach the wider possibilities a piano trio offers. Muthspiel's moving compositions and the group dialogue throughout *Driftwood* more than accomplish his goal.

Another ideal for the disc, Muthspiel has also stated, is to bring the ECM aesthetic to the recording. Whatever that sound may be (and it has never been sufficiently described), *Driftwood* makes the most of the elements that built Manfred Eicher's reputation as a producer. The silent spaces within the studio become another instrument; Muthspiel manipulates the ethereal at all the right moments.

The trio establishes this inclination from the beginning of "Joseph," a tribute to Joe Zawinul. Muthspiel, on electric, unveils an array of bent notes and staccato runs without breaking an overall sense of serenity (sounding nothing at all like, say, a typical Weather Report track). Blade's low-key skittering across the kit serves as the ideal response. On the acoustic "Uptown," Muthspiel echoes such Brazilian guitarists as Baden Powell while Grenadier provides a gently swinging groove. "Madame Vonn," an homage to ill-fated Olympic skier Lindsey Vonn, recalls the melancholia of Portugues fado, which might



L-R Larry Grenadier and Brian Blade with Wolfgang Muthspiel

©Photo by Sun Chung

derive from Muthspiel's time working alongside Maria João.

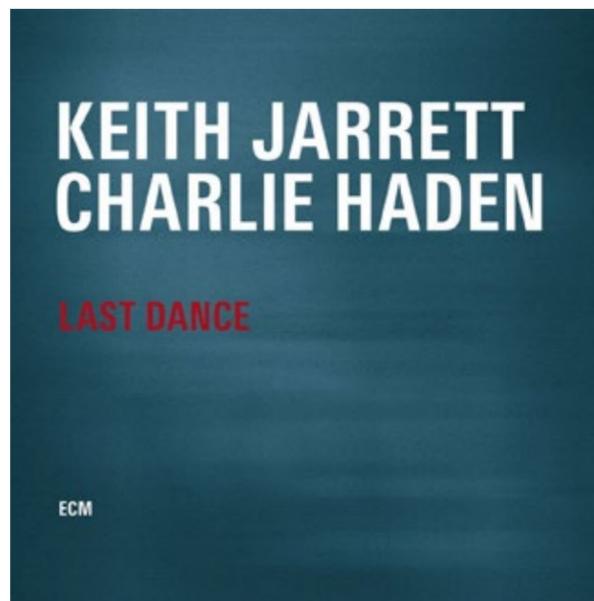
His acoustic emphasis never means simple delicacy, as he shows via surprising off-kilter note choices on "Cambiata." Similarly, Blade seems like he's lightly brushing against the cymbals. But he's doing so to construct a sturdy frame as well as creating strong rhythmic changes with Grenadier. On the title track, a free-improvisation work credited to all three musicians, hesitation is the key: An understated dialogue between Muthspiel and

Grenadier with Blade rolling in the background hinges on their perceptive way of ending each line.

Grenadier's lyrical arco technique takes the initial lead on "Highline" while Muthspiel's electric notes begin as background effects. But, gradually, the guitarist moves to the front with the kinds of chords that suggest a piano trio's dynamics. Only then does Muthspiel unleash an array of effects that resolve with an assertive rock coda. Some processing is also part of "Lichtzelle," and its impact is equally tasteful.

As with the opening, *Driftwood* closes with a memorial, "Bossa For Michael Brecker." Muthspiel's electric homage deliberately builds while avoiding any clear crescendos. He also never tries to imitate the saxophonist's tone, knowing that bringing one's own personality to a project is the best tribute to any musician.

—Aaron Cohen



Keith Jarrett & Charlie Haden

Last Dance
ECM, CD

Charlie Haden has recorded duets with a handful of pianists. Among others, Kenny Barron, Hank Jones, John Taylor, Hampton Hawes, and Gonzalo Rubalcaba have had the chance to contour their lines around the bassist's plush notes. While each boasts a distinctive approach, a through-line marks their sessions: An unmistakable sense of grace—as well as the serenity it seems to seek—often sits proudly in the foreground, and it comes from Haden's deeply pliant touch.

That artistic signature glows with emotional power as a matter of course, but it reaches an unusual depth when he's connecting with his longtime friend Keith Jarrett. *Last Dance*, the duo's second disc, teems with heart. Whether examining a Broadway ballad or pulsing through a bop nugget, the aging partners turn their focus to the task of rendering lyricism in the name of camaraderie.

Things move slowly here. Both Jarrett and Haden are quite comfortable with sullen tempos (head back to their sublime "Ellen David" from the bassist's 1976 *Closeness* to hear the roots of their rapport), and as they wind their way around the melodies of "My Ship" and "Everything Happens To Me," their appreciation of nuance stands in the foreground. Throughout, the pianist refrains from rapturous runs and the bassist pares down his already minimal approach. *Last Dance* isn't a place to turn for effusive improv (which isn't to say that Jarrett's right hand doesn't knock off a pithy string of trills every now and then). Rather, it's a spot that seduces with the deep grace of unity.

Regardless of how they saunter through these reflections, a deliberate nature stays in play. At certain moments it seems as if "Every Time We Say Goodbye" is taking a breather—it's just the pair's way of giving silence its due. "My Old Flame" may introduce the album's dreamy program at a creep, but there's a glide inherent in the duo's moves, and the tactile way they align themselves sustains the action. The sole uptempo track, Bud Powell's "Dance of the Infidels," is strategically placed and infuses the program with the ardor of bop.

Recorded during a 2007 meeting at Jarrett's home studio in the Jersey countryside, these sessions have already given us 2009's *Jasmine*, an album with a similar personality. And while this is formally part two of the work done seven years ago, it's more fetching than its predecessor, whose candlelit character occasionally brokkered a snoozy vibe.

Yes, it may inch along in some spots, but *Last Dance* comes on as a rumination on romance that simply chooses to make every note count. Its sentiment is fetching. —**Jim Macnie**

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SAM RIVERS/CONTRASTS

ECM

Sam Rivers*Contrasts*

ECM, 180g LP or CD

Sam Rivers and Dave Holland first recorded together on the esteemed bassist's 1972 freebop cornerstone *Conference Of The Birds*—a must-own album by a one-time-only quartet and, as far as artistic affinity goes, a telling session. It's there on which the pair's magical rapport presented itself, and the musicians felt it, too. The bassist and reed player quickly became part of an insightful and ongoing trio with drummer Barry Altschul, and three years after making the album, they were in a New York studio cutting extended duets that charged listeners with appreciating the flow of their excursions. Those dates, released on the Improvising Artists label and now rightly deemed iconic, helped cement a relationship that proved to be one of jazz's most fruitful.

Contrasts, an oft-overlooked entry in ECM's 1970s catalog, speaks to the power of flow as well. The record's seven discrete pieces are individual statements that present singular moods. But this disc, made by a 1979 quartet that includes trombonist George Lewis and percussionist Thurman Barker, is best heard in one clip. Thanks to the depth of the teamwork, the program takes on the vibe of a suite. By the time one of these distinctive nuggets concludes, you're curious about how the next will play out to amend the overall story line.

The vignettes might move from tom-tom thuds and 'bone smears to sax flurries and marimba forays, yet Rivers' aesthetic—which makes a case for linking motifs into a steady stream of ideas—is sated along the way. The uptempo aggression of "Dazzle" has more impact when adjacent to the flute esprit of "Verve." The opening swirls of "Circles" seem inextricably linked to the concluding "Lines." *Contrasts* spotlights the way Rivers the bandleader views continuity as a performance staple, offering "one ongoing song," as it were.

Rivers had cut something similar a year and a half earlier. The same group (with Joe Daley's tuba rather than Lewis' trombone) made the compelling *Waves*. But *Contrasts* is the richer album. The saxophonist was in his mid-50s at this point. He'd collected paychecks from Miles Davis, waxed important Blue Notes, and gained global kudos for the Altschul/Holland trio. His iconoclastic tendencies are also bolstered by a lyricism flecked with a personalized blues argot.

The evocative chirping on "Images," the long tones that unfold on "Solace"—abstraction is the lay of the land here, but the music's beauty is unmistakable. Getting to know *Contrasts* again through this reissue proves just how poised the saxophonist and his colleagues were as they brought their experimental concord to a wider audience.

—**Jim Macnie**

Cardas Audio, Bandon, Oregon



Jamie Saft/Steve Swallow/Bobby Previte

The New Standard

RareNoise Records, 180g 2LP or CD

Keyboardist Jamie Saft takes a direct turn toward the melodic on his new disc. In the past, he's brought the noise in an array of contexts, from his own electric groups to collaborations with such colleagues as Bad Brains and the Beastie Boys. But on this session with drummer Bobby Previte and venerated electric bassist Steve Swallow, the introspective edges out the aggression and seems to have tightened his focus.

Saft, who doubles on piano and organ, is also a member of Slobber Pup. The latter's 2013 album *Black Aces* throws free jazz, metal, and funk in an amalgamation that doesn't contradict the group's messy name. He's also been active in New York's downtown scene, where he and Previte have collaborated with John Zorn and a host of other genre-breakers. Previte recruited Saft for his Weather Clear, Fast Track band in the early 1990s and also introduced the keyboardist to Swallow. While Saft wrote all but three of the 10 compositions on *The New Standard* and shares production duties with Previte, he has mentioned that this trio is a full collaborative effort—vide, there's an upbeat track here accurately titled "I See No Leader." Throughout, the group's interplay backs this claim.

Recorded in analog direct to two-track ½" tape through a Neve console by five-time Grammy-winning engineer Joe Ferla, *The New Standard* opens with Saft's bluesy tone on "Clarissa," where he eases into and out of the solidly written piece with response from Previte's understated cymbals before the cut eases into a quiet resolution. Saft conveys a similarly relaxed approach during most of the disc. On "Trek," Previte's march and Swallow's determined lines set the pace while the pianist remains in the background. Then, the trio's rhythmic and harmonic roles intuitively switch as Saft becomes more intense. But on organ, Saft can sound just as assertive as he needs to be, especially on the gospel-inflected "Clearing" and via a series of weighty minor-key arpeggios on "All Things To All People."



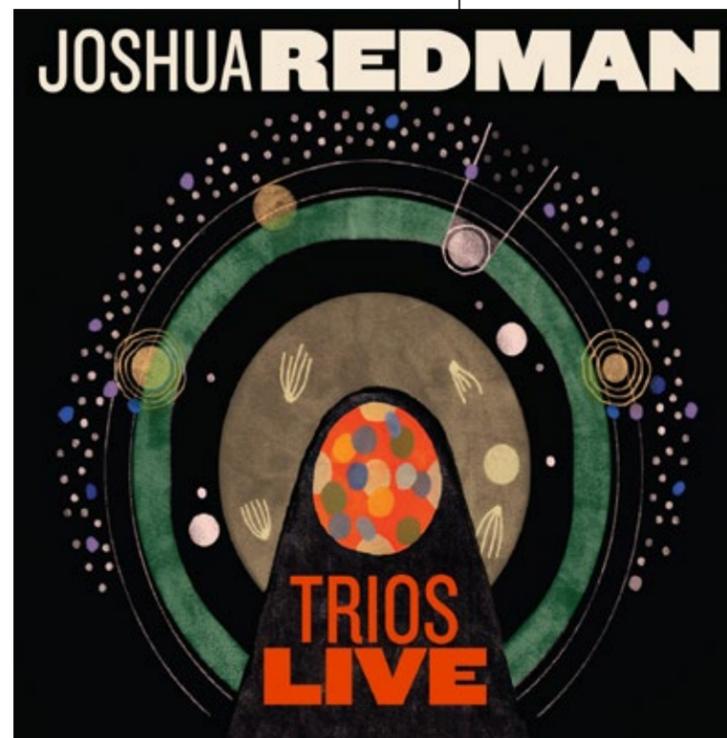
©Photo by Scott Irvine

Swallow provides another reminder of why, after so many decades, he remains the most respected electric bassist in jazz. On "Step Lively," his staccato low-end notes are the ideal complement for Saft's high-register runs. "Blue Shuffle" begins as a vintage Jimmy Smith-style organ groove until Saft and Previte sound like they're remixing the sound in real time while Swallow holds everything down like the elder statesman he is. The closer, "Surrender The Chaise," presents Swallow sounding like he's nudging Saft into the ether, but the group's quiet strength suggests these guys are not going away anytime soon.

—**Aaron Cohen**



A trio may be the most challenging format for a jazz saxophonist. The player has no place to hide. He or she can't play off of another horn's ideas, and there's no piano to provide a cushion of chords. In some ways, it's even more daring than performing solo because the leader still must engage and inspire a rhythm section.



Joshua Redman

Trios Live
Nonesuch, CD

Joshua Redman began recording with this kind of group about seven years ago. His 2007 *Back East* album features the trio at its core (including bassist Reuben Rogers, who returns here on three tracks), but it also includes a number of guest players. Since then, he's worked with the collaborative *James Farm* and orchestral *Walking Shadows*. On the new *Trios Live*, he goes back to the stripped-down setting for this concert recording of two different groups performing at New York's Jazz Standard and Washington, D.C.'s Blues Alley. Getting back to the basics and taking on this dare in front of discerning audiences

makes his playing sound stronger than ever.

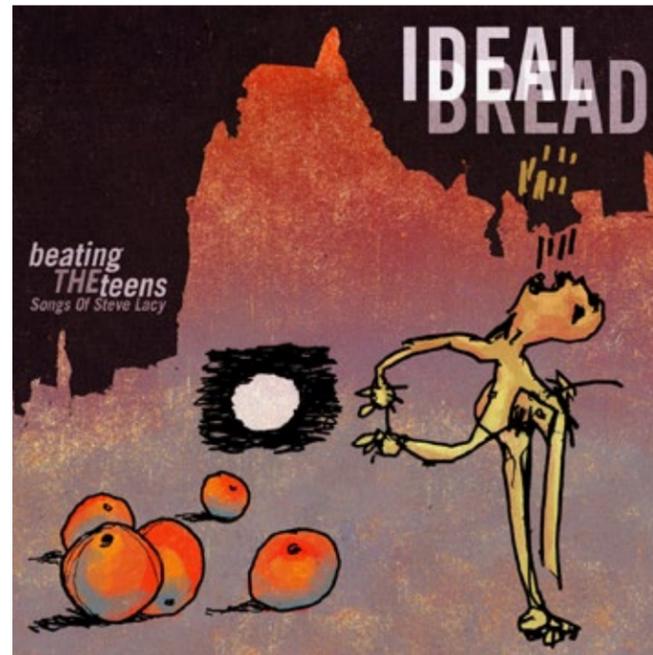
Redman has mentioned that Sonny Rollins' classic trio dates, especially 1957's *Way Out West*, have been especially inspirational when he began working within the format. While those are large shoes to fill, Redman, on tenor and soprano, sounds more than up to the job, especially since he consistently displays a personality of his own.

The way Redman, bassist Matt Penman, and drummer Gregory Hutchinson approach Kurt Weill's "Moritat (Mack The Knife)" can be considered the most ostensible connection to

Rollins. They extend the piece, and Redman in particular fills it with an array of squeals and clever quotations. Hutchinson, especially, helps guide all these forays into a resolving logic; Redman's rich tone also emphasizes this sense of clarity. A power take on Thelonious Monk's "Trinkle, Tinkle" steamrolls through the composer's singular intervals—a piano may have slowed them down. The saxophonist's voice is equally convincing on such quiet pieces as Jay Livingston's ballad "Never Let Me Go," which features Redman's subtle vibrato and subtly bold upper-register harmonies.

Trios Live also serves as a reminder of Redman's considerable skills as a composer. His "Mantra #5" provides the ideal structure for his soprano lyricism. "Act Natural" sounds like a multipart suite with Rogers' pizzicato bass solo leading back to Redman's embellishment of the theme with growls that hang outside the bar lines. Hutchinson also brings in different, and surprising, melodic tones here, as well as on "Soul Dance."

A rousing version of Led Zepelin's "The Ocean" concludes the outing. Redman, Penman, and Hutchinson bring the funk and unleash a few gimmicks—like the saxophonist's slap tonguing. But, considering the source, throwing every fun trick in the service of Zeppelin is more than all right. —**Aaron Cohen**



Ideal Bread
Beating the Teens
 Cuneiform, CD

W

hen Josh Sinton organized this Steve Lacy tribute band a decade ago, it was just that—a group that resurrected the esteemed saxophonist’s chestnuts so new ears could marvel at their unique designs. Featuring some of New York’s most inventive instrumentalists, the ensemble—drummer Tomas Fujiwara, cornetist Kirk Knuffke, and bassist Reuben Radding—did a terrific job of making their hero’s odd structural lines invitingly flow. From “Papa’s Midnight Hop” to “Kitty Malone,” the collective brought panache to the pieces. Sinton had studied with Lacy, and it was a treat to hear the late master’s tunes come alive again.

But repertory missions sometimes have a creative wall built into them. For its third album, *Ideal Bread* (the band name is taken from a Lacy pearl about how improvising is like baking fresh loaves each day) ditches the overt reproduction approach and instead crafts charts that genuflect to the originals while brokering a more kaleidoscopic spin.



©Photo by Johannes Worsøe Berg

Sinton chose a focus—Lacy’s *Scratching The Seventies/Dreams* box set—and tasked himself with reimagining these tunes just enough to have their souls remain intact while new bodies were issued. Lacy played soprano sax, and Sinton is a baritone man, so there’s already some distance between their essential sounds. Adam Hopkins is the bassist these days, but *Ideal Bread*’s general tone hasn’t changed much since its start: Four cats inject themselves into the heart of a songbook and peel back layers of the music to reveal more about themselves and the music at hand.

Pondering questions of flexible authorship—and how a 21st century improviser messes with myriad sources—is part of the fun here. (Don’t forget, Lacy upended plenty of Monk nuggets.) Sinton and associates make you think about the pliability and definition of “a cover tune.” But the joys of *Beating the Teens* are elementary, too. After lots of bandstand time, the quartet’s chemistry is superb, and the architectural ploys provide plenty of room for wily gambits.

Knuffke has a sly way of coming around corners. Fujiwara can be dense and lilting. Hopkins trusts the power of melody. Sinton banks on textural nuance, even when he’s shredding. Everything is up for grabs in these fertile interpretations. A horn theme in an original Lacy piece might become a fragment for the bassist to run with here. One of Lacy’s key rhythms might re-routed forever. Listeners shouldn’t go hunting too closely; A/B’ing the updates with the source material could turn up as many questions as answers. Uncertainties are left hanging, and that’s a good thing. But it’s not as if you can’t hear Lacy floating through the program.

The descending lines in the theme of “The Wane,” the quacks of “Scraps,” and especially that eerie aura the bari creates on “Somebody Special”—yep, Lacy’s around for sure, probably grinning as his progeny try their hand at making their own ideal bread. If you try sometimes, you get what you knead. —**Jim Macnie**


Jason Moran

All Rise: A Joyful Elegy For Fats Waller
Blue Note, LP or CD

For the past few years, pianist Jason Moran has been touring with a multimedia presentation of the work of early jazz composer Fats Waller. It's easy to see why Waller's music has endured well into this century: Few could swing as hard, and even fewer were as hilarious. Moran's celebration of Waller has retained the integrity and, often, the humor in his work while also drawing on more contemporary influences. Onstage—such as at his concert at the 2013 Chicago Jazz Festival—much of the appeal is visual, as it was with Waller's own film appearances. A few dancers add modern steps and Moran performs with his head underneath an oversized *papier mâché* Waller mask. His new *All Rise: A Joyful Elegy For Fats Waller* proves the project is just as compelling on disc.

The core group includes Moran's longstanding trio of bassist Tarus Mateen and drummer Nasheet Waits with an additional assemblage of horn players and vocalists, including Meshell Ndegeocello. This expansive ensemble lends Moran a wider amount of textures. He makes the most out of the expanded palette, especially when he draws on contemporary R&B tones and hip-hop rhythms to highlight how Waller's compositions adapt to new musical contexts.



©Photo by Clay Patrick McBride

Such modern, and personal, transformation starts with "Ain't Misbehavin'." In this version, the horn intro sounds closer to Outkast than Count Basie, and then the brass turns around to support singer Lisa E. Harris' slow vamps. Moran's group also sets up a contrast with Waits' rapid delivery underneath Leon Thomas' muted trumpet on "Yacht Club Swing." Mateen's electric funk keeps the effervescent harmonies grounded on "This Joint Is Jumpin'." As a singer, Thomas turns "Two Sleepy People" into a soul ballad as he lays his lines on top of Moran's Rhodes (the background electronic string effects are a slight distraction).

But the most striking overhaul is Ndegeocello's arrangement of "Ain't Nobody's Business," which converts the song into a dark lament with a hint of Sade's phrasing.

Moran's solos throughout *All Rise* show how much fun he has reworking his own learned knowledge of jazz history. Just listen to his use of hesitation and intervals that echo Thelonious Monk on "Lulu's Back In Town." And the combination of acoustic stride piano and electronics on "Handful Of Keys" could have come from Sun Ra (who admired Waller). Saxophonist Stephen Lehman's performance on "Jitterbug Waltz" could also surprise some listeners. While his records (such as the recent *Mise En Abime*) feature his own experimental language, he has not abandoned his commitment to digging deeply into traditional chord changes.

When Moran performed the Waller tribute in Chicago last year, he occasionally overemphasized the repetition. But on *All Rise*, there are hardly any wasteful notes. Maybe he knows too much excess will result in more than just a raised eyebrow from the spirit of the comic swing master. —**Aaron Cohen**



Stefano Bollani
Joy In Spite Of Everything
ECM, CD

Stefano Bollani has truly wooed me in the last few years. The Italian pianist's work with Enrico Rava boasts a muted radiance that brings a gleam of joy to the trumpeter's dark-hued work. Listen to how he energizes even the most ghostly passages of Rava's remarkable *New York Days*. And last year's encounter with Brazilian mandolin virtuoso Hamilton de Holanda is filled with the kind of quick-witted interplay that impresses anyone who demands music both animated and accessible. I caught the pair at the Newport Jazz Festival in early August, and they had a crowd—one I'm betting hadn't previously heard their music—utterly enthralled.

This new quintet album, one of the year's most seductive jazz records, seals the deal in regards to Bollani's charm. The pianist pinballs off his rhythm section on the flurry of lines that comprise the title track. Genial agitation is something he's expert at, but the fluid touch at his command often brings a Bud Powell elegance to the fore when he shifts into high gear. The quintet he assembled here is remarkably pliable. Guitarist Bill Frisell and saxophonist Mark Turner share the front line and bassist Jesper Bodilsen and drummer Morten Lund charge everything they touch. The boss is the pivot man, granting himself a fair amount of solos while feeding the fire when others are having their say. His comping work remains as inspired as his feature excursions. I reference Powell on purpose: Bollani brings a jaunty drive to the table on "No Pope No Party," a post-bop romp that could be a one-shot convincer for the group's awesome esprit.

Whimsy bubbles up in various spots. "Alobar e Kundra" sounds stitched together with moonlight, the pianist and his rhythm section following impulse after impulse while chasing gossamer. In Italy, Bollani is a recognized



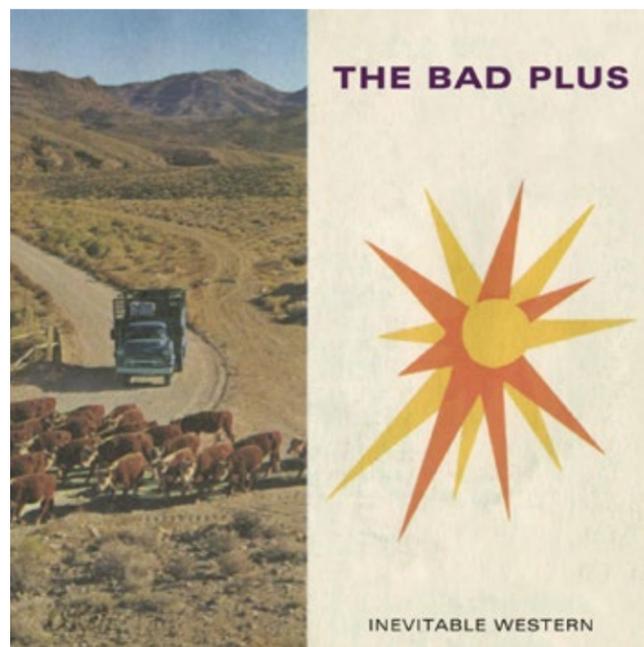
© Photo by Paolo Soriani/ECM Records

Morten Lund, Bill Frisell, Stefano Bollani, Jesper Bodilsen, and Mark Turner

author of children's books and lacks not when it comes to wit. There's a gamesman slant to his playing, too. The duo exchange with Frisell on "Teddy," a two-man reverie that parallels last year's Fred Hersch/Julian Lage meeting for poise and playfulness, makes counterpoint seem to be the most essential element of improvisation. You can almost see the grins on their faces.

All this talk about elation somewhat belies the command this unit has over autumn moods. "Vale" sits in the middle of this fetching program, providing an eerie stroll that gives Turner ample time to plot a luminous course while the quintet, especially the leader, sets a pensive mood. "Ismene" is somewhat similar—call it a tone poem of deep evanescence—but here, Frisell's

dewy lines help the aura unfold. Like the opening calypso "Easy Healing," the song resounds of character, distinct even as it uses a cloak of amorphousness to help establish its lighthearted essence. That's not easy to do, and as the music drives the group (especially Turner) to sound unusually inviting, the heart of Bollani's art emerges. He's all about drawing you in.
—**Jim Macnie**



The Bad Plus
Inevitable Western
 Okeh, CD

The Bad Plus has never lacked ambition. A few months ago, the trio released its take on Igor Stravinsky’s polarizing *The Rite Of Spring*. Now the group has gone back to refocus on rock-inspired modern jazz improvisation with *Inevitable Western*. But even if the nine original, and relatively compact, compositions (with writing duties divided equally among the band members) may not initially seem as monumental as reinterpreting a key modern classical work, the seemingly more inward-looking performance here sounds no less determined.

While the Bad Plus has stepped away from the rock covers that brought it widespread attention more than a decade ago, some elements from that time are prevalent throughout *Inevitable Western*. Heavily dramatic chord changes fuel drummer David King’s “Gold Prisms Incorporated” as well as bassist Reid Anderson’s “You Will Lose All Fear.” Queen could be one source here—and the trio has interpreted “We Are The Champions” (on *Live In Tokyo* from 2005).

But such grandiosity is never an ending point in and of itself. The group possesses the resourcefulness and quick-thinking intuitive dialogue to usually turn such statements inside-out.

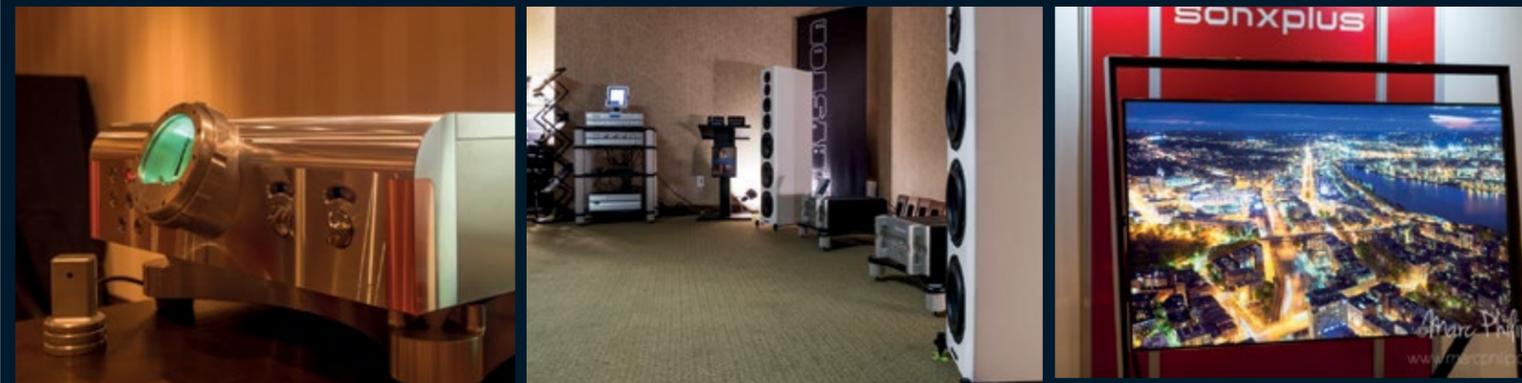
On “Gold Prisms Incorporated,” pianist Ethan Iverson’s emphasis on higher-register notes and key changes make the latter come across like they’re subverting the dominant motifs. He also creates a vivid contrast between his simultaneous low-register rumblings and higher-note lines on pieces such as King’s “Adopted Highway.” Then he weaves in a few arpeggios. Just as crucially, Iverson’s playing cajoles while leaving enough space for King and Anderson to constantly turn pieces around, as they do on the slow intro to Anderson’s “I Hear You.” Iverson’s surface minimalism also highlights King’s rapid, deceptively light attack.

Throughout, the rhythm section’s role becomes anything but predetermined. On Iverson’s “Self Serve,” King sounds more pronounced not because of his own volume, but how he guides the pianist and bassist while remaining in the background. At the beginning of “Epistolary Echoes,” the rhythmic foundation is established with an adroit handclaps-and-bass duo rather than on his own instrument. When the drummer unleashes polyrhythms on Iverson’s “Mr. Now,” he knows enough not to overheat the piece. After Anderson’s opening solo, Iverson’s slow gait closes the album via the title track. Perhaps the pianist’s playing, and his tune, are supposed to convey a sense of the cinematic desert. Either way, the Bad Plus has fun with any kind of narrative.

—**Aaron Cohen**

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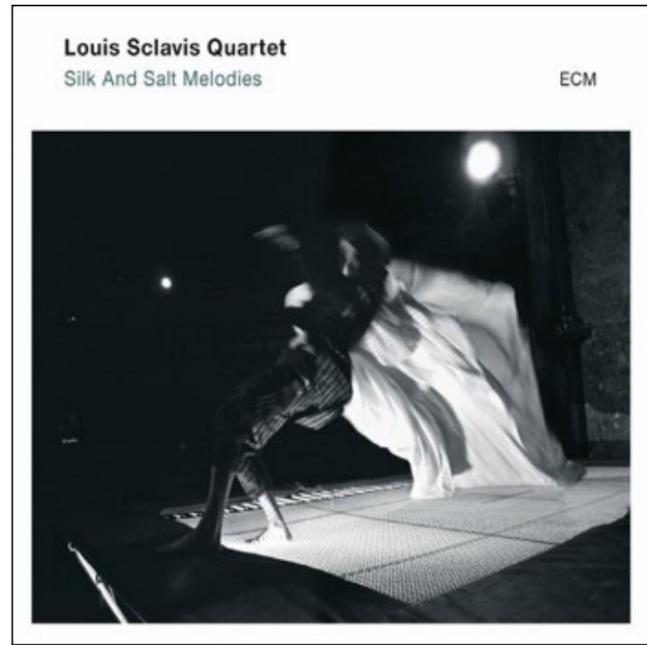
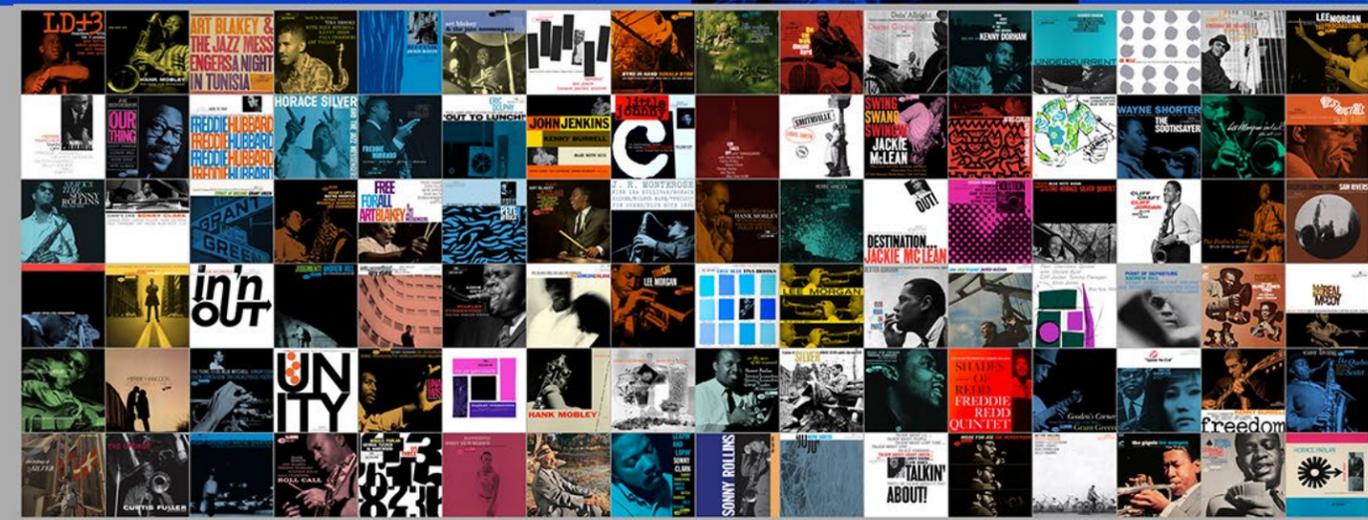
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Louis Sclavis Quartet
Silk And Salt Melodies
ECM, CD

French clarinetist Louis Sclavis sounds comfortable taking an extensive journey. About 25 years ago, he explored different reed instruments' outer edges along with such European free improvisers as Evan Parker and Wolfgang Fuchs on *Duets*, *Dithyrambisch*. But he's been traveling in a different direction these past few years with his Atlas Trio of guitarist Gilles Coronado and pianist/keyboardist Benjamin Moussay. On 2012's *Sources*, the group explores North African music. His new *Silk And Salt Melodies* reflects his take on the sounds of storied Central Asian trade routes.

Several international modes flow in and out of the disc's nine compositions, all of which Sclavis wrote. These include phrases that sound like they derive from the impressionism of Claude Debussy. Iranian percussionist Keyvan Chemirani, who represents a different classical tradition, even joined the ensemble for this disc. He plays the zarb, a kind of frame drum.

But *Silk And Salt Melodies* remains firmly rooted in jazz, especially as it sounds like the source for the group's intuitive dialogue. That includes opening track, "Le Parfum De L'exil," where Sclavis introduces the piece for the solo, but then swings behind the beat that Coronado and Moussay shape. On "Des Feux Lointains," Sclavis also plays from underneath Moussay's piano lines, but controls the motion with some surprising pauses. He also has a tone that occasionally echoes Eric Dolphy and John Carter. Sclavis soars during his solo on "Dance For Horses," which follows a skittish duo between Coronado and Chemirani. Other times, Sclavis emphasizes groove, like when his single notes tug along with Moussay's electric keyboard, with Chemirani adding the funk.

Silk And Salt Melodies sounds especially lively when these different elements crash against each other. Moments include the trio's shift in dynamics from loping to aggressive on "Sel Et Soie," and how the gentle opening to "L'autre Rive" spins into a fragmented solo from Coronado that sounds a bit like Marc Ribot. There is also no shortage of humor in "Cortege," which sounds as if it's mocking the martial tone of the introduction. But Coronado's open-ended solo is what defines the piece. The disc concludes with a brief, and somewhat strange, electronic collage called "Prato Plage," perhaps the signal of a different trip Sclavis plans for the future.

While Sclavis and his crew depict such faraway places, producer Manfred Eicher recorded the disc at one of ECM's main studios near Avignon, France. The pristine sound, which highlights the air as much as the notes, is remarkable. —Aaron Cohen



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Medeski Scofield Martin & Wood

Juice
Indirecto, CD



Jazz loves to push the boundaries and make big creative statements, but there's always been plenty of room for moves that conform to formula and recalibrate existing tropes. Medeski, Martin & Wood, the keyboards/bass/drums trio that wooed a sizable audience by blending extreme improv with enjoyable grooves, struck a rich vein of the latter when they connected in 1998 with John Scofield for the guitarist's *A-Go-Go*. Four albums and several live dates later, this foursome not only comes off like a true band but a well-heeled group of road dogs that couldn't sound any more comfy together.

With each new disc by the quartet, the collective ease becomes more pronounced. Familiarity is the name of the game on *Juice*, the ensemble's third studio affair. As pithy riff tunes spill into more luxuriant extrapolations, the give-and-take becomes seamless.

The rhythm section knows where to zig, the soloists know where to zag, and somewhere down the line—certainly on the percolating sizzle and flowing grooves of “Stovetop”—the elbow room they provide one other evolves into a symbol of the confluence needed to make elaborate interplay sound utterly natural.

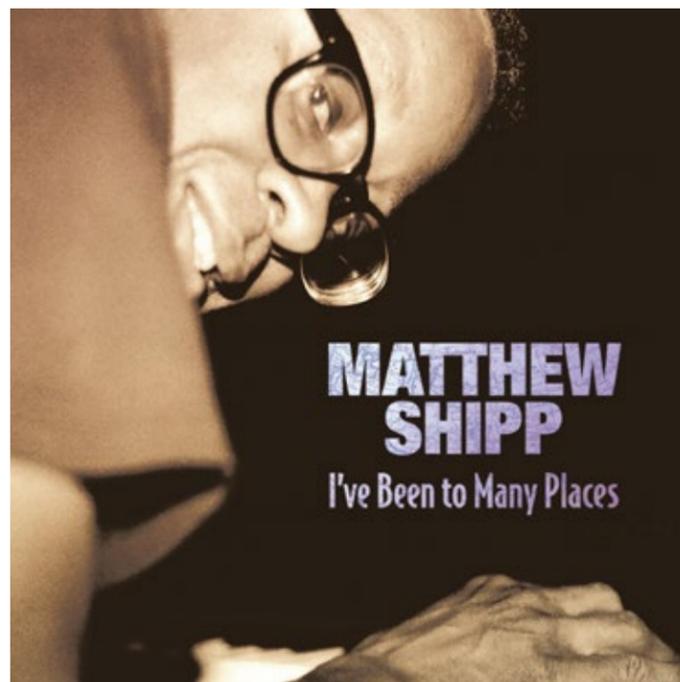
There's a bit of Boomer sentimentalism at play here. But fear not, these four dodge all things mawkish. “Juicy Lucy” corrupts “Louie Louie” with just enough gnarly glee to give it props for being one of the most pliable nuggets ever. By the end, it's bent out of shape. The reading of “Light My Fire” is more literal.

Rather than use it as a diving board for extensive solos, the quartet keeps the song as compact as the Doors did (even though the album version on the band's 1967 debut is an “extended” version). Adding a few more jukebox kicks, things get a tad wilder as the 60s are peeled further back. Repertory demands imagination, but it would have been hard to guess that a dub romp through Cream's “Sunshine Of Your Love” was in anyone's future. The guys give it a dose of easy skanking, and milk it for mood as much as they do melody.

I'm down with John Medeski's rainbow-colored

organ antics, but there's something striking about “Louis The Shoplifter,” which features him on piano instead. The caffeinated samba propels itself with steady chug. Scofield's pinched runs are deeply lyrical, like he's singing the song himself. Ultimately that's what marks *Juice*: The flow of action is so supple that everything arrives with a lilt attached. Even the hyper stuff. As the group watches the sun set on “The Times They Are A-Changin',” its expertise at poetic understatement resounds. The musicians' spin on Dylan's anthem is the most warm-hearted benediction of the jazz year.

—**Jim Macnie**


Matthew Shipp

I've Been To Many Places
Thirsty Ear, CD

The title of Matthew Shipp's solo disc indicates a look backward but also suggests a sense of finality. Nothing in the phrase indicates where he thinks he might be going in the future. *I've Been To Many Places* also revisits works that have been personally foundational, some of which he wrote and recorded more than half his lifetime ago. In addition, he incorporates standards that he has played in different contexts—including with powerful tenor saxophonist David S. Ware during the 1990s ("Tenderly"). His look at this personal history is filled with surprising inflections.



Here, Shipp emphasizes the lyrical. The title track, which opens the disc, is built around hesitations and lingering spaces between notes. That singular approach to pauses also shapes "Symbolic Access." His "Web Play" revolves around the lighter notes of his right hand making as much of an impact as the heavy lower-register rumbles of his left—the latter of which was key to Shipp's tense approach when he started to become known to international jazz listeners. He also reaches back to interpret

two of his early ballads, "Waltz" and "Reflex," which reveal how much his romanticism matches the mysticism he freely discusses in this issue's interview. Similarly, his version of John Coltrane's "Naima" sounds more about reworking the ode rather than trying to replicate the saxophonist's sheets of sound.

None of this means Shipp has softened. He just takes his time building into dramatic passages, like those on "Life Cycle." His revisit of George Gershwin's "Summertime" conveys a sense

of ominous mystery, as his solo becomes a barrage of repeated taut chords before returning to the familiar melody. While "Brain Shatter" does not convey the dangerous results of its title, Shipp's hammering quickly becomes intense before he immediately cuts it. On another original, "Brain Stem Grammer," his left-handed dive into the piano's lowest notes are set against intervals not far removed from Thelonious Monk—a technique he returns to on "Blue Astral Bodies." And on "Pre Formal," Shipp conveys a

different way for chamber techniques and Monk's inclinations to work together. That said, his arpeggios and rough bass notes on the R&B hit "Where Is The Love" won't make anyone think of Roberta Flack.

While Shipp has said that he would like to cease recording and focus on performing, *I've Been To Many Places* affirms that any planned change in presentation will not stop his flow of new ideas. —**Aaron Cohen**


Bill Frisell

Guitar In the Space Age!
Okeh, CD

A few years ago in a *DownBeat* interview with Nels Cline and Marc Ribot, I asked the esteemed guitarists about their first inspirations. Their eyes lit up when the Ventures popped into the conversation. Each player marveled over absorbing the iconic instrumental band as teens. Both are Baby Boomers, as is their contemporary, Bill Frisell, whose new *Guitar In the Space Age!* opens with “Pipeline” and closes with “Telstar,” two of the Ventures’ most famous tracks. Seems the music we all grew up with is always rolling around in our brains somewhere, often attached to a big dose of affection.

Guitar In the Space Age! milks such sensibility. Frisell, who was 12 in 1963 and did a good job recasting John Lennon’s music a couple years ago, rolls through more 60s jewels here. Call it New Frontier music as played by a graying progressive as unencumbered by sentiment as he is unafraid of experimentation. From gems by Duane Eddy to the Beach Boys to Link Wray, these songs are laced with shimmer and spark.

Team Frisell includes bassist Tony Scherr, drummer Kenny Wolleson, and guitarist Greg Leisz. Together they circle ‘round the melodies while offering a bit of expansion in the groove department. No flipping the apple cart here. The boss’s longstanding genuflection to melody wins on each track, and rightly so. The essence of the originals needs to be sustained for this squad to work its magic.

Politeness dominates. Even performances that could turn agro—“Rumble” and “Messing With the Kid,” say—stay calm. And ballads such as “Surfer Girl” and “Tired Of Waiting” glide on a sheen that finds Leisz and the leader melding their strings as if consonance was nirvana.

The country tracks that bubble up swing with bar-band nonchalance. “Cannonball Rag” and “Bryant’s Bounce” are snuck into the program to remind us of the kind of brilliance that lurked in twangville during that period. Song-wise, Frisell is always on a treasure hunt (see his update of Madonna’s “Live To Tell” from ’93), and these nuggets from the “duck and cover” era gather steam when corralled together.

Heard as a suite, *Guitar In the Space Age!* is a portrait of a long-ago time painted by a guy that always has an eye on the future, whether it includes a jet pack or not.

—**Jim Macnie**


Charlie Haden and Jim Hall

Charlie Haden-Jim Hall
Impulse!, CD

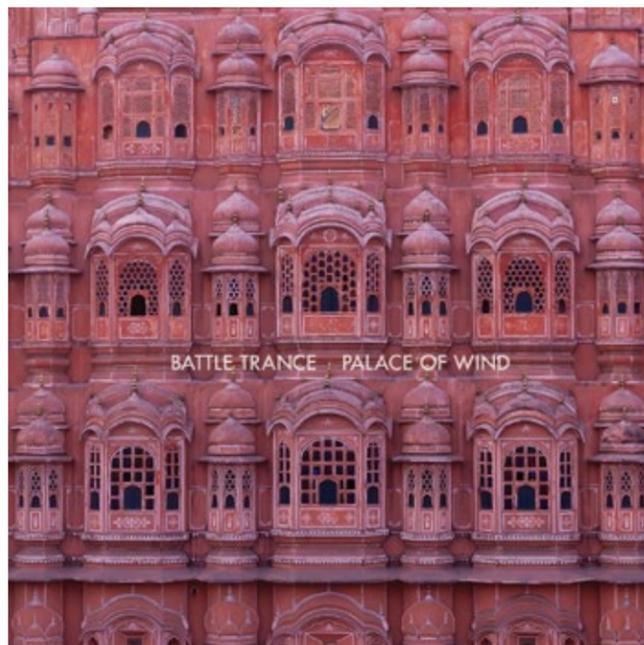
Bill Evans and Jim Hall’s *Undercurrent* was a key text in my early jazz listening decades ago and, ever since then, the late guitarist’s music has been an ongoing pleasure—especially his work in duo settings. The less that surrounds him, the easier it is to hear the personality of his instrument, invariably hushed, limpid, and certain. For me, that sound is just as seductive as the deeply inspired lines Hall is known for, and the trait is particularly obvious when he works with a bassist. Such deep simpatico—first documented in the 70s with Ron Carter and Red Mitchell—is central on this newly issued performance with Charlie Haden from the 1990 Montreal Jazz Festival.

Hall was Haden’s senior by eight years (the bassist passed in July), and a case could be made that while they came from different aesthetic mindsets, their skill at reshaping melodies made them superb partners. Throughout their careers, clarity remained paramount. Whether soloing or comping, each had a way of delivering interplay hallmarked by certitude. When Hall joined Haden in Montreal, these parallels became extremely obvious. Their dovetails through “Skylark,” the lift Haden gives Hall (and the way he reciprocates) on “Big Blues”—each is indicative of shared perspective being squeezed into singular focus. To some degree, that distillation is the essence of performance art. Here, at their first full concert together, these guys feel like they’ve been together for ages.

Another parallel: Each of these masters boasts a similar carriage when it comes to crafting a solo. They’re formal but folksy. Their “Body and Soul” could almost be a campfire song, something you’d sing to a sweetie on a summer night. And when you follow them through the liquid permutations of “Down From Antigua”—at 12-minutes-plus the longest track on the album and, thanks to Hall’s unusually aggressive strumming, a rarity that needs to be heard by anyone that calls themselves a fan of the guitarist—they couldn’t sound any more colloquial.

Maybe its just magical Caribbean breezes working their way up to Canada. But one thing’s certain: By the time the open-ended escapades of “In The Moment” subside, these 10 strings perform dazzling hand-in-glove maneuvers. Empathy, it seems, is everything.

—**Jim Macnie**



Battle Trance

Palace Of Wind

New Amsterdam Records/NNA Tapes, LP or CD

Saxophonist Travis Laplante (of Little Women) has said that this quartet came from a spontaneous idea. He just wanted to see what it would be like to form a band that included Matthew Nelson (Tune-Yards), Jeremy Viner (Steve Lehman, John Hollenbeck Large Ensemble), and Patrick Breiner. That all of them play the same instrument—tenor saxophone—wasn't a barrier.

Of course, assembling a small group of reeds with no rhythm section is not unprecedented. The World Saxophone Quartet has been around since the mid-1970s. But the WSQ represents the gamut of the saxophone family, similar in design to a classic chamber ensemble. Also, that band has worked its way through different compositional structures—short tunes to extended works.



On *Palace Of Wind*, Battle Trance performs one album-length piece with three different parts. Minimalism is the order of the day here—not just in instrumentation, but in this group's frequent passages of single-note drones. Remarkably, the players take that scheme in constantly surprising directions.

As much as Battle Trance's improvisational acumen comes from its background in jazz, the group's minimalism echoes such new-music composers as Charlemagne Palestine.

And each of these three parts convey compelling shapes that add up to a striking whole—even if it takes a few listens to absorb it all. This is also a group that has no room for solo stars. Each member sounds indistinguishable from one another, and it's undoubtedly meant to be that way.

On Part I, Battle Trance starts out slowly on the low end of their instruments. A few flutters creep in, and the quartet's harmonies slowly build to a near-crescendo. The members

also engage in a melodic call-and-response before moving into higher notes. Sometimes a soloist's other melodic ideas sound like they're yearning to break free from the barrage of the other three horns. Then the part takes on a lyrical, almost hymnal, conclusion.

Part II also begins with an almost-meditative tone and continues for a few passages. But then, recognizable jazz phrasing emerges underneath combined higher-end lines. While the group suddenly

explodes into discordant polytonality, it's never a mere exercise in dynamics—it's more about building a piece through unexpected sources. The third part also has its own creaky melodies, kind of like how Albert Ayler may have sounded if he were facing serious on-stage pressure from three other saxophonists. The conclusion is suitably introspective.

While this album-length piece makes a considerable debut statement, the possibilities for the group already seem immense. —**Aaron Cohen**


Marcia Ball

The Tattooed Lady And The Alligator Man
Alligator, CD

Marcia Ball sounds like she knows how to have a good time. She certainly knows where to have it. Born in Texas, but a longtime Louisianan, she's become an indefatigable advocate for the bayou's musical culture. Her new disc continues in this vein, as it embraces New Orleans R&B, zydeco, Gulf Coast blues, and gospel. Ball features her own songwriting more frequently now, so that even if she's traveled these roads many times before, her trip on *The Tattooed Lady And The Alligator Man* does not sound formulaic.

Ball's rollicking piano lines drive the title track, filled with kind of boisterous energy that matches her colorful lyrics (seemingly inspired from vintage circus posters or films). Such tempo and mood permeate throughout much of the disc and, no doubt, tracks like as "Like There's No Tomorrow" and "Can't Blame Nobody But Myself" will rock New Orleans house parties and Americana music festivals for the foreseeable future. But she and her band change the delivery, inflections, and even the musical influences on each song.

She assertively declares "Clean My House" in a way that combines her way of blending singing and speaking as saxophonist Thad Scott's horn arrangements recall the 1960s glory years at Memphis' Stax Records. On the sassy "He's The One," Ball's piano echoes such Crescent City legends as Professor Longhair. Here, Michael Schermer's electric guitar solo packs fire, but he's just as effective sounding understated on "Lazy Blues." Schermer also blends in with Red Young's B-3 organ crunch during Ball's sex-of-the-wrong-kind depictions on "Hot Springs."

As a vocalist, Ball seems to be just getting stronger. When she sings about financial troubles on "The Squeeze Is On," she understands how to cut her vocal lines short in just the right ways to emphasize Terrance Simien's accordion. But her best moments come during quieter laments, like the closer, "The Last To Know." She draws on phrasing from New Orleans soul queen—and longtime colleague—Irma Thomas on "Just Keep Holding On." Another slower piece, "Human Kindness," is seeped in the Southern gospel tradition with an egalitarian theme.

Whether Ball's stories are personal, universal, or taken from her imagination, *The Tattooed Lady* reaffirms that she has the energy to tell them for years to come.
—**Aaron Cohen**

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Nels Cline & Julian Lage

Room

Mack Avenue, 180g LP or CD

Nels Cline's position as one of free improvisation's most gifted guitarists is so solid, it's mildly shocking when he turns eloquent in comparatively traditional situations. That said, I guess I should qualify the "comparatively" part of my previous sentence. There's no "I Remember April" or "All The Things You Are" found on this new duet date between Cline and fellow string player Julian Lage. But neither do aggressive freak-outs, dissonant storms, or ornery skronkathons mark these 10 tracks. With one guitarist in the left channel and one in the right, *Room* is all about a pair of improvisers reveling in their rapport when it comes to working the lyrical side of abstraction.



©Photo by Sean Lennon

The opening moments of "Whispers From Eve" help tell the story. It's a spot where rumination takes on a glistening edge before the duo drops into an overtly charming melody. The partners find a way of offering enough personal filigree to keep the prettiness sounding edgy. Something similar happens in "The Scent of Light," on which a postmodern sense of balladry comes to fruition— forlorn phrases and blue asides enjoying lots of elbowroom. In the large, mood and design get a big say when it comes to where the next set of plinks and plunks will venture.

Clarity looms as one of the record's calling cards. Much

of the action is sorted out, enhancing the opportunities for grace to dominate. Waxing folksy, with ringing chords supporting a nimble lead, is part of the act's aesthetic. The emotional arc of "Freesia/ The Bond" cultivates a near-classical vibe, shooting off echoes of John Abercrombie and Ralph Towner's *Sargasso Sea*. And, like that almost-40-year-old ECM opus, deciding to sustain the open sections keeps things intriguing.

Accord is also paramount. In a somewhat amusing way, the duo's affinity for second-guessing each other defines the delicate oddities of "Blues, Too," where the

freebop parlance takes a spin around the block. The guys tinkle their way through upper-register maneuvers while making sure their conversation always stays taut, the single lines quickly entwining. Then, in a flash, the breeze picks up, blowing in a gust of strumming and soloing, as if Bruce Cockburn were trying his hand at Pat Metheny's *New Chautauqua*.

Making a pitch for delicacy without belying their prog instincts, Cline and Lage deliver an edge-of-your-seat recital with plenty of recognizable beauty.

—Jim Macnie



Joe Morris
Mess Hall
 hatOLOGY, CD

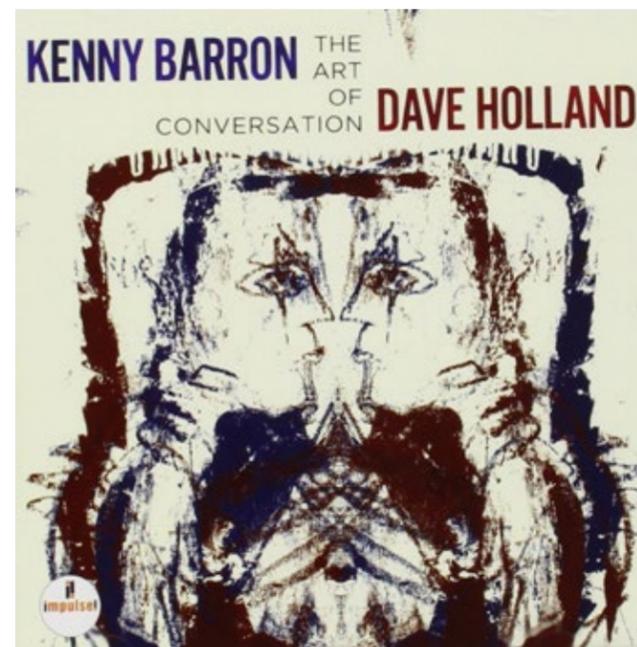
As a fan of the imagination and agility that Joe Morris has brought to improvised music since his 1983 *Wraparound* debut, I've always marveled at the guitarist's free-flowing lines. Teeming with notes, their ardor spills forward in an inviting manner. In the best circumstances, their accrued subtleties possess the ability to swoop down and scoop up even slightly intrigued listeners.

Morris has been refining this lyrical approach for decades, and the acclaim he's earned in the last ten years suggests his eloquence is becoming more reliable. But from time to time, he has also invested in a brash group sound that revels in volume. With a smile on his face, he's deemed these aggressive tacks his "Big Loud Electric Guitar" experiments. *Mess Hall* is the conclusion of a trilogy Morris began mapping out in the 80s, one that uses nuanced particulars of music theory and the combative pleasures of noise to celebrate the joy of group interaction. Like its precursors, *Sweatshop* and *Racket Club*, *Mess Hall* delivers a fetching jumble of sound, both cantankerous and captivating.

In his liner notes, the leader recalls being inspired by Jimi Hendrix when first approaching his instrument in 1969. While the string forays on *Mess Hall* include plenty of fluid fuzz, such parallels end there. Comprised of drummer Jerome Deupree (he also drove the *Sweatshop* and *Racket Club* bands) and keyboardist Steve Lanter (an occasional Morris associate and inventive pianist), this is a trio that romps through these tracks to milk a collective vehemence—and a wonderfully nasty one at that. Forget the "soloist out front with backing rhythm support" formula. As "Advanced Animal" and "Response Arena" indicate, it's all about the shared roar.

Taut, implosive, vicious at points—Morris' three-some burrows straight into abstraction, betting the farm on expressionistic fervor. Lanter's electric keyboards momentarily conjure the delirium of Sun Ra's "The Magic City"; Deupree's pummel makes allusions to the knotty thud of Captain Beefheart's Magic Band. Morris, who uses effects pedals (a break from his *au natural* norm), points out that one of his goals is to let pure sound impact the music's "formulation."

In this way, *Mess Hall* is a textural rumpus room, smitten with distortion, the older, angrier brother of recent discs by Slobber Pup and the Spanish Donkey on which Morris participated. One thing's sure: The articulation he gets when waxing specific and seductive in his comparatively quieter work doesn't forsake him on these fierce tracks. As the violence gets unpacked, the poise is revealed. —**Jim Macnie**



Kenny Barron and Dave Holland
The Art of Conversation
 Impulse, CD

Piano-bass duos remain atypical, but Kenny Barron and Dave Holland have stood far above anything resembling the ordinary for decades. They've also worked in this kind of setting before—Barron with the late bassist Charlie Haden on *Night and the City* (1996) and Holland with pianist/vibraphonist Karl Berger on *All Kinds of Time* (1976). But with *The Art of Conversation*, the two musicians create a lyrically mesmerizing dialogue that turns around the format's perceived limitations. Without a drummer to fill the traditional rhythmic role, Barron and Holland create their own approach to time on a disc sure to become an inspiration to future generations of jazz players.

The pair's musical empathy gets established on the opening "The Oracle." Barron takes the lead with a bright, but firm, touch. Holland responds with deep resonance and quick-thinking flexibility, and both add in a Cuban clave pattern toward the coda. The pianist's "The Only One"—a quasi-update on Thelonious Monk's "Well, You Needn't"—also features the two veterans filling each other's spaces in ways that would make even the most melodically sensitive drummer superfluous. When the duo interprets Monk's "In Walked Bud," its lively exchange on a familiar theme concludes with a quietly furious run from Holland that dazzles without lessening the duet's intuitive communication.

While Barron's luminous tone is unmistakable on such tracks, he is equally compelling on his minor-key ballad "Rain." On another ballad, Holland's "Waltz For Wheeler," the tribute to departed trumpeter Kenny Wheeler becomes anything but mournful as Barron's progressions convey a deep sense of joy.

Barron and Holland's congenial approach is not without its own edges. The disc is loaded with surprises that become more apparent with each listen, including the way the cohorts rephrase Charlie Parker's "Segment" without imitating obvious bop chord changes. Holland also includes a different take on Latin rhythms on "Dr. Do Right." The album's quiet farewell statement comes via an interpretation of Billy Strayhorn's "Daydream," which alto saxophonist Johnny Hodges made famous in the Duke Ellington Orchestra. Even though fewer musicians perform the piece here, they don't sacrifice an ounce of soul.

Along with their roles as performers, Barron and Holland's production provides *The Art of Conversation* with an ideal balance. They should take on the same responsibilities for the sequel. —**Aaron Cohen**

Marcin Wasilewski Trio w/Joakim Milder Spark Of Life



Marcin Wasilewski Trio with Joakim Milder
Spark of Life
 ECM, CD



Pianist Marcin Wasilewski frequently reaches for the lyrical higher-end notes, but in his hands, this seemingly gentle approach never becomes ethereal—especially on his trio’s new disc. His quiet touch and apparent comfort with interpreting pop songs serve as vehicles for a firm rhythmic sense. All of which sounds directly inspired from Bill Evans (and, of course, Wasilewski is far from the only contemporary pianist to follow that model). Of course, that influence also includes a strong blueprint for how a piano-based trio should communicate, and Wasilewski’s group has been creating such three-part dialogues for close to 20 years.

Wasilewski, bassist Slawomir Kurkiewicz, and drummer Michal Miskiewicz started working together when they were teenagers. They became active shortly afterward in Poland’s jazz scene, including doing extensive work with trumpeter Tomasz Stanko. The world became aware of the group’s low-key conversations on its American major-label debut, 2005’s *Trio*. On *Spark of Life*, which also features Swedish saxophonist Joakim Milder, they apply the same principles and never sound formulaic.

The trio and Milder know that building an open sense of space and mixing up instrumental textures remain key, even while they adhere to slow and medium tempos. On Wasilewski’s opening “Austin,” his astute pauses emphasize the melody. Miskiewicz responds with telling brush strokes on the cymbals. Another Wasilewski original, “Three Reflections,” highlights Kurkiewicz’s pizzicato lines, which lead into the pianist’s flowing crescendos as Miskiewicz’s drums serve more as a melodic frame along with his traditional time-keeping role.

The title track—performed twice, with different inflections—features the kind of arpeggios that resemble those of label-mate Keith Jarrett, yet the surprising directions in the solos are Wasilewski’s own. Milder also builds from the airy to the determined, especially on his “Still.” Sometimes his tone echoes Charles Lloyd’s approach to harmony, but he also unveils a quietly bluesy side on top off Wasilewski’s off-kilter chord changes. On earlier discs, the trio covered Bjork and Prince. Here, the group pumps life into Sting’s “Message In A Bottle” with odd intervals and bits of dissonance. A lesser-known rock tune, “Do rycerzy, do szlachty, do mieszczan” (by the Polish band Hey) becomes almost wistful. The group also instills a quiet fury to Herbie Hancock’s “Actual Proof” and quietly soar on composer Grazyna Bacewicz’s “Largo.”

Even with two decades under its collective belt, this group is energetic enough to sound like it’s just getting started. —**Aaron Cohen**

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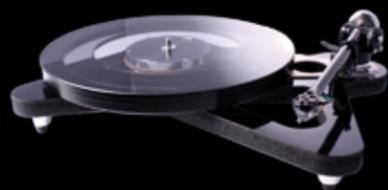


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