

# From Mega Therion to Eden: A Personal Music Guide

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# Introduction

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## What is this book?

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This is intended to be a personal music guide, by which I mean several things.

Where most other music guides attempt to be either definitive, comprehensive or both, I am explicitly attempting to be neither. This book as a whole is not intended to tell you what the most *important* rock music is, or what bands are really “alternative”, or what the *best* records are. Instead, I have a very simple criterion for inclusion: these records interested me enough that I went out and bought them. I have excluded a handful of records that I bought as experiments, listened to once, and never went back to, but otherwise this book covers every record I own. These are not albums some record company sent me, or bands I drew as a review assignment, these are the records I’ve been listening to for somewhere around 15 years. You will discover that this makes for what I am sure is the highest density of positive reviews ever assembled, but that doesn’t bother me. I invariably find that it is more interesting to hear *why* people who like something like it than *that* somebody else doesn’t like it.

You will also find that there are a huge number of “important” bands or even whole genres that are simply absent. For example, I don’t like reggae, polka, jazz or rap. This isn’t a value judgment on any of those, but there it is: I don’t buy those records and I wouldn’t have anything useful to say about them if I did. On the other hand, I am reasonably confident that this book has the longest entries for Big Country, Kate Bush, Game Theory and Marillion that anyone has ever published.

And most importantly, perhaps, you will find that I have written from a somewhat different perspective than most other music guides adopt. Rather than concentrating on biographical data, insider information, sales figures, chart position or critical acclaim, all of which I would simply have to read some other guide to get, I have instead cast the book as a directed tour through my own subjective *experience* of this music. Given the relative wealth of the former sorts of information in other guides, I hope you’ll find this a worthwhile, or at least interesting, departure.

I’ve taken a few other steps that are intended to make this book a useful experience. Instead of organizing these artists alphabetically, I have broken my view of rock music into 10 areas, and even within each area I have tried to order the artists I discuss by

the character of their music. This keeps together artists that are, at least to me, similar, making browsing meaningful, which it doesn’t tend to be when you just alphabetize things.

Also, and you may have guessed this already, I’ve written all the reviews myself. While this might seem like a disadvantage, the positive way of looking at it is that you can calibrate my tastes with your own. The more of my opinions you read, the better you will understand which of the things I consider important you also value, or which things that bother me are precisely the things you like best. Of course, this might lead to you tossing the book in the trash after a few chapters, but there’s not much I can do about that.

Finally, I have reviewed every single listed disc individually and (usually) thoroughly, even singles. You will find no one-liner reviews which, however clever, are intended more to impress you than to tell you about the music they nominally refer to. Note that I don’t mean that I won’t make irrelevant jokes, but rather that I will try not to *only* make irrelevant jokes.

## Who am I?

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An internationally acclaimed music critic, journalist and biographer for the last four decades, glenn mcdonald’s writing has appeared in—

Actually, I’m nobody in particular, and that’s sort of the point. Asking what my qualifications are for writing this book is asking the wrong question. I don’t claim to be doing anything other than explaining my own experiences, opinions and analyses, and I’m certainly the world’s foremost expert in what my own opinions are. If this book is to be interesting to you, it will be interesting because I put in the time and effort necessary to collect all this music and write about it. It justifies itself, or it doesn’t, and no stack of music degrees, industry connections, prior publication credits or celebrity endorsements would make the slightest bit of difference one way or the other.

Although I can’t think exactly why you’d care about these things: I was born in 1967; I grew up in Dallas; I moved to Cambridge to go to Harvard, where I majored in filmmaking and photography, and wrote for the Harvard Lampoon; from 9-5 on weekdays I’m an interface designer for Ziff-Davis Interactive, the online division of the publishing company that does all those two-inch-thick computer magazines; I live with my girlfriend Georgia; I have no pets, although I have lots of plastic dinosaurs and Georgia has fish. 5’8”, 160. 158 on a good day.

I like to listen to music. I’ve written this book about it...

## So what?

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What, you might well ask, is this book intended to accomplish? Here are my four goals:

1. On the most personal level, this book is an exercise for my own benefit in revisiting the considerable body of music that has been significant to me so far in my life. I am 25 as I begin this book, and most of the music here is considerably younger, so I don't mean to imply that I am looking back from a great distance or a position of staggering experience. Nonetheless, I am already fast approaching the point where if I don't write this book now I won't be able to write it at all. This may still be a matter of indifference to you, but it's early in the book yet.

2. On a public level, this book is an attempt to organize a limited but varied set of music into a coherent structure. So much popular music appears so quickly that the sheer bulk of it can easily just wash over you like a stocked trout farm being poured on your head. If you leave this book feeling that instead of a thousand random mediocre Frisbees, these few records at least can be understood by relations to each other and as part of some overall patterns, then I will have been wildly successful in doing what I set out to.

3. On the most abstract level, I also hope that taking this active an interest in the music I love will provide an object lesson and encourage all of you to lead an *examined* musical life. Though I have strong doubts whether publishers would feel the same way, I think it would be great if *lots* of people wrote books like this. Billboard could publish 'em in place of sales charts, and I think the music business would be a lot more interesting.

4. Finally, on the most concrete level, I hope that you find music here that you and I both like, and that on pages nearby (or far away for that matter) you discover something you don't know that turns out to be the coolest thing you've ever heard.

## Now that you've decided to read it

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The "whys" out of the way, I want to try to delineate some of my personal prejudices and make some inevitable disclaimers before we start the tour.

First of all, as I alluded before, my shortest-list of favorite bands is Big Country, Kate Bush, Game Theory and Marillion. As you will see, this by no means covers the entire scope of music that I like, but I think it's pretty much impossible to evaluate what anybody thinks about anything unless you know what they really like, and those four should at least get you started. I'd recommend that you read their entries first, except that those are probably the four *longest* entries in

the book, and thus might not be the best places to begin.

Secondly, I've noticed that I place a lot of importance on the human voice, and you'll find almost no purely instrumental music in the book. Voices, however, can be a very subjective thing, and what makes a voice distinctive to one person may make it unbearable to another. So while I'll do my best to describe voices along with musical styles, they are far more difficult to discuss than whether the drums are loud or the guitar solos are fast, so I don't expect I'll be completely successful. On a related note, I will also often discuss lyrics, because I find that words can make a big difference in whether I think something is great or just good. I can't think of *anything*, however, that I like in spite of the musical style, just because the words appeal to me, and I can think of many songs I adore whose lyrics are unremarkable or even offensive to me, so I will try never to *rely* on lyrics in a description.

Thirdly, I have organized the book based on my experience of these artists, and this has meant that many artists could plausibly appear in other areas, and even that a few artists appear in a context that *some* of their career doesn't fit in at *all*. I could have assigned individual albums to genres, instead of whole artists, but that seemed to produce lots of chaos in the interest of "mathematical" accuracy, so I didn't do it. I also could have cross-listed artists, but it wasn't clear to me that anything good would come of that. So, instead, I've tried to indicate in descriptions where elements of other areas are evident to me, and there's also an index in the back.

Lastly, though the book begins with the least-subtle and ends with the most-subtle, it is not a linear journey. The map on the cover is an attempt at visualizing the way the areas fall in relation to each other, but it is a vast over-simplification. Quantifying all the parameters that are really involved and plotting all these records in the resulting multi-dimensional space, however, is a task probably better left to space aliens.

Rather than waiting for them, let's begin.

## The Soundtrack of the Book

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Black Sabbath: "The Mob Rules" (Mega Therion)  
The Sex Pistols: "Anarchy in the UK" (Underground)  
Big Country: "Where the Rose is Sown" (Steeltown)  
Richard Thompson: "1952 Vincent Black Lightning" (The Border)  
The Icicle Works: "Understanding Jane" (Hull)  
Game Theory: "Throwing the Election" (Boylan Heights)  
Modern English: "I Melt With You" (The Suburbs)  
Boston: "More Than a Feeling" (The Western Skyline)  
Kate Bush: "Running up That Hill" (Earth)  
Marillion: "Kayleigh" (Eden)

# Mega Therion

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from the Celtic Frost album *To Mega Therion*

## Soundtrack

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Black Sabbath: "The Mob Rules"  
Slayer: "War Ensemble"  
Celtic Frost: "The Heart Beneath"  
Anthrax: "Bring the Noise"  
Megadeth: "Symphony of Destruction"  
Law and Order: "Plague of Ignorance"  
Blüe Öyster Cult: "The Pact"  
UFO: "The Writer"  
Queensrÿche: "Walk in the Shadows"  
Living Colour: "Cult of Personality"

## Introduction

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We begin with the least subtle music available, the musical equivalent of stepping on a land mine. Mega Therion is a collection of music in which *power* is, if not the sole aim, at least the central motivating factor. Much of it would fall under the heading of "heavy metal", and in fact this area probably is the closest analog to an accepted "genre" of any that I will discuss. This is both an advantage and a disadvantage, as it gives me more common understanding to build on, but it also contains many artists that are different only in stylistically subtle ways. I've also included several artists here, particularly towards the end of the section, that would either be controversial (or ridiculous) inclusions in a straight "heavy metal" list or be plausible additions to *other* chapters, but which seem more important to include here because they seem to me to share the rest of the section's emphasis on power. Of the songs listed in this section's soundtrack, only the first five could be heavy metal and nothing else; the other five, however, are very much a part of the same experience for me, and that, after all, is what the structure of this book is about.

In general, Mega Therion is escape music. Where punk, for instance, is traditionally confrontational, the "typical" heavy metal song is fantasy. The percentage of heavy metal album covers that look like illustrations from a Dungeons and Dragons adventure is not an illustrators' conspiracy. Even beyond the art, the names and the lyrics, the music *itself* is escapist. You will be hard pressed to find a song in Mega Therion that will instill emotions like melancholy, sadness,

sympathy, love, regret, peace or calm. Instead, you will get triumph, exhilaration, courage, invincibility and perhaps anger, but not so much of the last as you might expect. Mega Therion is not an exhortation to revolution, but an evocation of a imagined revolution already underway. Its lyrics are not sung *to* its fans but *by* its fans to the "others", the enemy. This is, I think, why heavy metal has come in for proportionally more societal censure than other genres; no matter what, exactly, "Suicide Solution" says, it *sounds* like a song a suicidal teen would leave behind to torture his bereaved parents. The fact that Satanism of the sort practiced in heavy metal circles is almost entirely defiance expressed in the idiom of Western Christianity, largely without original tenets of its own, is usually lost on everybody but language students.

Mega Therion is also an overwhelmingly white, male province. Power, of course, is largely a male construct, emphasizing the hierarchy between people rather than their commonality, as Deborah Tannen would say. The white part I can't explain except as a historical artifact (and to be fair, rap-metal crossovers are starting to blur the color divisions). I *am* a white male myself, as it happens, so perhaps there is a genetic component here, but for whatever reason this is some of my favorite music in the world.

## Slayer

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### *Show No Mercy + Haunting the Chapel, 1984 CD*

When you hear distressed parents complaining that heavy metal is an invasion from Hell, this is exactly what they're afraid of. You don't even have to listen to this record to know that there's trouble involved; a simple trip through the titles will suffice. Do "Evil Has No Boundaries", "The Antichrist", "Die by the Sword", "Face the Slayer", "Chemical Warfare" and "Haunting the Chapel" give you an idea? To be fair, the songs are not so much *for* evil as *about* it, but it takes a reading of the lyric sheet and a certain benefit of the doubt to be sure of this distinction.

Slayer plays lots of notes, but it would be misleading to describe the overall effect here as "melody". Tom Araya's vocal palette includes a) screaming and b) shouting, and he does both quite well, but that's the limit of his range. The instrumental palette is similarly streamlined. Guitarists King and Hanneman play either incredibly fast solos or distortion-drenched power-chords that move only slightly slower. Dave Lombardo, on drums, probably has a few tom-toms, and even hits them occasionally, but the overwhelming impression I am left with is that

he has four kick drums, eight legs, three snares and a forest of cymbals. His playing varies from “slow”, by which I mean each individual stick hit is distinctly audible, to “faster”, by which I mean that it sounds like he has somehow attached drumsticks to a power-sander, or some such similar device. Overall, the effect is very much like someone getting beaten up. In particular, *you*. “Chemical Warfare”, which was the first Slayer song I ever heard (and which is one of the three tracks on this CD taken from the “Haunting the Chapel” 12” single), is perhaps the best example of the wall-of-bullets effect that this album produces. Listening to this affects me, or *pummels* me at least, and I find the sheer intensity interesting, but to say I *like* it would be a little misleading.

### ***Reign in Blood*, 1986 CD**

My collection skips two Slayer albums before picking up with this one. This and the following two albums are produced by Rick Rubin, also known for his early work with Run-DMC, and his presence has noticeable effects. For one, this album is much better produced than *Show No Mercy*, and the individual instruments come through much clearer. For another, Slayer seem to me to have focused their music considerably. Araya has cut out almost all the screaming and most of the album’s vocals are either shouts or machine-gun-speed chants. The guitarists have shifted the balance heavily away from solos toward chord riffs (at least as the basis of song structures), and Lombardo has abandoned “slow” completely. While the song titles sound marginally less horrific than on the first album (“Reborn”, “Epidemic”, “Postmortem”), this is a shallow deception, and the lyrics to this album are as good an argument for sticking as you’re likely to find.

The result of these changes is, to me, distinctly positive. Where I’m afraid *Show No Mercy* leaves me feeling basically buffeted, *Reign in Blood* pulls me in and involves me. On the earlier record, tempo changes come and I say “Ah, the tempo changed again”, where on this one the tempo changes make me feel like I’m on a train that has just been derailed only to land on another track going another direction without ever braking. I readily admit, however, that I started buying Slayer records with *Seasons in the Abyss*, and worked backwards, so purists and since-the-beginning Slayer fans may prefer the rawness of their first records.

### ***South of Heaven*, 1988 CD**

While I like *Reign in Blood* a lot, *South of Heaven* is the album where I begin to experience individual Slayer songs. There is some of that with the previous album, but *Reign in Blood* still affects me more as a

single 29-minute document than as 10 separate songs. Several things happen on *South of Heaven* that begin to change my impressions. The most surprising change is that Araya actually starts *singing* on this album. Now, lest you misunderstand, it still sounds like shouting to the uninitiated, but when you compare it to the previous albums, you can clearly discern that he is actually shouting *notes*. Intentionally, even. The band has also learned a key lesson that Metallica would learn a couple years later, and have managed to slow down occasionally without losing any intensity. They don’t do it *often*, mind you, but there are several points on this album where Lombardo manages to get the number of bass-drum hits per measure down to the low double-digits.

And the most notable thing that happens on *South of Heaven* is that songs begin to sound constructed rather than just performed. It’s not that Slayer was speaking in tongues on the previous albums, but there is an extent to which, for me at least, the experience of being *inside* any of the songs on *Show No Mercy* or *Reign in Blood* is largely the same. On this album, though, I listen to songs and actually feel like I’m at the beginning of a song, or the middle, or the end (though not all at once, of course). There is single-note guitar work that is neither soloing nor minimalist chords, but which actually seems to advance the musical progress of the song. The negative way to see this, I guess, is that Slayer has taken the first step on the road to selling out and getting soft, but I think it would take a particularly intolerant death-metal addict to hold such an extreme position. To me, this album is Slayer reaching maturity.

### ***Seasons in the Abyss*, 1990 CD**

And having reached maturity, Slayer stays there. Stylistically, this album is little different from the previous one. Don’t for a moment, though, take that as a criticism. If every album had to strike a different direction than the last one, the more things would stay the same. Instead of breaking new musical ground, *Seasons in the Abyss* delivers 10 songs of which at least 8 have me running around the apartment when Georgia is not here, crashing into walls, jumping around, shouting along, and generally enjoying myself in a vastly therapeutic aggression-releasing way. There are *some* distinctly new elements, particularly the blood-curdling child’s pleading on “Dead Skin Mask”, so you shouldn’t be bored, and listening to Slayer quietly is still like a Nerf root-canal.

Lyricaly, it would be wrong to say that Slayer’s sentiments are now fit for PTA luncheon banter, but there are moments (especially “Expendable Youth”, which I’m pretty sure is about the effect of gang-life and

street drug-culture on young people) amidst the gore that you can hold up and say “here, *these* aren’t such bad ideas for impressionable 14-year-old boys to hear”. War imagery has always been prevalent in Slayer lyrics, but “War Ensemble” and “Blood Red” both seem to be identifiably *anti-war*. Mind you, there’s still “Dead Skin Mask”, which is about exactly what it says, and “Spirit in Black” and the title track, which are as demonic as anything they’ve written, but the effect of even the most grisly topics is very different when heard over 1990 Slayer music than when heard over 1984 Slayer music. It is almost as if the Slayer of *Show No Mercy* is *evil* crammed sloppily into a band, and the Slayer of *Seasons in the Abyss* is a *band* with a lyrical obsession with evil. That is exaggerating the progression, but improved production, songwriting, arranging and playing definitely change the impact of the lyrics, making them *part* of a song rather than its primary motivation.

#### *Decade of Aggression, 1991 CD*

And to tie together the Slayer oeuvre, here is a 2 CD live recording taken from shows in Lakeland, Florida; San Bernadino, California and London. At around the same time as this package was released, Mötley Crüe released a greatest-hits album called *Decade of Decadence*, and the contrast between decadence and aggression captures nicely what makes the two bands (and by extension, two factions of heavy metal) different.

The selection here covers *Hell Awaits* with “Hell Awaits”; *Show No Mercy/Haunting the Chapel* with “The Anti-Christ”, “Die by the Sword”, “Black Magic”, “Captor of Sin” and “Chemical Warfare”; *Reign in Blood* with “Raining Blood”, “Altar of Sacrifice”, “Jesus Saves”, “Angel of Death” and “Postmortem”; *South of Heaven* with “South of Heaven” and “Mandatory Suicide”; and *Seasons in the Abyss* with “War Ensemble”, “Dead Skin Mask”, “Seasons in the Abyss”, “Hallowed Point”, “Blood Red”, “Born of Fire”, “Spirit in Black” and “Expendable Youth”. The underrepresentation of *South of Heaven* is somewhat puzzling, especially given that eight of ten *Seasons in the Abyss* tracks make it into the set, but these last two albums are similar enough that the ten songs taken together do a fine job of representing both.

The album not only features songs from all phases of Slayer’s career, but it even *sounds* like Slayer’s career as a whole. While the playing is clearly late Slayer, and versions here of songs from the first two albums show clear signs of the band growing around them, the less-produced live sound returns some of rawness of early Slayer to the later songs, so things average out somewhere in them middle. I’ve never seen Slayer

live, but this album feels like it captures the experience. That is, it seems to capture *an* experience that I *imagine* is similar to that of being at a Slayer concert. Provided, of course, that you turn it up to 11 and cram your head inside a speaker.

My feelings about this album, given my feelings about the early and late studio albums, are predictably mixed. It’s a fascinating thing in itself (yes, they really do play that fast), but my urges to hear Slayer are more often satisfied with one of the other albums.

## Celtic Frost

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#### *Morbid Tales/Emperor’s Return, 1984/1985 CD*

High on my list of eternal mysteries is why it is that Slayer have become superstars, while Celtic Frost is basically a footnote in everybody’s record guides but mine. The careers of the two bands are, at least in time, parallel, and at least initially, Celtic Frost’s appeal seems similar to Slayer’s.

The difference, though, is visible in a way just in the names. Where Slayer draws upon heavy metal’s splatter-horror-movie aesthetic, Celtic Frost pull from mythology and the occult. While the lack of lyric sheets in all but *Vanity/Nemesis*’ package makes it difficult to be absolutely sure, the impression I get from *Morbid Tales* titles and what lyrics I can make out is that Evil, to Celtic Frost, is more a realm of dreaded legendary monsters and strange midnight rituals (“Into the Crypt of Rays”, “Danse Macabre”, “Nocturnal Fear”) than one of cannibalistic mass-murderers and eternities of torment.

Musically, *Morbid Tales* has much in common with early Slayer. As a vocalist, Thomas Gabriel Warrior (who, with a name like that, virtually *had* to grow up to play in a heavy metal band) relies here on hoarse croaking and the occasional heartfelt grunt, but the effect is similar to Araya’s shouting in Slayer. With manic drumming, blisteringly fast guitar and rumbling bass to tie it all together, Celtic Frost here is probably a step more sophisticated than Slayer was at the outset, but it’s another route to the same target. There are signs here, though, that more weirdness lurks behind the speed-metal veneer. “Dance Macabre”, in particular, sounds like an excerpt from an Expressionist nightmare transcribed by Stephen King. Over an unnerving nursery-rhymish bell tune, strange and sinister noises drift in and out. It’s not much of a song, but its inclusion on an otherwise straight-ahead metal record sets the stage for more experimentation to come.

Also boding interestingly for the future, three of the songs on the CD version of this record are from the



1985 EP *Emperor's Return*, and feature Reed St. Mark on drums instead of Stephen Priestly. While St. Mark can certainly keep up with Priestly's jack-hammer-attached-to-bass-pedal speed, he also shows signs of what seems to me to be a slightly subtler sense of rhythm, and this shows the potential for becoming another detail distinguishing Celtic Frost from the mass of death-metal bands.

### *To Mega Therion, 1986 CD*

Weirdness would have to wait, however, as the next album just gets *heavier*. Warrior's vocals are a tad less hoarse here, but they are also pushed back a bit in the mix, and the net effect is still cryptic. There's little or no slowing down here, though, and listening to the playing is likely to give you sympathetic carpal-tunnel syndrome. Breakneck tempo-changes abound. Where improved production gave Slayer more clarity, increased reverb here gives Celtic Frost more of a "rampaging ancient giants crashing through the fog-shrouded forest" feel. The overall effect is very Germanic, whatever that means.

On the second-to-last song, though, "Tears in a Prophet's Dream", we get a sequel to "Danse Macabre": 2:30 of strange processed noises whose title is as apt as anything, I suppose. In itself it isn't much, but with it fresh in your mind the album's epic final song, "Necromantical Screams", then features some ghostly female backing vocals, eerie gongs, strange echoes, and what sounds like a druidic war council in the background. There's no mistaking this stuff for anything other than heavy metal *yet*, but there are strange flickering shadows of shapes of things to come.

### *Into the Pandemonium, 1987 CD*

The third Celtic Frost album opens with a bizarre cover of Wall of Voodoo's "Mexican Radio", a song that would end up appearing in different versions on three of Celtic Frost's six CDs. A couple reasonably normal Celtic Frost songs follow. The fourth song, "Tristesses de la Lune", a haunting minor-key string piece with a strange female voice speaking French over a backing chorus and distantly audible guitar, is a drastic departure, though. The instrumental interludes on the first two albums had some historical precedent in Black Sabbath, but this song is just plain odd. The notes to *Parched Am I* mention that it was "originally deleted" from the album on the grounds that heavy metal audiences wouldn't stand for it, and while I don't exactly think the label was *wrong* to think that, there's a good argument to be made that heavy metal fans ought to be exposed to the bizarre every once in a while, just to remind them of the wider world, and that if they get

angry about it then, well, an angry heavy metal fan isn't particularly unusual to begin with.

Personally, I love to see tire marks on genre-border lines. "Babylon Fell", the fifth song, is back to normal, though, making me wonder if I hallucinated "Tristesses". "Normal" at this point is a lurching, demented beast, lovable enough in its own right, but after "Tristesses" I'm primed for the *really* strange. It comes a couple songs later, with "One In Their Pride (Porthole Mix)". It is unclear to me what there is "porthole" about this, though it is readily apparent why the version later on the album is labeled the "extended mix". Featuring samples from what sounds like Houston-to-space radio conversation, played over programmed drums and sequenced bass, this song might convince you that "Tristesses" wasn't a momentary lapse of sanity on your part. *Their* part, however, is another matter.

Synthesis of a sort arrives with the next song, "I Won't Dance", which unites soulful female backing vocals with full-speed Celtic Frost terror, an effect that makes one wonder whether Heaven and Hell aren't without shouting distance of each other, after all, with clandestine duets like this floating across Limbo in the early hours of afterlife mornings. (This would certainly keep Limbo from becoming *boring*.) Synthetic strings and the occasional spirit's visitation punctuate the rest of the album as well. The effect of these alien (to speed-metal) elements is chilling and unique, but with it Celtic Frost begins to drift towards a stylistic nether region where they are too heavy for anyone but metal fans, and too strange for *them*. If the tastes of potential music fans were evenly distributed about the whole rock style-space, this would probably be "art-speed-metal", which is as plausible-sounding a sub-genre as anything else, a priori, but the reality is that the style-space is badly warped, and many styles that *should* be possible, like dance-opera, Gregorian Chant-a-billy, ambient-folk and rap-fugue, are simply not to be found. Celtic Frost has fallen into just one of these voids, and if you can muster the courage (or foolhardiness) to follow them, you'll find that they've discovered some interesting things living there.

### *Cold Lake, 1988 CD*

Entering the next album a year later, it looks momentarily as if we might find out what would become of the warring influences on *Into the Pandemonium*. The album begins with a 1:06 drum-programmed instrumental called "Human". Looking over the album cover while the intro runs, however, I discover that between albums Reed St. Mark and long time bass player Martin Ain have apparently departed, Stephen Priestly is back, and there are two new

members, Oliver Ambert and Curt Victor Bryant. Also, the band's back cover photo makes them look like Poison, there are songs called "Seduce Me Tonight", "Dance Sleazy" and "Tease Me", and there's a new more radio-friendly version of Mexican Radio complete with probably-faked crowd noise and sing-along on the chorus. This all adds up to a strong first impression that *somebody* has been reading too many stories about how much money Bon Jovi is making. The later compilation's notes allude to the band's "post-*Pandemonium* shock", but I have no clearer idea than that about what happened between albums.

The good news, however, is that as soon I get over wanting this album to be the resolution of tensions set up on *Into the Pandemonium*, it stands on its own quite well. Non-mythological titles notwithstanding, there are several songs on this album that I like a lot, in particular "Cherry Orchards" and "Juices Like Wine". The music is undeniably more commercial than any previous Celtic Frost, with less thrash-like drumming and "better" vocals, but the hairspray factor is nowhere near as pervasive as the cover photo might lead you to expect, and like Rick Rubin's influence on Slayer, the addition of co-producer Tony Platt doesn't have an entirely ill effect on the band's sound quality.

I'm sure I would have had a different reaction to this album had I been into Celtic Frost at the time of its release. Having come to Celtic Frost entirely in retrospect, though, this seems like an understandable departure, and as such has its place.

#### *Vanity/Nemesis*, 1990 CD

The "main" trail of Celtic Frost progression, however, reemerges here on the next album. The first sign is the return of Martin Ain. Interestingly, though the liner photos are of Warrior, Bryant, Priestly and Ain, Ain actually appears only as a backing vocalist on four songs, and bassist on one. He is credited as co-author of two of these and three others, however, so in the end he is involved in 7 of the CD's 11 songs. Ron Marks, on the other hand, who contributes guitar on all but two songs, appears nowhere else in the notes.

Personnel changes aside, though, this is a powerful album that feels to me like the first time Celtic Frost has been completely comfortable with themselves. There are no songs here as wholly strange as "Tristesses de la Lune", but the effect of Uta Günther's background chorus vocals soaring behind Warrior's guttural rasp on "Wings of Solitude", "The Restless Seas", "Vanity" and "Nemesis" is harrowing, and it seems like an appropriate integration of the stray siren cries from the first three albums. The long closing track, "Nemesis", also features an extended intro on, of all things, acoustic

guitar (which isn't nearly as common an intro instrument in thrash as it is in mainstream metal).

Though this is not the *fastest* Celtic Frost album, I find it the most *propulsive*. That is, the overall feeling of tempo is more intense, even if individual instruments aren't playing faster. The band makes good use of the extra guitarist, veering into wild guitar solos in parallel with pounding rhythm guitar lines. This CD is also the first album package of theirs that includes notes and lyrics, and having a lyric sheet to look at while listening to these songs is quite an experience. Warrior's accent is very heavy, and his phrasing extremely strange, and it is quite a revelation to find that a line like "Heaven, cherry schnapps, rolled beneath the wheat" is really "Heaven carries not, what the soul would reap". I would guess that he is singing phonetically, except that the lyrics have a distinct poetic style to them that I wouldn't expect from a non-English-speaker. "Unleashed, with hands that cannot reach, / The screams of Heaven and shores, / The sleep-sound of a shadowed search- / Foresee the wings of solitude", for example.

After two albums in a row with "Mexican Radio", *Vanity/Nemesis* levels the average by including *two* covers. "This Island Earth" is attributed to "Ferry", and I'm guessing that it is Brian Ferry, and that the song was originally by Roxy Music. Not knowing the song, but knowing Roxy Music, I imagine that this version is, ah, shall we say, *substantially* different, if indeed my guess about its origin is correct. The album-closing track is a brutal version of Bowie & Eno's "Heroes", whose chorus, at least, is recognizable, if little else. Both songs mesh with the album's overall style nicely, and if you didn't know they weren't Celtic Frost originals you probably wouldn't guess. There are both, also, much more "serious" choices for covers than "Mexican Radio", where almost all the appeal in both the original and the cover, at least for me, is novelty.

#### *Parched with Thirst Am I and Dying*, 1992 CD

Quite apart from the fact that this is a Celtic Frost album, it is one of my favorite examples of what I want from a compilation. Not many compilations do a good job both of providing an overview of a band's career, and including enough new or different material to stay interesting even after you've gone back and bought all the individual albums. This one gets the balance as close to right as anything does.

The *Morbid Tales/Emperor's Return/To Mega Therion* period is represented here by "Circle of the Tyrants", redone versions of "Return to the Eve" and "The Usurper", and "Journey into Fear", which was originally slated to be the *fourth* song on *Emperor's*

*Return*. This seems like a pretty fair sample, and “Journey into Fear” is wonderfully chaotic.

*Into The Pandemonium* contributes “Tristesses de la Lune” and “I Won’t Dance”, and two unreleased songs from the same session: a cover of Dean Martin’s “In the Chapel in the Moonlight” and “The Inevitable Factor”.

Perhaps echoing my assessment of *Cold Lake* as a career digression, the album includes nothing taken unaltered from it. The version of “Cherry Orchards” here is a radio edit, and both “Juices Like Wine” and “Downtown Hanoi” were partially re-recorded in 1991, making these versions substantially more in keeping with the band’s overall style than the aberrant original album versions.

From *Vanity/Nemesis* the compilation takes “The Heart Beneath”, “Wings of Solitude”, “The Name of My Bride”, and the b-side “A Descent to Babylon”. I would probably have included either “Vanity” or “Nemesis”, and one of the covers, but this selection isn’t absurd.

And, for good measure, there is the *third* release of “Mexican Radio”, this time a 1991 recording. The novelty having been somewhat diffused by the two prior versions, this version is actually *better*, at least in my opinion. Where the first two versions make me laugh (happily, mind you), this version is actually pretty good on its own, much like the “Heroes” cover on *Vanity/Nemesis*.

Overall, I think the picture this compilation paints of Celtic Frost is quite accurate. If I had been in charge of song order, I would have put the tracks in chronological order, or at least arranged the liner notes in such a way that you could tell at a glance which songs were from which years, but once you piece together where the songs fall in history, the progression of musical styles is well-represented. The redone versions of older songs are balanced by the earlier unreleased material, and the downplaying of *Cold Lake* is not an unmotivated deception.

Rounding out the CD’s 73 minutes are two new (1991) songs, “Idols of Chagrin” and “Under Apollyon’s Sun”. The liner notes describe these as demo tracks, and it’s hard to know which parts of them are artifacts of their demo-ness and which are “intentional”. That said, both songs feature entirely-sequenced drum tracks, and I think the effect is tremendous. There is only one other band that I’ve listed in Mega Therion who have made obvious use of drum-machines, and that band, Sisters of Mercy, is probably the one whose inclusion in this area is most likely, I think, to puzzle people, perhaps for just that reason. Culturally, robots are basically taboo in metal, but musically I think the effect is fascinating, and I will be very curious to see whether any programmed percussion actually appears on the next Celtic Frost album.

## Hallow’s Eve

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### *Death and Insanity*, 1986 LP

After the larger-than-life worlds of Celtic Frost and Slayer, Hallow’s Eve is a speed-metal band that sounds like it is comprised by people I can actually imagine living in some apartment not entirely unlike mine, watching TV and ordering pizzas. Mind you, you wouldn’t want to live downstairs from them if they practiced there, but if you ran into them in the laundry room you would probably not find yourself frantically flipping through the Yellow Pages looking for “exorcist” afterwards.

I bought this album on the strength of the song “Lethal Tendencies”, which was on *The Best of Metal Blade*, Vol. 2, and it remains my favorite song from either Hallow’s Eve album. Rumbling along on a carriage of rattling drums and a throbbing bass line, it lasts a lot longer and proceeds with much more restraint than it would in the hands of Slayer, but as I’ve said before, speed and heaviness are not synonymous. The rest of the album is decent, but not much more than that.

### *Monument*, 1988 CD

An album or two later, Hallow’s Eve has a new drummer, and though no single songs lodges as deeply in my mind as “Lethal Tendencies” did, both the album and the band sound much tighter to me. Without-warning stop-start tempo changes, one of the hallmarks of speed metal, are executed frequently and deftly. The lyrics do not bear much examination (the liner doesn’t help matters by misspelling “altar” as “alter”), but the idea, I think, is that they give you something to yell along with the music, and as such they work just fine. The last song even ends with a snippet of, I believe, Elvis Presley, which is pretty amusing.

Hallow’s Eve isn’t the band that will change your opinion about speed metal, but if you like it already this isn’t a bad addition.

## Voivod

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### *War and Pain*, 1984 CD

The first Voivod album is hilariously awful, maniacal speed-metal thrash without the slightest bit of subtlety or conventional appeal. Vocalist Snake is credited with “throat, insults, screaming mike torture”, not singing. The other roles are “thunder machine”,

“burning metal axe” and “blower bass”, and these are both accurate and indicative of the rather juvenile speed-for-its-own sake fuck-you attitude that explains both the “hilariously” and “awful” parts of my assessment of the record. The fact that it was self-produced over a period of only eight days probably contributes to its messy state, as well.

You have to give Voivod this, though: when they make a stupidly nihilistic thrash record, they make a *really* stupid nihilistic thrash record. If this is the sort of thing you like, *War and Pain* is manna. Songs like “Warriors of Ice”, “Iron Gang”, “War and Pain”, “Live for Violence”, “Black City” and “Nuclear War” are in perfect keeping with the embarrassing high-school morbidity of the cover art (check out the metal spikes on the *guns*, especially the one that replaces the telescopic sight so that anyone trying to aim the gun from their shoulder would lose an eye).

As Spinal Tap once put it, there’s a fine line between clever and stupid. You can almost see it from here, if you turn around and squint.

#### ***Rrröööaaarr, 1986 CD***

The second Voivod album is, if anything, even more idiotic than the first one. The cover illustration has even *more* gratuitous spikes on it, and the songs, like “Korgul the Exterminator”, “Fuck Off and Die”, the redundant sounding “Slaughter in a Grave”, the unmenacing “Ripping Headaches”, and the straightforward “Horror”, “Helldriver” and “To the Death!”, are an undifferentiated mass of “let’s see how fast we can play if we don’t worry too much about making mistakes” (an approach that once did wonders for me in a typing course, by the way). The only consolation is that the handwritten lyrics (of *course* they’re handwritten; in a real font they wouldn’t look *cool* enough) reproduced in the CD booklet are even smaller than the ones for *War and Pain*, and so I’m not even tempted to try reading them.

#### ***Killing Technology, 1986 CD***

The gratuitous-spike count goes *way* down on the cover of *Killing Technology*, and this signals a sudden corresponding leap towards adulthood by the band musically. They have discovered tempo changes, for one thing, which gives them reason to play at something *other* than top speed every once in a while, in order to be able to *switch* to it (“*this* amp goes to *eleven*”). Additionally, guitarist Denis “Piggy” D’Amour has awakened from his two-album stupor and discovered an unexplored vein of bizarre chords previously unknown to heavy metal, which he strews around in a way that suggests that while he doesn’t quite know what to do with them yet, he at least

realizes that they are potentially significant. Snake’s vocals, too, begin to show the faintest glimmers of variety in them. Where his performances on the first two albums were exclusively standard death-metal croaking, here he occasionally clears some of the phlegm out and sounds like a human being. I wouldn’t call it *singing*, precisely, but he’s not trying to sound like a D&D monster, and that’s a non-trivial first step towards improvement.

#### ***Dimension Hatröss, 1988 CD***

According to the quote from *Sounds* on the back of this album, “Voivod are metal’s future”. I think they mean that in the future lots of bands will sound like this, which I think is wildly implausible. I strongly doubt that very many bands *could* sound like this, and never mind whether they’d want to. However, if they mean this in the sense that *Dimension Hatröss* is musical science-fiction, and Voivod is actually *imagining* music *extrapolated* from thrash metal, then I think they are exactly right.

I’ll be blunt. *Dimension Hatröss* is still not very accessible. I started buying Voivod records with *Nothingface*, began to work my way backwards, and stopped here for a long time before venturing, timidly, farther back. Unlike the first three, I like this record better every time I listen to it, and I think it’s the real turning point. I can’t listen to it that often, though.

*Dimension Hatröss* makes even more use of Piggy’s collection of strange guitar-chord progressions that would be more at home in jazz, and the meter changes here are jarringly abrupt even by speed-metal’s standards. While Snake’s vocals are nowhere near as gruff as on the first three albums (or as Celtic Frost’s or Slayer’s, for that matter), much of the singing on this record doubles repetitive guitar lines rather than harmonizing with them, which produces a decidedly strange effect, especially given the things Piggy plays.

Not counting the last song, this is a concept album that chronicles the band’s character, the Voivod’s journey to and through an alternate universe. You’d have to follow along on the lyric sheet to really understand the whole story (the good news being that at least for the CD they’ve finally given in to typesetting, so you *can* read it), but even without it the lyrics create the impression of *otherness* quite clearly, and that adds to the mood that the music produces.

The last song, which I think I’m correct in thinking is not intended to be part of the concept-story, is the Batman theme. Ironically, I imagine that the Gotham City of a Batman that had this rendition as its theme song would look *very* much like the sets of Tim Burton’s film *Batman*, but you’d have to replace all Batman’s

comic-book foes with Cylons, which is bound to raise some thorny licensing issues.

Lest you misunderstand me, this is a challenging but very original record.

### *Nothingface*, 1989 CD

This is the first Voivod album I bought, but as I bought it without having heard anything on it, it hasn't become as much the center of my understanding of Voivod as first-heard albums often can. There's no concept-explanation on this record (at least, none I can read: they've gone back to handwritten lyrics, which are tiny again despite there being no shortage of space for them), but there seems to be a running theme of technology-created anonymity even so, a theory that seems to be borne out by the unsettling computer-graphic images for each song in the booklet.

Musically, the biggest difference between this album and the previous one is that though many verses preserve the strange guitar-voice unison that marked *Dimension Hatröss*, several songs (notably "The Unknown Knows", "Nothingface" and "Into My Hypercube") actually have choruses. These are not Scorpions-style "repeat the title four times" choruses ("chori"? "chora"?), but I find here that all I need is a little melody to build my understanding of a song around, and that doing so makes me much more sympathetic to it. There is more dynamic variation here, as well, like "Into My Hypercube" moving from a delicate introduction to full-speed (several different full-speeds, actually), and "Sub-Effect" slowing and almost stalling towards its end. Both the melodic and dynamic variations are helped by this album's cover, Pink Floyd's "Astronomy Domine", which the band gives a much richer treatment, understandably, than they gave "Batman". Is that harmony I hear when they sing "Neptune, Titan, stars get frightened"? No, probably not.

At any rate, I've found this album easier to cope with than the previous one. Whether that means I will end up liking it less once I've fully grokked Voivod, I don't know. Its perceived improvements are incremental, but significant.

An extra-musical detail: this is one of the only CDs I have that is actually DDD. Another one: the booklet unfolds into a very cool poster of the band.

### *Angel Rat*, 1991 CD

Somewhere in *Dimension Hatröss* and *Nothingface* I half-subconsciously thought I sensed tinges of Rush. I couldn't isolate it musically, though, so I wrote it off as a proximity effect from Rush having written science-fictional song-cycles, too. However, noticing that this album is produced by Terry Brown, who co-produced

every Rush album from *Fly By Night* to *Signals*, I drag my old feelings out again to see if they make any more sense with this album.

Somewhat to my surprise, they do not. The reason this is surprising is that although *Angel Rat* is hugely more accessible to me than the other two albums, it no longer reminds me at all of Rush. In fact, although it is by several measures miles closer to the "mainstream", on this album Voivod seem completely unique to me, and I can't even think of one of those "it's Cyndi Lauper mixing drinks for Buckminster Fuller while three wounded frogs play croquet" hybrid descriptions.

How to explain this. Most obviously, Snake/Denis Belanger spends this album singing. Singing quite well, actually, in my opinion. "Clouds in My House", "Twin Dummy", "Golem" and "None of the Above" seem particularly catchy to me, though calling a Voivod song "catchy" makes me worry about myself. A less obvious factor (and this may be an auditory hallucination on my part) is that the bass parts on this record seem to have been mixed up and the guitar down just a bit. (This would make sense as something Terry Brown might do after years with Geddy Lee, come to think of it.) At any rate, like the large effect that subtly different vocals had for me, this small balance-shifting from the less-stable guitar line to the more-stable bass line may go a long way to explaining why this album is more-immediately appealing to me. And, while with the previous two records I can't tell which one I will end up liking more, I'm quite certain that I will continue to like *Angel Rat* more than either. Voivod has managed the difficult trick of making their sound more accessible without losing what makes it unique, and has ended up producing a stunning album that occupies some niche of heavy metal that I don't really have a name for.

### *The Outer Limits*, 1993 CD

Whatever that niche is, *The Outer Limits* enlarges it. I have three substantially different reactions to this album, and I generally have all of them each time I listen to it, one before putting it on, another while listening to it, and the third one afterwards. I don't have them in the same *order* each time, though.

One of the impressions is that this album continues the process started by its predecessors of bringing the Voivod aesthetic closer to mass accessibility. Their penchant for odd chord-changes and lurching rhythms hasn't been eliminated, by any means, but they seem to be learning more clearly with each album that these things are not incommensurate with listener-centric notions like melody and song structure. "Fix My Heart" is even catchier than "Twin Dummy" on *Angel Rat*, and "Wrong-Way Street" and "We Are Not Alone", the pair

of songs that ends the album, sounds like Voivod coming as close to playing a couple of straight-ahead rock and roll songs as they are able. Michel Langevin's drumming throughout cleaves to the backbeats with surprising persistence, as if the band has begun to tire of watching the epileptic tremors that must have passed for dancing at their shows for earlier albums. Voivod is still a considerable musical distance from territory that the average Bon Jovi acolyte would recognize, but you can start to see the glow of city lights on the horizon from here. For those who liked Voivod specifically *for* the sense that they were adrift in some unexplored void, this may be a bad thing. For those who thought that was cool but couldn't help wondering where the hell they were relative to anything else, this may be good.

The second impression I have is that Voivod are finally relaxing enough to *rock*. One perfectly understandable reaction to earlier Voivod is to say "You know, a little I-IV-V really wouldn't hurt you much." And as much as I approve of their intricate avoidance of such time-rutted grooves, there's a physical part of me, a gland somewhere I expect, that can't help but feel constantly on edge listening to them, waiting and (this is the gland speaking, mind you) hoping that all this complicated harmonic evasion will *finally* be resolved into something that the *body* understands, not just the mind. On *The Outer Limits* this seems to actually happen several times, and when it does the band seems to this gland to suddenly slip into gear, and I find myself grooving to it, tapping on my desk at work, my feet beginning to slip into kick-drum tattoos almost subconsciously, much to the annoyance of the person with the office under mine, probably. "Yeah", says the gland. "Yeah." Partly I resent this, and resist the gland's urgings, but partly the gland is me, too.

The last impression I have is that Voivod are starting to slip into some strangely psychedelic/progressive langour that ends up to my taste bloating some of these songs up in a not entirely pleasant way (as if there's a *pleasant* sense to the word "bloating"). The obvious initial focus for such a criticism would be the 17:26 epic "Jack Luminous", but I feel some of this flavor creeping in to the opening of "Moonbeam Rider", much of the slow "Le Pont Noir", the instrumental lull in "The Time Warp" and even the little gaps between verses in "The Lost Machine". I'm not sure, entirely, what makes this material different to me from the kind of abstruse instrumentation that swirls through previous Voivod records. Perhaps this is just my mind looking for something distasteful in the music onto which to project my dislike for the crude, brown, Fifties-sci-fi, 3D liner art.

Whatever the reasons, these three impressions dance around each other with every listen. Sometimes I

put the disc on almost reluctantly, find myself caught up in it, and smile afterwards. Sometimes I put it on eagerly, feel almost guilty listening to it, and am left with a bad taste. You can work out the other permutations. Assembling them all, and trying to transcend them, I'm not sure what it is Voivod has accomplished here. It's another album, and probably won't be the end of the fanship of any Voivod fan who didn't give up back on *Nothingface*, and I suppose it could pick up a few new converts, but it's the first time in the band's evolution that I don't feel like I know what they're reaching for, and am not sure that they do, either.

## Megadeth

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### *Killing Is Our Business...And Business Is Good*, 1985 CD

Where Voivod's music diverged enough from the "rest" of heavy metal that they seem, in my mind, distinctly separate, Megadeth occupies instead the outer edge of what I understand as "speed metal". While Metallica has been speed metal's commercial champion, and Anthrax its ambassador to other genres, Megadeth to me has been its conscience, dedicated to channeling its intensity through musically-sophisticated expression.

There is certainly speed to spare on this, their first album. Fast drums, rumbling bass, warp-drive guitar solos, skulls on the cover, they're all here. The first thing you might notice, though, is that Dave Mustaine's vocals are neither the noteless shouts of early Slayer, nor the polished pyrotechnics of Dio. In fact, more than anything his voice is *thin*. Strained and wavering, it nonetheless bravely ventures into unclichéd territory, refusing to relieve melodic tensions with the expected resolutions to 1-4-5.

And the rest of the music follows. It is significant to note that the back cover lists both Mustaine and Chris Poland as playing "lead guitar". While there is plenty here that could be called "rhythm guitar" playing, leads are very much *part* of song structures to Megadeth, not interludes between verses and choruses. Songs don't stop to disgorge solos before moving on, they fling them off at full speed, often using them as the catalyst for tight tempo changes and chord modulation. "Rattlehead" is a particularly break-neck example, as is the bizarre scattered solo that leads into the chorus of "Skull Beneath the Skin". The closest thing to a relaxed moment on this album comes with the bluesy first few bars of "These Boots", a much-overhauled cover of "These Boots Are Made for Walking", but it doesn't last long.

Lyricaly, Megadeth lives up to its name, and death is the primary topic here. You'll need to look at the lyric sheet to make sense of much of it. ("Rattlehead" could easily be "rawhide" otherwise.) On the whole, though, you're better off not expending much effort on the words, as the literary impact is almost wholly subordinate to the effect of Mustaine's delivery.

### *Peace Sells... But Who's Buying?*, 1986 CD

You can start listening closer to lyrics on the second album, though, particularly on the title track, which is to me in some ways the real beginning of Megadeth. "What do you mean, 'I don't support your system'? / I go to court when I have to." And the simple but powerful chorus: "If there's a new way, / I'll be the first in line. / But, it better work this time." This isn't a concept album, and in fact there are no other "on topic" texts on this album, but the cover vouches for the title track's social sincerity, showing the band's trademark grinning-skull character leaning on a "For Sale" sign planted in front of what looks like a burned-out UN headquarters, warplanes flying by overhead. Lyrical distinction isn't really here yet, but this album shows a dawning realization that it *could* be.

Musically, this feels strongly like a second album to *Killing...*'s first. As seems typical of bands in this area so far (or my perception of them, at least), this album shows increased production-clarity and dynamic range. Where *Killing...* mostly changed tempos on the fly, *Peace Sells...* is not afraid to come to a complete stop at times, and is able to start up again, at a different clip, having lost no apparent momentum. I hear the bass more and the voice less on this album, which anchors the guitar parts somewhat more firmly than on the first record. Mustaine's voice is more processed here, which makes it more conventionally palatable by a little. It's not a bad change, though I admit to missing the old plaintive rawness of it a bit. There's even a little acoustic guitar on "Good Mourning", but not much, so Gordon Lightfoot fans probably shouldn't rush out and buy this one on those grounds.

This album's cover, "I Ain't Superstitious", is given a raucous send-up comparable to "These Boots" on the previous one. It's not my favorite song on the album by a long shot, but it might be useful as an outsider's introduction to Megadeth, giving them a known point of reference from which to both appreciate that the band is technically adept, and to understand in a somewhat more than purely visceral way what makes the band's style unique.

### *So Far, So Good... So What!*, 1988 CD

In personnel changes for this, the most evanescent of Megadeth incarnations, Jeff Young and Chuck Behler replace the departed Chris Poland and Gar Samuelson for an album. Someone will, no doubt, sneer at me for this, but I quite frankly can't tell much difference. That is, I can tell the difference between this album and the previous ones, but I can't really attribute it to a different drummer and guitarist. The biggest differences, for me, are a "bigger" and more complex production, and the first lyric set that holds my interest throughout.

The highlight for me, though, is the third track, one of my favorite covers ever: a spiritually-faithful remake of the Sex Pistols' "Anarchy in the UK". This isn't the *only* way to have a good cover, but when I hear Megadeth's version of this song I believe that if the original had been recorded in 1987 rather than 1977, this is exactly what it would have sounded like. Steve Jones is even credited as appearing on it, though I have no idea what part is his.

The angry sentiments of "Anarchy in the UK" do not dissipate as the album goes on. "502", a song about drunk driving that begins with the well-crafted line "Pull over, shithead, this is the cops", manages to simultaneously condemn the crime while empathizing with the ennui that makes reckless driving seem like the only available release. Or, perhaps, I'm simply imposing both levels of complexity on a less-subtle driving song. Either way, it isn't Raymond Carver, but it's *evocative*. The album-closing anti-PMRC diatribe "Hook in Mouth" is also meaningful, if less than subtle.

Musically, this album takes the growing sophistication of performance and composition that was evident on *Peace Sells...*, and for the first time adds sophistication of production. Where the first two records attempted merely to document the performances, *So Far So Good...* treats the studio as more than just a methodical attempt to simulate a live set. Mustaine, for example, discovers that there can be more to vocal processing than selecting a reverb, turning it on at the beginning of the session, and turning it off again at the end, and there are some very cool uses of delay and distortion. Speed metal purists may like this album less than the first two *because* of the production, but I think it adds an interesting and not-overdone element to Megadeth's already-powerful sound.

### *Rust in Peace*, 1990 CD

Jeff and Chuck go the way of the others for this record, and what seems, as I write, to be the "permanent" Megadeth line-up takes over here for the first time, with Nick Menza and Marty Friedman joining Mustaine and David Ellefson. Though again I confess that Mustaine's unifying guitar presence makes

it hard for me to discriminate between the different second guitarists, Menza seems to be the most versatile of Megadeth's drummers, and the overall effect on the band's sound is definitely positive.

In a couple ways this album returns to older Megadeth form. The production is less obtrusive here than on *So Far So Good...*, striking what I think is a pretty good compromise between ignoring and indulging the studio element, and effects here mostly emphasize song elements rather than creating them. Mustaine's vocals, in particular, are brought forward in the mix and allowed to stand more or less on their own, with perhaps even more chilling effect than on the first album. On "Holy Wars...The Punishment Due", in particular, he sounds like a banshee announcing the approaching apocalypse.

The lyrical highlight is "Hangar 18", which employs one of my favorite conspiracy theories: that the government has hundreds of abducted aliens stashed on a secret air force base somewhere. (The song's video features some of the best aliens since the cantina scene in *Star Wars*.) Musically my favorite track is "Lucretia", which shows some of the "power and speed are not synonymous" control of Black Sabbath. Still, speed and wild lead-guitar are here in abundance, and I feel pretty confident recommending this album to anybody who liked the first two.

#### ***Countdown to Extinction*, 1992 CD**

I am, to be sure, a general sucker for "new", as you will see from the distribution of release-dates in this book. Nonetheless, I feel strongly that this is Megadeth's best album by a sizable margin. It was #7 on my 1992 album top ten list, and it was the album that finally convinced me that Megadeth really are one of my *favorite* metal bands, as well as one of the best.

Sonically, the production is truly remarkable. Taking lessons perhaps, both positive and negative, from Metallica's *...And Justice for All*, this record goes the other direction from *So Far So Good...*, using studio technology not to give songs features they couldn't have live, but to give each component *clarity* that no arena sound-system mix could ever hope for. Every drum hit, every bass note, every guitar chord stands out, showing off playing that has never been tighter. I have little doubt that the fact that this lineup had by this point lived through the *Rust in Peace* tour together and grown both more comfortable and more confident as a band are what made them willing to risk such a bare production.

Lyrics here are also especially strong. "Symphony of Destruction", "Architecture of Aggression", "Foreclosure of a Dream", "Sweating Bullets" and "Countdown to Extinction" all provide coherent socio-

political anger very much in the spirit of "Peace Sells...", and "High-Speed Dirt" provides an addition to the small world canon of songs about sky-diving. I'm not going to suggest that Megadeth lyrics should oust *The Red Badge of Courage* or *All Quiet on the Western Front* from high-school curricula, but they've come a long way since "Looking Down the Cross".

"Psychotron" and the title track are my favorites, I think because they have the clearest melodic hooks, but there are many standouts. While on the one hand this strikes me as the Megadeth fan's ultimate Megadeth album, due to generous helpings of vicious crunch, it also seems to me that it has the best *songs* of any of them, and so it may also be the best non-fan's introduction to the band as well. Many people, even rock fans, tend to shy away from heavy metal based on the not-entirely-unreasonable feeling that the "music" tends to be mostly speed and noise, but *Countdown to Extinction* is musically on par with rock's best.

## **Metallica**

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#### ***Kill 'Em All*, 1983 LP**

As of 1993, if you've heard of heavy metal at all it's a pretty safe bet that you've heard of at least two bands: Black Sabbath and Metallica. Where Black Sabbath can be reasonably credited with starting the genre, Metallica is its second generation, and arguably the band that has brought it the most outside attention.

Believe me, though, you'd never guess this by looking at the back cover of the band's first record. The group photo there I think will stand the test of time as one of the least flattering portrayals anyone has ever received that didn't involve a chalk outline. Kirk, Cliff, Lars and James look like they are about 15, total, and make me want to say either "Wash more often", or perhaps "Get off my lawn!" Hetfield in particular looks like someone has replaced his brain with something that presses on the inside of his skull, and throbs painfully when used.

It's not difficult, then, to believe that the music is a lot better than the photo. I'll simply describe it, however, as "Metallica's first album", because if that doesn't convince you that you want it, then you don't.

#### ***Ride the Lightning*, 1984 CD**

In a year, Metallica has aged much more than that, and for all practical purposes this to me is the first speed metal record. Most of speed metal's trademarks receive their primordial explication here. The fact that all four players play about as fast as is humanly possible is the most obvious detail, but a somewhat more easily



overlooked facet of good speed metal is that this music is *planned*. Now, most music is planned in practice, but many forms of music are not necessarily planned *by nature*. The difference between planned blues and improvised blues is quantitative, but planning is really just a technical enhancement. Speed metal, however, *cannot* be improvised effectively. The intricate tempo-changes and odd time-signatures that Metallica goes through throughout this album absolutely require that all four members of the band know *exactly* where each song is going to go before it starts. And once this practical exigency has been added anyway, the band is suddenly free to *compose* music, rather than simply *inventing* it. In a way, then, writing speed metal is actually much closer to classical composition than the process of writing standard pop or rock songs usually is. You may have to grit your teeth and concentrate on the music to hear what I mean, but try it.

And at any rate, *Ride the Lightning* is not for the weak or the timid. The average song length is over 6 minutes, which means that total number of notes on the album is something like 72,000,000,000. When it isn't mind-blowingly fast, it is ominously heavy. The lyrics don't tell you much more than the titles, but the titles, like "Trapped Under Ice", "Creeping Death" and "The Call of Ktulu" are unsettling enough.

And to make it worse for skeptics, both "Fight Fire with Fire" and "Fade to Black" begin with acoustic introductions that make it impossible to dismiss the band as only able to play one kind of music, and that's without making the experts sit through the 8:52 instrumental "The Call of Ktulu", which you might call "indulgent" at *worst* and in a more generous mood a sign of real expertise both technical and compositionally.

And where early Slayer is mostly devoid of melody, Metallica don't let the music's inertia prevent them from throwing in memorable *tunes* in the mold of drummer Lars Ulrich's circa-1979 British heavy metal idols. The chorus of "Creeping Death", in particular, wouldn't be out of place done by Iron Maiden or Diamond Head. A seminal record.

### ***Master of Puppets*, 1986 CD**

Other record guides tell me that this is Metallica's creative peak and its commercial breakthrough, and I won't argue with at least one of those, but to me this excellent album is an incremental refinement on *Ride the Lightning*, and I even sometimes have to look at dates to remember for sure which one came first. Especially as they are bracketed by the quite different *Kill 'Em All* and *...And Justice for All*, *Ride the Lightning* and *Master of Puppets* to me make a pair, and I can't imagine anybody liking one and not the other, or even

thinking one is markedly superior to the other one. Both are tremendous, and it is only by the most arbitrary of distinctions that I can label "Disposable Heroes" my "favorite" song from the two and thus prefer *Master of Puppets* every so slightly over the previous one.

Both feature Lars Ulrich's trend-setting drumming, most typified in my mind by an almost unprecedented degree of attention to where in each measure the kick-drum hits should fall. The answer is sometimes "everywhere", but where Lars stands out for me is at the other extreme, placing individual kicks so as to accomplish with a few strokes what many of his intended emulators would try to do with 50.

These two albums also define what to the casual observer I am sure is the defining element of Metallica's sound, Hetfield's pounding rhythm guitar. With it, guitar playing has come about as far as it can from the early blues-ensemble days where rhythm guitar was supposed to blend with the bass drum as if the bass-drum had a tone and the guitar itself had no attack of its own.

And more for historical interest than for much musical difference (at least that I hear), I note that this is the last album before the untimely death of bass player Cliff Burton, in the Great Rock and Roll Vehicle Crash that also claimed the lives of Randy Rhoads, the Big Bopper, Rick Allen's left arm and that guy from April Wine's hair.

### ***...And Justice for All*, 1988 CD**

New bassist Jason Newsted's arrival coincides with Metallica reaching in many ways the logical terminus of their stylistic development so far. Fitting a reasonable-enough nine songs into a, well, *not-cramped* 65 minutes, this record (actually, on vinyl it's two records) could easily have been merely the conclusion of the trilogy begun with the last two records.

A couple factors intervene, however. The most notable is that this record must have sounded much different on the band's studio monitors when they were mixing it, because I can't imagine any other reason why they would have released such a potentially epic album with a drum track that sounds like either it was recorded inside a cardboard box, or like the drums themselves *were* cardboard boxes. Megadeth's *Countdown to Extinction* would use a very "dry" production to amazing effect, but here I just keep wondering whether someone didn't accidentally trip a "bypass" switch on a bank of effects right before they made the master.

The other confounding factor is that, as important as I think it is to face each album on its own terms rather than imposing external values on it, nearly

every song on this record is just too damn long for me. I wouldn't discard *any* whole song, but almost all of them would be more appealing at about two-thirds their current length, especially "...And Justice for All" and "To Live is To Die", both of which clock in at just under ten minutes. "Harvester of Sorrow" is a great short song, but even it is 5:42. Of course, it didn't help that for the longest time I only had this album on vinyl, necessitating a trip to the record player every 15 minutes to flip sides or change disks.

I don't want to overplay either of these factors, though. Although they prevent this album from being, in my mind, the perfect culmination of the *Ride the Lightning* - *Master of Puppets* period, it is still an awesome album. As with Sabbath's *Born Again*, bad production can't hide great performances for very long, and once you accept this album's idiosyncrasies it is well worth listening to over and over again. As long as the songs are, they aren't *padded*, and if you can forget about song boundaries and just listen to the music, there's hardly a minute here that isn't stupefying. The dry production, as much as I don't think it *suits* this music as well as it could, does let you concentrate with ease on every detail, so for *serious study*, this may well be a Metallica scholars' godsend.

Still, as with *Kill 'Em All*, this isn't the place for a non-fan to start.

### ***Metallica, 1991 CD***

It takes a courageous heavy metal band to release an album with an entirely black cover into the world after *This is Spinal Tap*. If I take the liner out of the jewel case and hold it the right way under the light, I *can* see that there is a Metallica logo and a snake there, but under any less-careful scrutiny this is a black cover.

The arresting cover, though, and the eponymous title, are appropriate enough, as under them lurks Metallica's first change of direction. Perhaps the band lost sleep over precisely the things that bothered *me* on ...*And Justice for All*, as *Metallica* is produced *big*, and though it still comes in at over an hour, it fits 12 songs into that time, some of which enter the formerly unknown four-minute territory.

My reaction to this album has gone through many stages. On the first few listenings I found it disappointing. It's massively heavy, but it's not very fast, and try as I might I couldn't shake missing the speed. I also had the feeling that despite the new stylistic approach, much of the record was a retread of earlier Metallica songs, the similarity most striking between "The Unforgiven" here and *Ride the Lightning*'s "Fade to Black".

After disappointment came overexposure, as MTV played the intensely depressing videos for "Enter

Sandman" and "The Unforgiven" about hourly for months, followed by the less-depressing but still overplayed clips for "Nothing Else Matters" and "Wherever I May Roam". My desire not to see the videos translated into not wanting to listen to the album, either. I am not, on the whole, very used to having songs I like in heavy radio or video rotation, and it almost invariably dampens my enthusiasm for them for a time.

As the effects of overexposure slowly fade, however, the album is gradually slipping back into my good graces. "Enter Sandman" is very cool, and I haven't heard it much lately. "Of Wolf and Man" and "The God That Failed" are really good, too, and buried deep enough in the album to escape airplay. This is still in some ways an album that made Metallica "just another band I like" in my mind, but there are worse fates, and certainly worse albums.

## **Anthrax**

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### ***Among the Living, 1987 CD***

My friend Matt once described Anthrax by saying "You could *ask* them to play faster..." In the company of Megadeth, Metallica and Slayer, they still play pretty damn fast, but not fast enough for *that* to be the factor that distinguishes them and explains their presence in my collection.

In fact, the first thing that distinguishes Anthrax is that they may be the most cheerful speed metal band I know of. Where Metallica's *Kill 'Em All* has the inscription "Bang the head that does not bang", Anthrax here gives us their classic "Caught in a Mosh" (which contains the memorable chorus couplet "Which one of these words / Don't you understand? / Talking to you is like / Clapping with one hand").

It's not that they are without a serious side. *Among the Living* contains a song about an ex-Nazi who turns machine-gun sniper when his past is brought to light ("A Skeleton in the Closet"), one about the plight of American Indians ("Indians"), and one about the futility of nuclear war's mutually assured destruction ("One World"). But Anthrax are not fundamentally serious *people*. Their summary of the injustices done to Indians is "We're dissin' them", and "Indians" contains a section marked "mosh part". The album also features a song about Judge Dredd, "Caught in a Mosh", and one called "N.F.L.", though this last does *not* turn out to be about football. After the unsmiling approaches of Slayer and Metallica, humor is a very refreshing way to approach speed metal, which is after all, a pretty silly sort of music.

Another side effect of not taking themselves too seriously is that it allows them a lead singer who can actually sing well, which goes a long way to making *Among the Living* an experience that you don't need animal sacrifices to appreciate. In a way, though, this is almost too bad. As technically-proficient as Joey Belladonna is, most of my favorite moments here are when the rest of the band steps up to their mics and just starts yelling. Not-subtle, but more in keeping, I can't help think, with the band's underlying musical attitude.

### ***State of Euphoria*, 1988 LP**

If you liked *Among the Living*, well, here's another one. There's not much stylistic progression between the two, but there isn't any regression either. Nothing here is as gleeful as "Caught in a Mosh", but on the other hand this one includes a free hologram and contains a great cover of "Antisocial", originally done by Trust (whoever they were). One of these two albums is plenty, though, and the fact that I have *Among the Living* on CD and this on LP means that format-convenience settles the question of which one I listen to when I do.

### ***Persistence of Time*, 1990 CD**

Here, though, Anthrax break out of their stall and show some movement. This album is substantially heavier overall than the last two, putting more emphasis on the bass and the crunch of Scott Ian's rhythm guitar. A relatively restrained instrumental slips in here, called "Intro to Reality", and the near-rap section of "Blood"'s chorus is interesting foreshadowing, in retrospect.

On the whole, though, this record doesn't strike me as an improvement. The added heaviness detracts from Anthrax's usual sense of humor, and too many songs on this album seem to have a minute or so of unnecessary chugging at the beginning. Despite their pace, Anthrax songs were never short, but this is the first time where they begin to weary me. The charm of Belladonna's voice is also wearing somewhat thin.

However, the album's shortest song settles without a doubt in my mind whether this CD was a good purchase: "Got the Time", a cover of Joe Jackson's song. Here Anthrax's manic energy is allowed full reign, and the album's often-turgid heaviness is traded for hardcore energy. Joe's original was already a pogo-dance gem, and Anthrax's flat-out rendition is a masterpiece. If only they would do a whole albums of covers like this...

### ***Attack of the Killer B's*, 1991 CD**

And, as if on demand, here is one of the coolest records anybody has ever put out. A more varied selection of songs you are unlikely to find:

"Belly of the Beast" and "Keep in the Family" are live versions of songs from *Persistence of Time*. They're pretty good, but they're also pretty close to the originals, and here they serve mostly to pad the CDs overall length (13:20 between them, with only two other songs on the CD lasting more than four minutes).

"Milk" and "Chromatic Death" were originally for S.O.D., a partial Anthrax alter-ego band, and are full-tilt thrash. The latter was the theme music for MTV's Headbanger's Ball for a while, and if you've read the title you know all the lyrics.

"Protest and Survive" was written by Discharge, "Parasite" is a rollicking Kiss cover, "Pipeline" originally by the Ventures, and "Sects" another Trust song. Anthrax may well be the world's greatest cover band, thought that may not be what they'd like their claim to fame to be.

"Startin' Up a Posse" and "N.F.B." resurrect Anthrax's sense of humor and flaunt it. "Startin' Up a Posse" is a hilarious song about profanity and censorship that lurches unsteadily from a country-ish stomp into a "play as fast as you possibly can" chorus. The intentional irony of the song is that the day radio's "moral code" loosens up enough to let this song be played, it will then become obsolete. "N.F.B." is Anthrax's "tongue protruding through punctured cheek" contribution to the oeuvre of heavy metal bands' acoustic ballads. A wonderfully saccharine love song, complete with tasteful reverbed harmony vocals, this particular example skids to a stop with the touching line "She got hit by a truck". Sorry to ruin the surprise for you.

"I'm the Man '91" is a steroid remake of Anthrax's pioneering rap/metal song, previously available only on an EP. In it Anthrax lay claim (with a nod to the Beastie Boys) to having led the merger of heavy metal and rap, at least from the heavy metal side. And that leads to...

"Bring the Noise". A first place tie on my Top Ten Song list in 1991, I consider this one of the most important rock songs released during my lifetime. At a time when divisions between white and black in America are much on our minds, this song fused two genres that have been almost wholly monochromatic in marketing and showed how much they (and by extension their fans) have in common. The song does not, regrettably, seem to have led promptly to an eradication of racial tensions in this country, but I did get to see Anthrax and Public Enemy perform it live

together, and it rocked the part of the world that was inside the Orpheum Theater that night.

The other thing I learned from seeing that Anthrax show is that Joey Belladonna is a complete fucking idiot. You don't go to a metal show for the literary quality of the between-song banter, really, but after a few of Joey's shrieked "You like that shit, don't ya?!"s I began to wish that they'd just shut his mic off whenever he wasn't supposed to be singing. It's pretty amazing that the rest of the band put up with it for this many years, but after *Attack of the Killer B's* their patience must have finally run out, and Belladonna was sacked. This was very exciting news to me, and the thought of a whole Anthrax record with just the other four guys singing made me drool a little with anticipation. To my intense disappointment, however, they decided to get a new lead singer rather than just redistributing vocal chores, and their selection, Armored Saint's John Bush, has no more the voice I wanted for Anthrax than Belladonna did (though I liked him well enough in Armored Saint). *They* seem happy about having him, but I can't muster much interest.

## Metal Church

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### *Metal Church*, 1985 CD

It would be easy enough to write off Metal Church, without even listening to their records, as "just another" heavy metal band. Most obviously, the name "Metal Church" has a feel quite similar to "Black Sabbath". The cover of this debut album features a fog-enshrouded Explorer guitar covered with ivy and cobwebs, a crosspiece bolted to the neck turning it into a cross. And in the unlikely instance that you're not convinced yet, the band-name logo is kind of sinister-looking, too. All indicators point to cliché.

If you actually listen to this album, you'll discover that the first impression you get from the cover is mostly accurate. Metal Church won't go anybody's short list of most-innovative or most-influential metal bands. Stylistically they fall somewhere just fast-wards of Black Sabbath, right where I've put them in this chapter, really. Vocalist David Wayne's somewhat nasal delivery is reminiscent of Saxon, and the guitar timbres on this album remind me of Saxon as well.

Lest you think that these things are criticisms, though, I should say that Metal Church is actually one of the heavy metal bands that I like the *best*. As much as I admire the artists that push at whatever boundaries present themselves, without a norm for reference you can't have any "alternative". With speed metal, thrash, death metal, arena metal, funk metal and gothic metal

scattered around this chapter, Metal Church are part of the core that is simply Heavy Metal, without any of the sub-genre qualifiers. Without it, you could *have* any of the forms which exist in relation to it. And given that you have to *have* a "normal", there's no reason why great music can't be made there. I have a soft spot in my heart for bands who get overlooked in the middles of genres (in a way my *favorite* band, Big Country, suffers from this), and Metal Church find this vulnerable patch and ram a sharp guitar-neck right into it.

In fact, precisely because it *isn't* a trendsetter or the vanguard of any sub-genre, this album may be one of the best single-artist introductions to metal. It is heavy, hard, and very consistent and solid. The title track (yes, "Metal Church" by Metal Church from *Metal Church*) and "Battalions" are particular favorites of mine, and the cover of Deep Purple's "Highway Star" is terrific. If only every "normal" heavy band made albums this good-hell, if every *fiftieth* metal band made albums this good-I'd own a whole lot more heavy metal.

### *The Dark*, 1986 CD

There aren't very many Metal Church records, so in my opinion there's very little reason not to buy them all. *The Dark* continues on in the spirit of *Metal Church*. The drums seem to rumble a bit more here than on the first record, and Wayne's vocals seem grittier, but otherwise the exchange of producer Terry Date for Mark Dodson seems to have little impact.

The band here sounds somewhat less like Saxon and more like Iron Maiden, though I realize that for many of you that will be about as helpful as telling an American tourist in India how much the lira is worth in yen. I also realize that my perception of a resemblance to Iron Maiden may be nothing more sophisticated than the fact that there is a great song on this album called "Method to Your Madness", whose title brings to mind Iron Maiden's "Can I Play with Madness". Then again, there are probably sixty billion songs called some variation of "Method In the Madness" that this one *didn't* remind me of, so perhaps there's something in it after all.

My favorite song here is "The Dark", a rap-like stomp through old-fashioned terrors of the "I'm shaking and I'm thinking / Of something evil lurking / And waiting for me in the house" variety, as opposed to the more modern "now my head is slowly and gruesomely turning inside out in extreme slow-motion" sort that many of Metal Church's peers evidently prefer.

### *Blessing in Disguise*, 1989 CD

Then three years elapse without a Metal Church record, and I have no idea why. I suppose there might be another album in between the ones I know about, but if so I've never seen it. Ah well. Whatever it was that waylaid Metal Church, it evidently swallowed David Wayne whole, as he is nowhere to be found here, replaced by new singer Mike Howe. Also conspicuously absent from the official band lineup is guitarist Kurdt Vanderhoof, though he is credited with cowriting the music for all but two songs, and the lyrics for all but one. There's a note mentioning "additional guitars courtesy of Kurdt Vanderhoof", but it's not clear to me whether this means that he *played* them, or that the band just borrowed them because they were nicer than the ones they already had.

Terry Date is back to produce this one, and just to prove it can be done, he has made the bass growl a bit louder again than on *The Dark*. Howe's voice is also a bit more technically adept than Wayne's, and sounds less strained, which pretty much cancels out in my opinion. The band does take advantage of Howe's potential for mellower delivery on the long acoustic passages of "Anthem To the Estranged", playing slow sections against fast ones for a nearly ten-minute-long "Heaven and Hell"-style epic. "Badlands" has a similar scope, but "The Spell Can't Be Broken" and "Cannot Tell A Lie" follow in a more straightforward Metal Church vein.

On the whole, I like this album a little less than the other three, but only a little, and the boomy, rousing anthem "The Powers That Be", in particular, is as good as any of the other record's songs.

### *The Human Factor*, 1991 CD

On the other hand, *this* album, with the exact same personnel (including the ghost-hand of Vanderhoof), is my *favorite* Metal Church record, and thus one of my favorite records, period. "The Human Factor", a song about the lack of it in modern music (containing the great line "one more MIDI cable and my band is ready to go"), and "Date With Poverty", the video for which introduced me to the band, start the album off in crushing style, and my attention never wanders.

The energy level on this record is a notch above its already-spirited predecessors, and it combines with clear and forceful production (Dodson, again) and a surprisingly pointed set of topical lyrics (covering First Amendment rights, teen suicide, child abuse, nuclear terrorism and alcohol dependency!) to produce one of the most intense, *focused* records around. The songs are shorter, faster and harder than on *Blessing In Disguise*, and even "In Harm's Way", which opens with an

acoustic section akin to the one in "Anthem to the Estranged", kicks into gear sooner and doesn't let up.

Even the cover belies a new self-confidence. Where the first three covers are stock heavy-metal themes, the angular logo featured prominently, this one is a photo of the band members, shot from above, lying on the floor surrounded by candles. Actually, when I describe it that way it sounds even *more* overblown than the others, but the brightly colored candles, seen from above, don't look sinister at all, and the band looks calm and clean, not grubby and mean. The logo, in strict defiance of unwritten heavy-metal rules, doesn't even appear on the front cover, relegated to a postage-stamp sized area of the back cover, which is otherwise just the song list and label credits (this album being, for the first time, on Epic). Obviously a band who are comfortable with themselves, and with letting their music speak for itself. You *can*, you see, judge an album by its cover, as long as you do it in retrospect.

Metal Church may be travelers in the middle of the metal road, but with *The Human Factor* I think they have found The Way.

### *Hanging in the Balance*, 1993 CD

Before anything else can be said about *Hanging in the Balance*, it must be said that the outside of *this* CD does the band absolutely no favors. The front cover illustration is, and I apologize sincerely for my inability to avoid a subjective value judgment here, one of the worst in the history of music packaging. In fact, it's not just that it's ugly. It *is* ugly, mind you, a cartoon drawing of a hideously obese woman who resembles a butterball turkey more closely than a human being, save that so self-respecting turkey would consent to donning the ludicrous steel brassiere and gut-plate that this figure is pictured in, and even a turkey would have the sense not to wear fishnet and pink high heels with it.

It's more than that, though. Even if you *liked* this cover, you could scarcely devise a cover more likely to dissuade heavy metal fans from purchasing the album without actually having Wayne Newton involved. The style is totally wrong, the *colors* wrong, the lettering questionable. I came upon this album by surprise, it having had no advance publicity, and my first impression upon picking it up was "What the hell *is* this?" Flipping it over didn't help much, as the back cover reveals that Metal Church have abandoned (or more likely, been abandoned by) Epic, and now reside on Joan Jett's Blackheart Records, a pretty strange place for them to have ended up. The only thing that *doesn't* suggest that Metal Church has embarked on a musical detour as a sleazy lounge-act is that their logo is still

basically unchanged. Without the logo for reassurance, I might not have bought this album.

Which would have been a shame, and certainly *is* a shame for all the people for didn't have my fortitude, for the album actually involves no stylistic departure at all. The only connection between the album cover and the musical contents is Joan Jett's backing-vocal cameo on "Little Boy" (along with Kathleen Hanna of Bikini Kill and Allison Wolfe of Bratmobile). This is a logical successor to *The Human Factor* is every way I can think of, crushing heavy metal in its traditional sense. Anybody hoping for a return to the evil gloom of *The Dark* would be disappointed, but the cover would probably have kept those people from even touching the thing. If you found *The Human Factor's* synthesis of pop songcraft and metal power as exciting as I did, though, this album is as good or better. "Waiting for a Savior" was my favorite heavy metal song of 1993, and only narrowly missed making my top ten (edged out by a Vai song that, though it's listed in this chapter, had a somewhat different appeal).

There is one other odd detail that I'll mention, since I'm not totally sure what to make of it. A striking number of these songs revolve, lyrically, around religious topics. "Gods of Second Chance" is a plaintive plea to God to make himself known, the singer desperate for affirmation after the suicide death of a friend (?). "Losers in the Game" holds out the hope that however bad life gets, "when time is done and kingdom come, we'll not be losers in the game". "Hypnotized" is a straightforward bit of autobiographical narration by Satan. "No Friend of Mine" is about racism (sort of Metal Church's version of the Specials' "Racist Friend"), but opens the subject with the line "No one's born with hatred, it's something that you learn; how do you think the good Lord feels about the crosses you burn?" "Waiting for a Savior" is about that, though it concludes "he's not coming". This marks nearly the end of explicit Good Lord references, but "Little Boy" involves angels, and "The End of the Age" prophets, preaching, calves and other assorted apocalyptic acoutrements.

Metal Church still has a ways to go before they turn into Stryper, especially as religion here is invoked in the internal search for meaning, not as proselytizing, but it's an interesting trend, given the resistance that heavy metal fans outside the Christian Metal subgenre typically show to sympathetic treatment of religion. (Perhaps the cover is meant to distract from the lyrics, for just this reason.) A few years ago it would have bothered *me* more, but all these Orson Scott Card books (and scattered others, like Judith Moffett's *Pennterra* and Dorothy L. Sayers' *The Mind of the Maker*) have started to change my attitude toward individual believers, as distinct from churches and religions themselves.

And besides, when an album sounds this good, on one level it could just as well be about knitting.

## Motörhead

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### 1916, 1991 CD

If you can imagine merging Slayer with the Ramones, then you probably have other problems, but you also may have a good idea what seminal, dirt-caked leather-models Motörhead sound like, at least circa 1991. It is no coincidence that *1916* features a tribute to the Ramones themselves, called simply "Ramones". That song is probably the only one here that would fit in as is on a Ramones' album, but most of the rest show more than a touch of Ramones' simplicity and high-speed directness. "Going to Brazil" reminds me of "Johnny B. Goode" performed by a motorcycle gang. "Angel City" has a similar rock-roots feel. "No Voices in the Sky", my favorite song on the album, somehow channels this energy into a bitter but rousing chorus aimed at a deaf god.

There are two breaks of sorts in the 40 minutes the album runs. The fifth song, "Nightmare/The Dreamtime", is eerie and largely drumless, swirling bass lines and reverberated guitar feedback providing the soundtrack for a sinister doubled chant and some truly scary backmasking that makes Lemmy, who already sounds like a monster of sorts, sound like a much more frightening monster. Good Halloween haunted house music. The following song, "Love Me Forever", is a ballad of sorts. Drums and solos kick in when the chorus hits, but the verses feature about the tenderest singing you're likely to get out of Lemmy, and an accompanying guitar with several fewer distortion pedals in the signal chain than there usually are.

The final song, "1916", is the most unusual. A slow dirge about young men facing reality's dissolution of their grand illusions of war's glory, with martial drums, cello and an organ of some sort, this song could easily have been written in some mortar-lit trench as World War I surged around the narrator. The incongruity of Lemmy's battered voice singing *softly* makes this seem even more like the rendition of some timeless folk song. It's hard to imagine, even as I say it, that Motörhead has done something "beautiful", but there it is, genuinely moving.

## Black Sabbath

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As a diligent search through the rest of the book will reveal, my personal view of music history basically

begins in 1977, and there is precious little in this book that was released before then. The few exceptions are almost all, as in this case, the back catalog of a band that I discovered through later material. The reason for this is relatively simple. When this album was released I was three.

My late arrival notwithstanding, Black Sabbath is my oldest favorite band—that is, of the bands I still consider “favorites”, this is the one that I’ve liked for the longest time. A couple tell-tale signs are the preponderance of LPs in this section, and the fact that, since I started buying Sabbath records at a time when I had basically no disposable income, there is a big gap in the middle of my collection. I’ve gradually begun to fill in the rest of the Sabbath digital catalog, but an integral part of my Black Sabbath experience is still the fact that I bought the first five albums in 1981 at a Sound Warehouse 5/\$20 sale, which at the time was two months’ allowance.

I also cherish the thought that after all these years there are still a handful of Black Sabbath records I don’t have. Now, if I can just manage not to wait so long before buying them that they go out of print...

### ***Black Sabbath, 1970 LP***

With the advantage of several years of hindsight, I can see now how this record relates to, and presages, the “real” Black Sabbath records that follow. The dark, gloomy mood and slow but undeterable pace are there, as is Ozzy (here spelled Ossie) Osborne, destined to become heavy metal’s only household name by biting the head off a bat (or was it drinking Coke and eating Pop Rocks at once?). There are a few power-chords of sorts, and Geezer Butler’s flashy bass-playing, but there are several factors that lead me to, even now, think of this as a different band entirely from the Black Sabbath whose work begins on *Paranoid*:

Too much pink in the album cover.

Harmonica.

Tiny, wimpy drums that sound like an unmiked Ed Sullivan appearance.

Trippy blobbular logo.

Pitter-patter ride cymbals that sound like the accompaniment to a grade-school filmstrip about The Louvre, or possibly Krebs’s Cycle.

Too many boingy, sand-filled-banjo-like guitar sounds.

Blues.

As a historical artifact, this is fascinating, and I’m not trying to warn you away from it, but it simply is not, to me, Heavy Metal. Also, cover collectors should note that the song “Behind the Wall of Sleep”, listed here, is not the source of the 1986 Smithereens song of the same name.

### ***Paranoid, 1970 CD***

Here, then, is where heavy metal is born. It is reasonably difficult to have gotten through the last 22 years without having heard “War Pigs”, “Paranoid” or “Iron Man”, all of which appear here, so the chances are good that you already have some idea of what these songs are like. On the other hand, it’s not at all unlikely that the versions of those songs that you’ve heard were not the originals (note as I go along how many times they come up on other releases). Listening to the originals, then, can be an interesting surprise.

For one, Osborne has since learned to sing a *lot* better than he could in 1970. Particularly on the slower, relatively unadorned “War Pigs”, his erratic command of pitch is evident in a way that the echoes and speed of “Paranoid” and cyborg effects of “Iron Man” mask. For another, it is easy to forget just how slow these songs all are. Speed metal is a *long* way away.

But to me these increase the appeal of *Paranoid* rather than detracting from it. After all, what’s the fun of meeting your friends’ parents if they turn out to be just like their kids? Also, who can resist a pair of songs titled “Rat Salad” and “Fairies Wear Boots”, the latter containing the immortal line “Fairies wear boots now you gotta believe me”?

As I said, this is musical prehistory to me, but if I were to draw one of those evolutionary-tree diagrams that paleontologists use to show how a single family of grouchy trilobites in Port Also, Delaware gave rise to all of the modern world’s water buffalo, eels, organized religion and Baco-bits, the two songs that would mate at the root of it are “Paranoid” and Simon and Garfunkel’s “The Sounds of Silence”. Provided you’re willing to suspend your disbelief over the Royal Gorge by a single bungee cord, it’s amazing how much of the music that I like can be traced back to a hypothetical unholy merger of these two songs. “Paranoid” provides drive, intensity and directness, and “The Sounds of Silence” provides beauty, melody and intelligence. Mix these elements together in varying proportions, and there’s very little music in this book that can’t be seen in a way as a product of them. Now historically, this isn’t causal. The elements that make up these two songs *do* also make up most of the *other* songs, but neither Black Sabbath nor Simon and Garfunkel invented them. In my own world, though, this is as far back as I trace things, and so from my perspective calling these songs modern music’s progenitors is not particularly less insane than most of the other things I say in this book.

### ***Master of Reality, 1971 CD***

By the third album, Ozzy’s voice is beginning to settle into that unique way it has of always sounding

like he's singing through a cheese grater, even when he's standing right next to you. The concentration of "standards" on *Paranoid* notwithstanding, this is a better album musically. "Sweet Leaf" is structurally similar to "Paranoid", but the rest of the band comes closer to matching Ozzy's intensity. "After Forever", my pick for best track, shows perhaps Sabbath's best *melody* yet, and some pretty good tempo changes, for 1971. "Embryo" and "Orchid" are the first of Tony Iommi's trademark instrumentals. "Children of the Grave" sounds the heaviest to me, the guitar and bass propelling the song along almost on their own, allowing Bill Ward the luxury of some rattling tom-tom runs that Lars Ulrich's generation would later convert into double-pedal kick-drum rolls.

On the other side, the beginning of "Lord of This World" sounds a lot like Spinal Tap's "Big Bottoms" to me (it might, come to think of it, be an intentional tribute). The haunting guitar-bass-flute-Ozzy ballad "Solitude" and the almost Jethro-Tull-like "Into the Void" round out an underrated album.

#### **Vol. 4, 1972 LP**

The two great mysteries of *Vol. 4* for me are: 1) why are there big pictures in the gatefold of Geezer and Tony, but not of Ozzy and Bill Ward? and 2) why do they thank "the great Coca-Cola Company of Los Angeles"? Is this a cocaine reference I'm naively missing?

Whatever the reason, this is a noisier record than any of its predecessors. Tony's guitar is more distorted and less noise-filtered, and Bill Ward seems to hit a lot more cymbals than he used to. Geezer, on the other hand, is buried way down in the mix, nearly vanishing from "Tomorrow's Dream" completely. Ozzy's vocals, too, sound distant.

Piano and what sounds like a synthesizer make their first brazen appearance on "Changes", along with some *backing vocals*! The instrumental "Laguna Sunrise" adds synthesized strings to Iommi's acoustic guitar. However, this album also contains "Supernaut", one of the heaviest Sabbath songs to this point, and "Cornucopia", one of their *fastest*, so there's no need to fear that the boys are getting soft; they're just loosening up.

#### **Sabbath Bloody Sabbath, 1974 LP**

This is the first Black Sabbath album that *looks* like their stereotype. The front cover is a bizarre redly lit scene of demonic torment, a man sprawled on a bed comprised of skulls, claws and the number 666, with sinister pointy-eared tufted-tailed creatures from the netherworld hovering mockingly over him. Ah yes, there's a snake around his neck, too, and an

incongruously cheerful-looking rat hopping onto the bed at the bottom right.

The back cover, for contrast, shows presumably the same man convalescing in relaxing shades of blue and green, surrounded by kindly lions and pitying waifish attendants. I can't tell what has become of the rat.

In retrospect, this would have been a better cover for *Heaven and Hell*, but I'm getting six years ahead of myself.

Musically, this is the first Sabbath album produced entirely by the band themselves, and it feels slightly more confident than *Vol. 4*, though otherwise stylistically little-changed. "Sabbath Bloody Sabbath" and "Killing Yourself to Live" are strong songs in standard Sabbath mode. "Fluff" is this album's pretty instrumental. "Who Are You" is a strange off-key dirge loaded with buzzing synthesizers and ambient noises. "Looking for Today", with acoustic guitar and flute on the chorus and shuffling drums throughout, and "Spiral Architect", with some orchestral-sounding percussion, synth strings and double-tracked Ozzy, both sound like pretty straightforward rock songs, without very much heavy metal to them.

In fact, I doubt a heavy metal band could get taken seriously as such today with an album that contains as little actual *heavy* or *metal* as this one. Fortunately, 1974 was more tolerant.

#### **Live at Last, 1980? CD**

I'm going to get out of sequence for this oddly unexplained CD, a live recording that has a publishing date of 1980 on the back cover, but which features no songs from any album later than Sabbath Bloody Sabbath (and only one of those). From the lack of credits and austere packaging I would almost think this was a bootleg, but I don't know what a bootleg would have been doing in the cut-out bin of Tower Records, where I bought this.

Whatever its historical origin, *Live at Last* sounds to me most like *Vol. 4*. It includes "Tomorrow's Dream", "Cornucopia" and "Snowblind" from that album, as well as *Master of Reality*'s "Sweet Leaf" and "Children of the Grave", *Paranoid*'s "War Pigs" and "Paranoid", *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath*'s "Killing Yourself to Live", and a way-extended version of *Black Sabbath*'s "Wicked World".

The sound quality overall is pretty good. It sounds like a live recording, by which I mean people standing around with microphones, not a direct feed from the mixing console to a multi-track that is then processed and cleaned up just like a studio album. The mics were well-placed, though, and I like the effect.

The performances are on the ragged-but-spirited side. "Killing Yourself to Live", "Paranoid" and



“Children of the Grave” are particularly raucous, and almost everything here is noticeably faster than the original versions, if not necessarily shorter. “Wicked World” serves as the housing for a lot of guitar and drum soloing, which turns a 4:30 original into an 18:59 epic here. I don’t find its length annoying or boring per se, but if you’re hungry and your kitchen is within earshot of the stereo this is a fine time to fix a sandwich. I also like the longish rendition of “War Pigs”, though it is the most chaotic performance captured here, with all four players either out-of-tune or off-beat at different points in the song. Ozzy has feedback problems with his mic early in the song and the sound man appears to have corrected them by turning the mic level down for much of the rest of it.

But what’s the fun of a live album that sounds just like the record? This is well worth the \$6.99 I paid for it.

### *Never Say Die!*, 1978 CD

My collection now skips blithely over *Sabotage*, *We Sold Our Soul for Rock ‘n’ Roll* and *Technical Ecstasy*, alighting just in time for the last album of the first incarnation of Black Sabbath.

Ozzy’s era ends in fine form. There isn’t a single song on this album that I don’t consider excellent, even if Ozzy sounds especially like a chorus of strangling munchkins on “A Hard Road”. Details like the piano and jazzy cadences of “Air Dance”, and the horns on “Breakout” remind you that Black Sabbath was always a good deal more sophisticated than the large majority of its imitators, and the title track reminds you that they could rock just as hard as anybody.

Foreshadowing Ozzy’s departure, the bluesy final song, “Swinging the Chain”, is sung by somebody else. I don’t know who it is, and the liner notes provide no additional information, but it sure doesn’t sound like Ozzy. Perhaps it’s John Elstar, who plays harmonica on it. Of course, if I ever find out who it is I’d probably want to call that the second incarnation of Black Sabbath, and make Dio’s the third, and who needs that confusion? Let it remain a mystery.

(Later: I asked Bobby, the mail guy at work, who is trying to start a Sabbath tribute band, and he told me that it’s actually Bill Ward singing, so there’s your answer.)

### *Heaven and Hell*, 1980 CD

Black Sabbath version 2, then, starts here, as Ronnie James Dio takes over for Ozzy Osbourne. At the same time (and I’ll leave the question of causality aside), the band’s sound changes considerably.

First of all, of course, Dio’s voice is very different from Ozzy’s. Dio’s is technically more capable and

more powerful, though in a more conventional way than Ozzy’s. In my opinion, Dio is the best heavy metal vocalist ever, but definitely a heavy metal vocalist, while Ozzy is a singer unto himself, weaker inside the genre but more powerful outside of it. Also, Dio is uglier than Ozzy, if you can believe that.

The rest of the band’s sound changes in a similar way, channeling its energies more directly into heavy metal than in Ozzy’s era. *Heaven and Hell* is the first Sabbath album that sounds to me both like it could be taken seriously as heavy metal if it was released today, and like it *could* have been released today. Even *Never Say Die* has, to my ear, a distinctly *old*, Seventies feel (remember that for me, “old” and “Seventies” are synonymous), while *Heaven and Hell*, with producer Martin Birch (also known for work with Blue Öyster Cult and Iron Maiden) at the controls, sounds “modern”. Also first appearing on this album is keyboard player Geoff Nicholls, who would become a fixture hereafter, bringing consistency to the “odd sounds” element of Sabbath’s music.

All in all, this is an epic album, and a pivotal one in my life. *The Mob Rules* was actually the first Black Sabbath album I bought, but “Heaven and Hell” is the song that brought the band to my attention first. Though it isn’t even seven minutes long, which is not very long compared to many subsequent metal songs, it has the structure of an epic in the way that most much-longer songs do not. I was 13 when this song came out, and lines like “The world is full of kings and queens who blind your eyes then steal your dreams” had a great deal of incisive resonance for me.

The rest of the album is similarly awesome. Iommi’s guitar parts are cleaner and more forceful than ever before, Ward sounds great, and Geezer Butler’s burbling bass lines are here shown to their best effect for perhaps the first time. “Neon Knights”, “Walk Away” and “Die Young” are my favorites, but the whole album is great, and is Sabbath’s most stylistically-consistent record to this point in their career. In fact, *all* the albums after this one are either more consistent or less varied (depending on where your preference lies) than the ones *before* it.

I know that historically, Ozzy’s Sabbath was the band that created heavy metal, and that Ozzy himself is perhaps the genre’s most central figure, but to me *this* is the *real* Black Sabbath.

### *The Mob Rules*, 1981 CD

And *this* is the real Black Sabbath *album*. From the shambling faceless figures on the cover and the first crashing measure of “Turn Up the Night” to the “aliens are landing on my house” instrumental “E5150”, this record still stands undiminished in my mind after 13

years of listening to it, as one of heavy metal's definitive works. The only cast change is Vinnie Appice, replacing the departed Bill Ward, and while it is certainly possible to tell the difference between the two drummers, they are both excellent. Martin Birch again produces.

No individual song here has quite the grandeur of "Heaven and Hell", but "The Sign of the Southern Cross" comes close, and the album overall improves on *Heaven and Hell*. "The Mob Rules" provides this record's lyrical tag line, "If you listen to fools, the mob rules", as well as its heaviest riffs. "Country Girl" is one of the best explications of Sabbath's trademark ability to use a tightly controlled pace to achieve an intensity similar to what the best speed metal bands do with maximum speed. "Over and Over" has some of the musical feel of old Sabbath, but Dio's voice drives it into a soaring post-chorus solo that would have been out of place before.

In fact, the only things I *don't* like about this album are that the songs on the cover of the LP weren't listed in the order they actually appeared on the record (the CD fixes this), and that there are no liner notes of any sort, both flaws, incidentally, that *Heaven and Hell* shared.

#### *Live Evil*, 1982 CD

This version of Black Sabbath follows up their two studio albums with the first Black Sabbath live album (*Live at Last* was recorded earlier, but released later), a 2 CD package that covers the beginnings and endings of Sabbath's career to this point, but little in between.

From the Dio era, there are "E5150", "Neon Knights", "Children of the Sea", "Voodoo", "The Mob Rules", "Heaven and Hell" and "The Sign of the Southern Cross", and the first two Sabbath albums are represented by "N.I.B.", "Black Sabbath", "War Pigs", "Iron Man" and "Paranoid". This middle half-dozen albums show their faces here only in "Children of the Grave" and the instrumental "Fluff". Where *Live at Last* sounds like a bootleg, this is very much a planned and polished live album. As such it is less interesting in a way, but more listenable.

The new material is well-played, and shows live energy, but it is all very similar to the studio versions, and I wouldn't recommend this album on that account. The old songs, though, are updated here in grand fashion. If, like me, you like the new Sabbath *sound* better than the old one, it is great to hear the old classic songs given new musical settings. "Black Sabbath" is closest to its original, while "N.I.B." is the most drastically reworked. The old songs sound not so much like old Black Sabbath songs, but like the new Black Sabbath playing great versions of some heavy metal

standards (which happened to have been first recorded under the name of Black Sabbath). Some older Sabbath fans will no doubt dislike this, but as a person endlessly fascinated by covers and remakes, I find it fascinating, and I think it's the only reason to buy this album.

Actually, it's the only *musical* reason. Two non-musical reasons are that the cover picture is *really* cool, and that Dio's between-song banter is better than Ozzy's.

#### *Born Again*, 1983 CD

Sadly, the second incarnation of Black Sabbath was short-lived, and Dio's departure was the beginning of the end for more than just him. The four albums from *Seventh Star* to *Tyr* are what I refer to as the Lean Years, with Tony Iommi alone remaining from the original line-up. Sandwiched in between Dio's departure and the doldrums, however, is this criminally underrated album.

Bill Ward looks none-too-well on the cover picture, but he's back and he sounds great, and Geezer Butler has yet to depart. On vocals, then, in a decided strange turn, is long-time Deep Purple singer Ian Gillan (also known from playing the lead in Jesus Christ Superstar, the polar metaphysical opposite from his appearance here). It is an odd mix, and apparently one that was largely manufactured on paper and in the studio, but the result is mind-blowing, and earns from me the rare (if dubious) label of Masterpiece.

There are many things, let me make clear, to dislike about *Born Again*. The lyrics are not inspiring sentiments in the least, varying from violent to irresponsible to brutally sexist. Gillan's tortured yelps will probably get on many listener's nerves. And this has to be one of the worst-produced major-label records I've ever heard, sounding like it was mastered inside a cardboard box, or run through several too many improperly-calibrated compressors or cassette generations.

But none of that can deflect the incredible, manic, crushing tide of sound that pours out of this album. "Trashed", a song about driving drunk (not *against* driving drunk, mind you), might as well be describing these songs rather than its characters, as the whole album careens wildly through its terrain, cornering on two wheels at most, avoiding smashing headlong into trees and bridge abutments only by the thinnest of margins. And even in the few instances where the band seems to flip over and skid along the highway on its roof, you can hear the engine racing, the wheels spinning and the hood ornament plowing a scar into the asphalt, and before you can quite figure out what's happened the car has caromed off the guard rail and is upright again, battered but unslowed.

This is Black Sabbath's vicious side, distilled and compressed and delivered in a pill the size of Wyoming. It is not recommended for the faint of heart. You'll play it a million times or you'll throw it in the trash compactor and sing hallelujah as the jewel box shatters.

So how do you respond to challenges, hmm?

### ***Seventh Star*, 1985 LP**

If *Born Again* was a desperate last-chance appeal, it was denied, and the band subsequently fell apart completely. Both the cover and spine of this album read "Black Sabbath Featuring Tony Iommi", which is a brazen attempt to make it look like a good thing that the rest of the band has abandoned him. It's an apt description, though, as there is little other than Tony's presence to recommend this album to Black Sabbath fans.

Actually, that's not quite fair. While it's true that the Lean Years are not the Black Sabbaths of old, they are disasters only if you expect them to be. So rather than deride each of these efforts for not being another *Mob Rules*, I am going to try to evaluate them on their own terms.

*Seventh Star*, then, features Glenn Hughes on vocals, Eric Singer drumming, and Dave Spitz on bass. Hughes is not at all a bad singer. He has some of Gillan's grittiness, but is much more bluesy, a bit like Paul Rodgers of Bad Company. Singer and Spitz provide a sturdy, if not flashy, rhythm section. And Iommi is still Iommi, churning out his inimitable murky power chords. "Angry Heart" has a great rumbling underpinning supporting a very nice melodic chorus. "In for the Kill" has some harmony that may be too pretty for harder-core fans, but that otherwise sounds a lot like Iron Maiden. "Turn to Stone" is a blistering cover of the Electric Light Orchestra's sympho-pop hit. Er, well, I'm joking about that, but I wish it *had* been. It is a decent song, anyway, but not nearly as interesting as it could have been. I like the title track okay, too.

So don't necessarily write off this album. If you're a heavy metal fan, I bet you own and like several albums that aren't nearly as good as this one.

### ***The Eternal Idol*, 1987 LP**

Don't get too attached to Glenn Hughes, though, because he's gone as fast as he arrived, replaced by Tony Martin, who is actually excellent. Martin's voice is in the same vein as Dio's, though perhaps a little bit stronger in technique and thus a little less distinctive. I feel somewhat sorry for Martin, as history seems to have dealt him into an unfortunate moment. It is not hard to image that *Heaven and Hell* and *The Mob Rules*

could have been just as brilliant with Tony Martin as they were with Ronnie James Dio, but instead he landed here and has to do what he can.

And he makes do quite well. "The Shining", the opening track, is very good. "Ancient Warrior" is a bit of a letdown, but "Hard Life to Love" kicks back into gear, albeit in more of a hard rock mode than heavy metal. "Born to Lose" sounds not entirely unlike the Scorpions, but like a *good* Scorpions song.

Airy keyboard fills are much more prominent on this album than on previous ones, and combined with the very 4/4 rhythm section they drive the band mainstreamward into the territory of Judas Priest and the like. This isn't the direction that I would have chosen for Black Sabbath, but they don't do a bad job getting there.

### ***Headless Cross*, 1989 CD**

Warner Bros. records must not have liked the direction, either, because after 15 albums over 17 years with the mega-label, *Headless Cross* features the new I.R.S. Metal insignia. Other major changes are the arrival of drummer Cozy Powell (who co-produced the album with Iommi) and bass player Laurence Cottle, and the crediting of this album's songs to Black Sabbath, not just Iommi (as with the two previous ones).

In fact, the songwriting credit seems like the most telling detail to me, as Black Sabbath sounds like a *band* here, as opposed to an Iommi solo project, for the first time in the Lean Years. Rather than trying to drag the other musicians up to his level Iommi here has taken the selfless alternate route to unity and allowed the focus to move away from him, and here he sounds like he is just trying to be the guitar player, not the whole band.

Tony Martin continues to do a good job singing, but lyrically Black Sabbath has slipped into self-parody. "Headless Cross", "Devil and Daughter", "Kill in the Spirit World", "Nightwing". Pretty much without exception the lyric sheet to this album reads like the band hired a hack contract-writer and told him to "write about Satan and rituals and sinister beasts, that sort of thing". This may not matter to some people, but to me it is a sign that the band is taking itself more seriously precisely when it is *less* deserving.

Musically, the album *rocks*, but it is lighter than any Sabbath album before or since. The shift of focus away from Iommi's guitar ends up leaving it on Martin's somewhat overdone vocal processing, giving the whole album a decidedly pop-metal-production sheen, at least relative to other Black Sabbath albums. There are some exceptions, notably "When Death Calls", whose chorus, at least, *roars*, but on the whole I find I feel that though the band has definitely

reoriented themselves after *The Eternal Idol*, they are heading off, again, in the wrong direction.

### ***Tyr*, 1990 CD**

It turns out, actually, that they were heading *back* towards heaviness, not away from it, as *Tyr* is substantially heavier than *Headless Cross*. “The Law Maker” picks up the pace, turns the guitar, bass and drums up and the keyboards and vocal echoes down, and comes closest to re-establishing Sabbath’s sonic assault than anything since *Born Again*.

*Tyr* is not a true concept album that I can tell, but the mythological theme implied by the title (Tyr was the Norse god of law) pervades the text, and does nothing in particular to improve the much-depreciated quality of Black Sabbath lyrics. I also am completely mystified as to what “Jerusalem” has to do with ancient Norway.

As I’m writing this Georgia just walked into the room to comment that “this sounds like Sammy Hagar”. I don’t necessarily agree, but I do feel that after two relatively consistent albums (new bassist Neil Murray is the only line-up change from *Headless Cross*), the Iommi/Martin/Powell/I.R.S. incarnation of Sabbath is growing set in their ways. *Tyr* is, as heavy metal albums go, “very good” in my book (this one), but there are no signs that this incarnation is likely to ever reach the heights of “brilliant”, where its forebears dwelt.

“Dwelt”? Blech. These lyrics are getting to me.

### ***Dehumanizer*, 1992 CD**

By thirty seconds into “Computer God”, the opening track of *Dehumanizer*, it is as if the Lean Years never happened and all is forgiven. And that’s before Dio starts singing! Yes, utterly unlooked for, here is the greatest comeback album I’ve ever cared about. Geezer Butler is back at bass, Vinnie Appice at drums, and some force that felt the universe was owed a favor has convinced Dio to rejoin. The result is an album that is the natural successor to *The Mob Rules*.

Not to diminish the skills of Cozy Powell, Tony Martin or indeed Vinnie Appice, but having Geezer and Dio back in place makes all the difference in the world, and it is as if Iommi has suddenly awoken muttering “Oh what a horrible dream”. On the one hand this amazing record makes the “merely adequate” Lean Years all the more regrettable, but on the other hand, getting a third album like this is enough of a gift to compensate for nine years of killing time, and I half-feel proud that I supported the band through hard times, and, that by expressing my support for “Black Sabbath”, whatever guise it took, I helped make this new chance possible.

What else to say? Everything here is right. In one stroke Black Sabbath returns to being the best heavy metal band around. There are fast songs like “TV Crimes” and “Time Machine”, and slow ones like “Letters from Earth” and “After All”. Dio sounds great, the production (by “Mack”) is every bit as good as *The Mob Rules*. If you didn’t like the Dio incarnation the first time around you probably won’t like it much more this time, but I’m very happy. *The Mob Rules* came into my life at a very impressionable time, and the nostalgic value of getting a crashing return to its form and style at the age of 25 is high (and Boston is about the only band that has *more* potential for spanning so many years in my music-listening experience than Black Sabbath). “Nostalgia” isn’t quite the right word, actually, because it isn’t that this album makes me feel like I’m back in 1981, it’s that it *connects* 1981 and 1992, asserting that there *is* continuity in time, which isn’t always as obvious in rock music as it is in art forms where careers tend to last lifetimes and the form itself isn’t still in relative infancy.

## **Ozzy Osbourne**

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### ***Blizzard of Oz*, 1980 CD**

Having departed Black Sabbath, Ozzy quickly demonstrates that the separation was good for both sides. Carried largely on the flashy playing of Randy Rhoads, an impressive guitarist whose berserk style is a far remove from Iommi’s, Ozzy’s debut solo album is a new start with great promise.

Where Tony Iommi’s playing was dark and deliberate, like a menacing giant stomping toward a balsa-wood village, Rhoads skitters and slashes along above the surface of songs like a piranha on jet skis, and this casts Ozzy’s demented delivery in a different light than Black Sabbath showed it in.

The two highlights of this first albums are undoubtedly “Crazy Train” and “Suicide Solution”. “Crazy Train”, the hit, could stand as the one-song version of Ozzy’s declaration of independence from Sabbath’s gloom. Fast and more warped than actually sinister, it is as fresh in its own way as Sabbath’s new work with Dio at the same time. “Suicide Solution”, on the other hand, is possibly heavy metal’s most notorious song, as it was the target of the most widely publicized attack on heavy metal lyrics by parents who claimed it actually exhorted their teen son to kill himself. The song actually *dismisses* suicide as an *inadequate* solution, but then irony-recognition has rarely been the most prized ability of right-wing vigilantes. Of course, it isn’t the quality most often

attributed to impressionable teen-aged boys, either, so it's possible that Ozzy could have averted substantial trouble by calling it "Suicide Is No Solution", or "So-Called 'Suicide Solution'", but he didn't and you can't make him.

Also on this album are the dirge-like classic "Mr. Crowley", and "Steal Away (The Night)", which would have made a good b-side to "Crazy Train". "Good-bye to Romance" and "Revelation (Mother Earth)" provide ballad outlets, and indeed Ozzy appears to have taken all the ballads *with* him when he left Sabbath, as Dio's version of Sabbath is basically without them.

### ***Diary of a Madman, 1981 CD***

Ozzy's solo career reaches its first peak quickly. "Over the Mountain" and "Flying High Again" beat "Crazy Train" at its own game, and may be the definitive Ozzy songs in my own revisionist version of the universe. The fact that both songs involve flying, the very activity that would edit Randy Rhoads out of the universe way before his work was done, makes them even more poignant, not that poignancy is really their strength.

After such a start, the rest of the album is almost inevitably an anti-climax. "Believer" is a particularly Black Sabbath-sounding track. "Little Dolls" features monster-stomping drums and shows that Ozzy has really learned to sing pretty well over the years. "You Can't Kill Rock and Roll" and "Tonight" are the ballads. And "S.A.T.O." (why this is abbreviated and what it stands for I have no clear idea, but I've seen "Sailing Across the Ocean" suggested, and while I can't find those exact words in the song, they're close enough to the theme of the lyrics to be plausible) and the title track boost the album's energy back towards its opening level.

This album also begins Ozzy's three album quest to make himself look as hideous as possible on the cover.

### ***Tribute, 1987 CD***

I will skip ahead in release dates again, because 1987's posthumous tribute to Randy Rhoads is an album of live recordings from late 1981, and it seems more useful to discuss it here before going on to the post-Randy albums.

Like *Blizzard of Oz*, *Tribute* opens with "I Don't Know" and "Crazy Train". In fact, *Tribute* contains all nine songs from *Blizzard*, as well as two from *Diary* ("Flying High Again" and "Believer") and three Sabbath songs ("Iron Man", "Children of the Grave" and "Paranoid"). Casual Ozzy fans who don't care for song duplication, then, should probably skip this album.

The reason to buy this album is Randy himself. The sound quality is not bad, considering that nobody knew these were going to be the only live recordings of Randy we'd ever have, but if he hadn't died I doubt that many of these takes would have made it onto a better-planned live album. Given history, though, this is *far* better than nothing. Rhoads' wild style feels like it is much more at home in the open spaces of concert arena than in a padded studio, and hearing the sparks seem to fly off his strings during these songs is the intoxicating stuff of guitar-hero legend. For Black Sabbath fans it's probably also worth the price to hear Rhoads' barely contained renditions of the three Sabbath songs. A true devotee can while away quite-happy hours comparing the originals of "Paranoid" and "Children of the Grave" with the live Ozzy/Sabbath versions on *Live at Last*, the Dio/Sabbath versions on *Live Evil*, and the Ozzy/Randy versions here.

The album ends on a very sad note with several minutes of studio outtakes from "Dee", Rhoads' echoing studio asides making him sound incredibly alone, his own short classical-guitar piece becoming Ozzy's tribute to a departed friend.

### ***Bark at the Moon, 1983 CD***

Filling Randy's shoes is an unenviable task that here falls to guitarist Jake E. Lee. Lee plays guitar with a flair similar to Randy's, but simply isn't quite as good at it. Nonetheless, the album gets off to a strong start with the title track, another driving song in the mold of "Crazy Train", "Over the Mountain" and "Flying High Again". "Now You See It" and "Rock and Roll Rebel" are of that ilk as well. "Centre of Eternity" and "Slow Down" are slightly mellower mid-tempo songs, and "Waiting for Darkness" is slower yet.

The ballads on this record, "You're No Different" and "So Tired", are perhaps the most telling to me. "So Tired", in particular, though ostensibly a relationship song, seems to resonate in Ozzy's voice as if it is much more than that. I'm sure I'm reading far too much into it, and projecting later work backwards, but it is as if Randy's death took a piece of Ozzy's energy that cannot be replaced. Indeed, compared to what Black Sabbath spent 1983 doing (*Born Again*), this is a disappointingly low-energy album.

Still, he looks ugly as hell on the cover, so the end is still a long way away.

### ***The Ultimate Sin, 1986 CD***

Ugly cover illustrations reach their pinnacle on this album, with Ozzy transformed into a hideously deformed multi-limbed creature rising out of some bubbling primordial ooze.

Musically, Ozzy has definitely smoothed over some of his rough edges in the intervening three years. This is a heavier record than *Bark at the Moon*, but by far the least *frantic* Ozzy album yet. The out-of-control spark of "Crazy Train" and "Flying High Again" is largely absent, replaced with yet another level of technical improvement in Ozzy's delivery.

"Shot in the Dark", "Lightning Strikes" and "Killer of Giants" sound best when I listen to this, but overall I find this album rather homogenous, and none of these songs really lodge themselves in my mind and keep playing after the CD runs out. This is also one of the most *calming* heavy metal records I have. Both of these things probably sound like criticisms, and I guess they are in a way, but this is still a pretty well-crafted album. Ozzy is getting older. Take that as you will.

#### ***No Rest for the Wicked, 1988 CD***

New guitarist time again: Zakk Wylde replaces Jake E. Lee. Wylde is an even more *polished* guitarist than Lee, with a propensity for squealing harmonics. He adds a burst of energy to this album that, unfortunately, gets almost completely swallowed in the production.

Otherwise, this album is almost indistinguishable for me from *The Ultimate Sin*. "Fire in the Sky" merges in my mind with "Shot in the Dark", and the rest of the songs merge into each other in random order. Ozzy has found a secure niche, and seems content to stay there, neither striving for better nor sliding into worse. Even the cover picture shows an Ozzy who looks almost soft, huggable, more like a teddy bear than the shambling ogre of old. A *comfortable* album.

#### ***No More Tears, 1991 CD***

Who better to help arrest the effects of the aging process than the ugliest immortal himself, Motörhead's Lemmy Kilmister. Lemmy cowrites four songs on this album, and the momentum from this boost seems to carry the rest of the album with it. "I Don't Want To Change the World", "Hellraiser" and "Desire" come closest to recapturing lost energy, despite the fact that "Desire" bears a disturbing resemblance to Judas Priest's "You've Got Another Thing Comin'".

The real triumph of this album, though, is actually the opposite effect. Rather than a triumphant return to his old form, several songs on this album, like "Mama, I'm Coming Home", "No More Tears", "Time After Time" and most of all "Road to Nowhere", actually take *advantage* of Ozzy's obvious weariness, expressing it rather than trying to hide it, and in this way Ozzy arrives at an unlooked-for transcendence. As he sings "I'm still looking for the answers" and "The wreckage of my past keeps haunting me", I hear a mixture of

bewilderment, frustration and acceptance. "I guess I'd do it all again", he sings, and his honest ambivalence is evident. From heavy metal's reigning embodiment of evil, Ozzy has grown down to be merely and gloriously human. "Road to Nowhere" is a song to be treasured, of a sort that is vanishingly rare in heavy metal: sad, and *touching*.

And having heard it, on subsequent listens the whole album appears to me to grow deeper, all the songs gaining an extra dimension. This could well be entirely a figment of my wishfully-dramatic imagination, but perhaps with this pointer you too can imagine this album into more than it might otherwise be, into a conclusion or a coda of sorts, a reconciling of Ozzy's past with his future, a last look back before moving on. I see Ozzy as Bilbo, boarding the ship at Grey Havens, about to set sail to the West on a journey that is as much a new beginning as an end.

But now I'm *definitely* getting too maudlin...

## **Dio**

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#### ***Holy Diver, 1983 LP***

"If Ozzy can do it", Ronnie James Dio must have figured, "so can I". And to an extent, he can. Taking Vinnie Appice with him from Sabbath, and adding guitarist Vivian Campbell (who is, as I write, in Def Leppard) and bassist Jimmy Bain, Dio sets out to do things *his* way. That is both the good news and the bad news.

Where Ozzy actually sounded like his way was *different* from Sabbath's way, Dio's way is extremely similar to Sabbath's course during his stay. "Gypsy" reminds me of "Country Girl", "Stand Up and Shout" is a bit like "Turn up the Night", and "Straight Through the Heart" sounds, ironically, a little like an Ozzy song. The unsatisfying thing about this record, for me, is that Dio as a solo songwriter just doesn't have as deep or interesting music as the band he left, and Campbell and Bain can't seem to make up for this shallowness. While Sabbath struggled through the mid-Eighties with a guitarist in search of a strong band, Dio struggles through as a vocalist with the same need.

That said, *Holy Diver* is not at all a bad record. Held next to its rough contemporaries, Ozzy's *Bark at the Moon* and Iommi's *The Eternal Idol*, Dio's entry is quite respectable. It's heavy and Dio is a great singer, though I think both the heaviness and Dio's delivery are overdone here to compensate for the relatively underdone songs. The album redeems itself in my eyes, though, with one *brilliant* song, "Rainbow in the Dark". A solid, propulsive metal anthem, "Rainbow in

the Dark" is buoyed up to greatness by a lilting, oscillating synthesizer line, and is the kind of song that careers are built on. The song will be forever linked in my mind to two recollections. One is its video, in which Dio comes as close to making me believe in gargoyles as I've ever seen a human come without apparent cosmetic enhancement. That face; those furry boots. Yikes. The other memory is of listening to this song cranked up on the terrible car-radio in my parents' mucus-green 1970 Toyota wagon, driving over to Marc Elliott's house, not paying as much attention to driving as I should have, so that I made a right turn off of Mockingbird a little too sharply, and ground one my father's brand new plastic hubcaps into a high curb. Sorry, Dad. Those were pretty crappy hubcaps, though...

### ***Sacred Heart*, 1985 LP**

Unfortunately, "Rainbow in the Dark" is also the kind of song that ends up getting more or less repeated in thin disguises, losing a little each time. "Last in Line", the title track of Dio's *second* album, was such a culprit, in my opinion, and "Hungry for Heaven" is the pale imitation on *this*, Dio's third album (which, the first song's background noises notwithstanding, is *not* a live record). This remake substitutes a piano for the original synthesizer sound, and the line now sounds even more like "Baba O'Reilly", but the ending is better, and I consider it another grade-A heavy metal fist-shaker. Dio has the makings of an absolutely killer greatest-hits album, except that hearing the "Rainbow in the Dark" clones all in a row might diminish their appeal irretrievably.

All in all, I'd say that unless you are a serious Dio devotee, you could pick either of these albums (or the second one, I suspect) and not need any of the others. This record has plenty of decent songs, just like *Holy Diver*, but only the one that I'd hold up as remarkable.

## **Iron Maiden**

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Though not nearly as much of a presence in my life as Black Sabbath, Iron Maiden is of somewhat comparable importance in the real world, as they are possibly the foremost standard bearers of the second generation of British heavy metal, and in many ways are the stylistic forerunners of Metallica and thus of legions of other metal bands not mentioned here. I was only aware of the band by reputation until about 1984, by which time, of course, Metallica's first album had already been released, but there are several albums before the ones I have.

Calling Iron Maiden a midpoint between Metallica and Black Sabbath is not a bad beginning, though it doesn't explain everything. Certainly Iron Maiden is a fast-playing band compared to Sabbath, but where Metallica and Anthrax flaunt speed largely for its own sake, Iron Maiden rarely uses it as a song's focal point.

Martin Birch, who did the Dio-era Sabbath records, produces all the Iron Maiden records discussed here, giving them the same clear punch that characterized *The Mob Rules*. With two guitarists, Iron Maiden's guitar sound is fuller-thicker? denser? something like that—than Black Sabbath's, but Steve Harris' often-melodic bass playing is more like Geezer Butler's than it is like Cliff Burton's or Jason Newsted's. Nicko McBrain's drumming, as well, calls less attention to itself than Lars Ulrich's.

Then again, if you think Ronnie James Dio is guilty of over-emoting, Bruce Dickinson will probably drive you insane. In fact, if you put Dio in a centrifuge while recording him, you'd have an effect similar to Dickinson's voice, which tends to fly in tight orbits around sustained notes like swarm of killer bees performing precision aerial-show drills around a frustrated bug-zapper, the occasional straggler spiraling smoking into the trap like *Black Sheep Squadron's* Japanese Zeros into the Pacific.

Unlike either other band, though, Iron Maiden is on good speaking terms with melody, and bona fide harmony vocals, largely unknown to Metallica or Sabbath (outside of the Lean Years), are common here. The effect, just to get another metaphor in, is something like a roller coaster that is fast enough to give you a rush, but not so kamikaze that you can't watch the scenery as you go.

### ***Powerslave*, 1984 LP**

I must have picked up *Powerslave*, intending to buy it, and then put it back, at least 15 times over the years. There are good reasons for this, though they won't necessarily tell you much about the album.

The reason I picked it up is that it has two classic songs that I always wanted, "Aces High" and "2 Minutes to Midnight". "Aces High" is not about card playing, but rather air combat (and not the only Iron Maiden song about this relatively neglected topic, either). "2 Minutes to Midnight" is, paired with Judas Priest's "Living After Midnight", the perfect beginning to a New Year's Eve party tape that you intend to put on at 11:53:56. Where the Priest song really is *meant* for that use, though, "2 Minutes" is actually about that clock that indicates how close somebody thinks humanity is to exterminating itself in a nuclear holocaust. This would provide some good dramatic tension for the turning of the year, except that by that

time of the night there has probably been enough champagne consumed that the social relevance of the song's lyrics will fly over your guests' lolling heads, smashing somewhere on the wall where tomorrow you will have to scrape off it and several other substances you don't remember serving *per se*.

The reason I put the record back so many times, though, is that side two features a 13:45 track called "Rime of the Ancient Mariner". I had to read Coleridge's epic poem of the same name in high school, and I can say without any hesitation that it is the one book that makes me most sympathetic with book-burners. There's this mariner, you see, and he shoots an albatross, and it goes downhill from there. There's a lot of predestination, which was exactly the wrong thing to try to feed a pretentious, over-intense Nietzsche-loving high-school student. Grr. I'm getting irritated all over again just remembering the experience. But that's a discussion better left for my *next* book, a scathing critique of the American educational system to be titled *Crying on the Shoulders of Giants*.

Anyway, eventually I overcame my resistance to the Coleridge allusion, and bought the album. The song, and the rest of the album, is very good indeed. While "2 Minutes" remains my favorite for sentimental reasons, "Powerslave" itself is great, and the rest of the album is solid mid-Eighties heavy metal.

#### *Somewhere In Time, 1986 CD*

This album's epic, "Alexander the Great", is shorter, and although it's a good song I just can't take a song with the subtitle "(356-323 B.C.)" and couplets like "Their culture was a Western way of life / He paved the way for Christianity" that seriously. Still, I give the band big credit for making the effort, often successful, to write thoughtful lyrics about topics ordinarily outside the purview of heavy metal.

There aren't any songs on this album that strike me with quite the same arena grandeur as "2 Minutes", but "Wasted Years", "Sea of Madness" and the title track are of "Aces High" temperament. The addition of some occasional guitar-synth adds another element to the band's sound-palette, and as a set I think these songs are a little more tuneful than those on *Powerslave*.

Also, the cover is a true classic, with Eddie, Iron Maiden's metal-and-sinew mascot, cast as a futuristic vigilante in some unspecified future city. The band themselves appear in cartoon cameos on the back cover, amidst a cityscape littered with Iron Maiden in-jokes (West Ham is beating Arsenal 7 to 3; I don't know why this is significant, but I'm sure it is).

#### *Seventh Son of a Seventh Son, 1988 CD*

It is, if I recall correctly, Heavy Metal rule #17 that states that all heavy metal bands must eventually break down and learn to put acoustic guitar introductions at the beginning of metal songs, and Iron Maiden finally gets around to it on "Moonchild", this album's opening song. Synthesizers are also more present on more songs on this album than the previous two, contributing string fills and ghostly choirs, though for the most part they are kept to the beginnings and ends of songs, and never allowed to get in the way of full-scale guitar assault.

"Infinite Dreams" is sort of Maiden's answer to Sabbath's "Heaven and Hell". Starting slowly, almost a ballad, it gradually builds speed to a gallop before slowing to a halt again.

The album's clear standout, however, is the fabulous "Can I Play with Madness". Downright upbeat, with soaring chorus harmonies and a "Rainbow in the Dark"-like synth riff, this is one of my favorite kinds of songs, an uncompromising heavy metal anthem with real pop (i.e. Boylan Heights, not "top 40") sensitivity. "The Clairvoyant" and "Only the Good Die Young" also lean this way, though in these two it is due more to the guitar solos than the singing. The band shows signs of bigger market potential, while betraying nothing.

#### *No Prayer for the Dying, 1990 CD*

The only lineup change in the span of my sample, Janick Gers replaces longtime guitarist Adrian Smith on this album, and the band switches to Epic at the same time.

The music takes a big step forward (at least, *I* think it's forward), though I don't know if either of those changes were responsible. This album is at once more streamlined and raw (the synthesizers, which weren't oppressive to begin with, are de-emphasized again for the duration), and yet distinctly more melodic and accessible. Several songs here turn the band's drive to the service of some especially catchy songs (as Douglas Adams says, a slice of lemon wrapped around a large gold brick). "Tailgunner" (another air combat song) and "Hooks in You" are the best examples, the latter containing the hilarious chorus lines "Hooks in you, / Hooks in me, / Hooks in the ceiling / For that well-hung feeling". (Interestingly, Marillion also has a song called "Hooks in You" that is uncharacteristically hook-laden.) (In fact, while on the subject of *lyrics*, "Public Enemy Number One" follows up on its ridiculous title with the awkward but heartfelt put-down "Your children have more brains / Than your drug-infested remains", and "Bring Your Daughter...To the Slaughter" needs no more explanation.) There are even



some nuggets for the Maiden traditionalist, as “Run Silent Run Deep” (sub combat, of course) and “Bring Your Daughter” both steamroller through in grand old style.

This album was *fourth* on my 1991 album list, one above Megadeth’s *Rust in Peace*, but neither it nor the band have worn as well, and I now like both *Rust in Peace* and Megadeth substantially better.

### ***Fear of the Dark, 1992 CD***

One great album deserves another just like it, and sure enough, this one sounds a whole lot like the last one. That’s not a complaint, just an observation.

It is important to have a sense of humor to appreciate this stuff. “Afraid to Shoot Strangers” has a particularly Spinal Tap quality to it for about three minutes before it kicks into a rollicking instrumental epilog. “The Fugitive” arrives at the ethically questionable conclusion “But if I ever prove / My innocence some day / I’ve got to get them all to make them pay”. And the juxtaposition of “Judas Be My Guide” and “Weekend Warrior” can’t be the most advantageous for either.

“Be Quick or Be Dead”, “The Apparition” and “Weekend Warrior” are the bounciest songs here, and if I like this album a little less than *No Prayer* it is because neither of these quite works up the party-stomp of “Hooks in You”. Of course, for those of you who preferred the older Iron Maiden, you might like this album better than the last one for that same reason.

Also, am I the only one to notice that the beginning riff in “Fear of the Dark” is almost the same as the Sisters of Mercy’s “Temple of Love”? Probably.

## **various**

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### ***New Wave of British Heavy Metal, 1990 CD***

This seems like an appropriate enough place to insert this definitive compilation, as Iron Maiden has the biggest presence in my collection of any of the artists featured on it. Compiled by Metallica drummer Lars Ulrich, this two-CD set summarizes his favorite era in modern music, the British heavy metal scene circa 1980. Although a few bands here (Def Leppard, Iron Maiden, Saxon, Venom) have made a lasting impact on their own, most of these groups were otherwise unknown to me.

My opinion of the individual songs on this compilation varies widely, but the appeal of the package is as a lovingly constructed retrospective of the kind that any musical movement would benefit from. The bands appearing here are: Diamond Head (*two*

tracks), Sweet Savage, Saxon, White Spirit, Raven, Paralex, Def Leppard, Weapon, Samson, Hallow Ground, Girlschool, Witchfynde, Iron Maiden, Jaguar, Tygers of Pan Tang, Gaskin, Sledgehammer, Venom, Angel Witch, Trespass, Holocaust, Vardis and Blitzkrieg (plus, on CD only, Dragster, A-11-Z, Witchfinder General, Black Axe, Fist and Praying Mantis). I find that many of these bands seem to me like they would have been better off *left* in obscurity, and many deserved even *wider* exposure. You’ll likely feel the same, though we’d probably disagree about exactly which bands belong in each category. Regardless, this should be part of every informed metal fan’s history lesson.

## **Judas Priest**

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### ***Unleashed in the East, 1979 CD***

Judas Priest is another fixture in the heavy metal firmament, and one that has really never appealed to me very much. I lump them in with Mötley Crüe and Kiss as bands whose success I attribute to their images, as their music doesn’t seem sufficiently remarkable to explain it. All three seem to me to create songs by saying “Well, what chord should we play over and over again to fill the space between guitar solos *this* time?” It is as if the band has only one brain between the members, as there is almost never more than one remotely interesting thing going on at a time in a Judas Priest song. There’s either singing, a guitar solo, or a drum run, and while any one of these things is going on the rest of the band just treads water. This may not be all bad, of course, as I suppose it lets you concentrate on one element at a time, and the enormous number of die-hard Priest fans testify implicitly that one-at-a-time is enough, so take my judgment as you will.

Judas Priest, however, does have a few songs that I like enough to have bought these two records. The key song on *this* record is their version of “Diamonds and Rust”. I’m not sure whether Joan Baez actually *wrote* this song, but I know it from her album of the same name, which was a mainstay of my parents’ record collection, and thus a prominent feature of my childhood. It’s a wonderful song, and having a heavy metal version of it is sufficiently interesting to me that I’m willing to overlook the fact that none of the other eight songs on this album sound very good to me.

### ***Live, 1987 CD***

The song that caused me to break down and buy this “classic” concert album is the party-anthem “Living After Midnight”, one of the all-time greatest “turn your

mind off and pump your fist in the air” metal anthems. The rest of the album, to be fair, is packed with songs that *nearly* recapture that gleeful energy for me. “Heading Out to the Highway”, “Love Bites”, “Some Heads Are Gonna Roll”, “Private Property”, “Freewheel Burning” and “You’ve Got Another Thing Comin’” all have a sort of pleasant chug-a-chuggedness to them, but in the end it’s all too homogenous for me, and “Living After Midnight” has grown old and begun to show its thin frame through threadbare gaps in the blustery musical facade.

## Saxon

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### *Rock the Nations*, 1986 CD

Another band from essentially the same musical heritage as Iron Maiden, Saxon sounds to me like they have stayed truer to the British New Wave school of heavy metal. Big reverberated drums, a strained-but-capable (or capable-but-strained) vocalist, and big machismo-laden lyrics replace Iron Maiden’s pop chorus harmonies, literary-allusion lyrics and epic song structures. Indicative of the mood on this record are the titles “Rock the Nation”, “Battle Cry”, “We Came Here to Rock”, “Running Hot” and “Party ‘til You Puke”. “Waiting for the Night” sounds like it could have been hugely popular had Bon Jovi recorded it. “You Ain’t No Angel” proves that when they put their minds to it, Saxon can write lyrics that are as stupid and sexist as anybody’s (“You’re just sixteen you’re on the loose” is a good sample).

In a bizarre gesture that defies reasonable explanation, Elton John actually appears and plays piano on “Party ‘til You Puke” and “Northern Lady”, though if I didn’t read the liner notes I’m not sure I would have even noticed that there *was* piano on either song. His presence does nothing to elevate the spirit of the proceedings, and in short, Saxon is not a band that I would hold up as a particularly shining example of *anything*. On the other hand, if you thought the heavy metal world lost a great talent when Def Leppard “sold out”, this album may help nurse you through your crisis. And I kind of like it, too, thought that’s certainly not why.

### *Rock ‘N’ Roll Gypsies*, 1989 CD

Recorded on Saxon’s 1988 tour of Eastern Europe, this album does a better job of capturing both what I like about Saxon and what I hate about them. What I like best is the song “Dallas 1PM”. I remember this song from my distant childhood as a well-crafted narrative of JFK’s assassination, and have been looking

for the record that originally contained it for a few years. I still haven’t found it, but here the song is on this live album. It’s not as well crafted as I remember, but the song itself still sounds pretty good.

The part I hate, though, is very much in evidence in this recording of the song, with the band’s inane lead vocalist exhorting the crowd to “make some noise” and then chanting “Oi, oi, oi” as if at a soccer game, dispelling any illusion I would have preferred to maintain that the band actually knew the difference between the songs that are completely moronic and the ones that have the potential not to be. There will be, I know, plenty of times during the rest of my life that I will come to “realize” that something I thought was great when I was younger is actually pretty lame, but for some reason this one hurts more than most.

## Savatage

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### *Fight for the Rock*, 1986 LP

I never had any illusions about Savatage, though. Just listening to their name tells you that they are not attempting to be rock’s answer to Vladimir Nabokov, Julia Child or even Charles M. Schultz. The cover picture, showing the band in a posed recreation of the famous photograph/sculpture of the soldiers on Iwo Jima putting up an American flag, announces that band has not come to shatter any genre barriers. And indeed this album covers the standard range from angry anthem to sensitive power-ballad in just the first two songs, then repeats the journey several times on the remainder of the album.

Provided that you’re willing to accept these premises, though, this is a mildly enjoyable album, especially for the \$1.99 I paid for it.

### *Hall of the Mountain King*, 1987 LP

This is a *much* more distinctive album. Visually, first, this is the ultimate Dungeons and Dragons heavy metal album. The front cover, with a muscular steely-eyed giant seated on an ornate throne, surrounded by gold, gems, medieval weapons and mystical tomes, could be an illustration straight out of the D&D Monster Manual. Much of heavy metal has always had an escapist bond with the role-playing game world, but seldom is the connection as explicit as it is on this cover.

Musically, the band has made a huge leap over the previous album. No personnel changes are in evidence, but a change of producers may have been an important factor. Here the band has abandoned run-of-the-mill commercialism for a much darker and heavier sound, vocalist Jon Oliva riding his voice much closer to

its ragged edge than on *Fight For the Rock*. In fact, the transition between these two albums is very similar to Celtic Frost's transition from *Cold Lake* to *Vanity/Nemesis*, even down to the color schemes on the four albums' covers.

"Strange Wings", probably the most accessible song here, has what could be a very standard structure, with a catchy chorus and slower, acoustic-backed verses, but the performance is edgy and distorted, raising the song to another level, though without completely obliterating its potential appeal. "Prelude to Madness", which opens the second side, sounds like Mussorgsky to me, though the credits don't own up to any outside inspiration. "Hall of the Mountain King" itself is punctuated with demented screams and the chants of legions of mining dwarves. At least, that's what I assume they are.

My favorite song on the album is "White Witch", a sinister speed-metal sprint that shows that Savatage has the potential to sound as powerful as the lyrics on "Fight For the Rock" pretended to be.

### ***Streets*, 1991 CD**

Savatage passed out of my consciousness for a few years, returning to it with this 69 minute rock opera. Thanks to the helpful prose summary supplied by the liner notes, I can tell you with some official certainty that this is the story of a drug-dealer turned rock-star turned drug-addict turned reformed-addict turned despairing-existentialist turned born-again.

There's no denying that this an ambitious effort. The band sounds assured, and darker still than on *Hall of the Mountain King*. There are several stand-out moments. "Strange Reality", the burned-out returned-to-the-street D.T. Jesus' encounter with a gin-soaked bum who used to be his boyhood blues-guitar hero, is a somewhat melodramatic plot-twist, but a menacingly forceful song. "You're Alive" has some of the epic feel of parts of *Tommy*. "If I Go Away" is *grand* in a piano-ballad sort of way.

In the end, though, there is just too much sameness here. Too many songs begin with Oliva singing over simple (often simplistic) piano accompaniment, and after a while the anticipation of seeing whether *this* one is going to stick with piano *all* the way or break into guitars at some point can no longer sustain the songs. Too many of these songs sound like they were included to "advance the plot", not because they add anything musical to the album. I suppose if you find the opera itself compelling, this wouldn't bother you, but I didn't really find the rags-to-riches-to-rags-to-riches tale to be particularly inventive or affecting, and thus I wanted the songs to be able to stand on their own. Which, at least to me, they don't.

## **Armored Saint**

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### ***Raising Fear*, 1987 CD**

Armored Saint is a killer heavy metal band from the old days, whose seminal album "Delirious Nomad" is a classic of the genre. At least, that's what my friend Matt says, and I have no reason to think he's wrong. One of these days I'll actually buy that album and find out for myself.

In the meantime, little bits of Armored Saint trickle into my collection courtesy of bargain bins and other chance encounters. *Raising Fear* is a good, though pretty predictable, heavy metal album. The cover of "Saturday Night Special" sounds exactly like what you'd expect that song to sound like covered by a band called "Armored Saint", and the rest of the album sounds like what you'd expect from a band who would do that cover. Vocalist John Bush shrieks and howls, guitarist Dave Pritchard slithers through fiery solos, and the band has a drummer named Gonzo and *lots* of hair. The lyrics are menacing, but hardly literary; "Out on a Limb" opens with the promising first line "Bureaucratic crap", but quickly decays into oscillating between "Out on a limb, with no reply" (?) and "Brain, pain". The band's impatient tendency to end lines after only four or five syllables makes for long, skinny columns of text in the liner notes, and makes some of these songs sound more repetitive than they might otherwise have.

Competent metal time-filler to me, but nothing I come back to frequently.

### ***Symbol of Salvation*, 1991 CD**

I'm drawing conclusions from scant information in the liner notes, but former guitarist David Pritchard seems to have died of Leukemia on the way to *Symbol of Salvation*, and the band only barely managed to pull through and continue. He is hard enough to replace that it takes both Jeff Duncan and Phil Sandoval to assume his guitar duties. Pritchard's name is still on some of the songs, though (he must have died *during* the making of this album), and the album is dedicated to him.

Armored Saint does a decent job of holding their own in Pritchard's memory. "Reign of Fire", "Dropping Like Flies", "Symbol of Salvation" and "Burning Question" are especially full-throttle. If I had to fault the album for anything, I'd say that it is overproduced and still pretty predictable musically. It plays like a somewhat faster version of the Black Sabbath records with Tony Martin. It's got your basic hard drumming, dexterous guitar solos, crunching power-chords, strong bass and your basic high heavy-

metal vocals, but that's just the problem: the delivery of all these elements is *too* basic, and in my opinion the band here still doesn't rise above the heavy metal norm either qualitatively or quantitatively.

It marks the end of another Armored Saint chapter, though, as John Bush was subsequently recruited away by Anthrax to replace Joey Belladonna.

## Warlock

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### *Triumph and Agony*, 1987 LP

Have you ever said to yourself, "Wow, I wish I could find a heavy metal band with a German-accented female lead singer"? If you have, and I think this unlikely, then here's the band you've been looking for. Warlock, musically, is pretty straightforward heavy metal, not unlike Armored Saint, above. However, they are the only heavy metal band I can think of offhand who has a female lead singer but does *not* define themselves as a "female" heavy metal band, in the way that, say, Lita Ford does.

The idea of a metal band with a woman singing actually sounds very appealing to me, and on "I Rule the Ruins" the effect is intense, but I was disappointed to find that although there is a female voice throughout, it is often not a *feminine* voice. I'm sure the German accent contributes to this impression, but the singer (the jacket doesn't mention her name) also uses a high throaty delivery very similar to that of many male metal vocalists. This is not a bad thing, in itself, but it's the opposite of what I *wanted* from Warlock, and the album doesn't offer me anything compelling to compensate.

## AC/DC

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### *Back in Black*, 1980 CD

We now move, for the first time, outside of what I consider heavy metal proper. Many AC/DC fans will, no doubt, find this an odd place to draw that line, but I consider this hard rock, not metal. Several key features make the difference.

First, Phil Rudd's drumming is much less involved and a much less prominent feature of the band's sound than most metal bands' drummers'. Not only is the drum production not as big as it usually is in metal, but Rudd is stylistically much more like Charlie Watts than Lars Ulrich. He hits the kick drum on beats one and three, and the snare on two and four, and when there are cymbals they usually come in on one or

three with the bass drum. Complicated fills are rare, and lead-ins to choruses or the like are usually done by delaying or rushing a snare hit, rather than adding notes, which is what most metal drummers would do.

Secondly, Angus Young's guitar sound is less processed than metal guitarists usually like. He plays it distorted, but not so much so that you can't hear the nuances of his chord playing. Metal guitarists usually keep enough distortion on that a chord is reduced basically to the initial attack and then "the rest of it", saving nuances for solos, but you can hear a lot more detail in the playing of Young and other hard rock guitarists.

Given how much I like heavy metal, it is odd that I don't really like hard rock much. Conversely, Georgia, my girlfriend, likes a number of hard rock bands (Aerosmith, most notably) that I don't, and she doesn't much care for most metal. (In fact, while I was writing that she walked in and said "This is a great album". So I must be right.)

This *is* a pretty great album, though. It has my favorite AC/DC song, "You Shook Me All Night Long", as well as such definitive AC/DC classics as "Shoot to Thrill", "Let Me Put My Love Into You", "Rock and Roll Ain't Noise Pollution" and of course "Back in Black".

Angus Young is also one of the most distinctive stage presences in all of music, stalking across the stage at astonishing speeds, despite a gait that makes him look like a poorly constructed wooden toy. Put him together with Ozzy Osbourne, who staggers around like a frost-bitten zombie, John Entwistle, who never moves or breaks a smile, and Def Leppard's one-armed drummer Rick Allen, and you'd probably have the world's most retarded-looking band. Though, come to think of it, they'd probably sound pretty good.

## Thin Lizzy

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### *Jailbreak*, 1976 CD

Thin Lizzy occupy very much the same quadrant of this genre as AC/DC in my mind. Phil Lynott's guitar is a bit more distorted at times than Angus', but his bluesy voice balances it out. It's not that AC/DC and Thin Lizzy really sound that much alike (the four years that separate the two albums are very evident, for instance, and that's the least of it), but they are similarly removed both from heavy metal and from "the type of music I usually like", though given the range of music in this book the latter may not make much sense to anybody but me. In fact, where Thin Lizzy's debt to Jimi Hendrix is pretty obvious, Crispin

(my local Hendrix expert) once picked Angus Young as a good example of a prominent guitarist who showed a singular *lack* of Hendrix's influence.

Unless you've spent a couple decades in a barrel, you've probably heard "Jailbreak" and "The Boys are Back in Town". Those two are pretty representative of the rest of the album, with the notable difference that unlike those two songs, you probably *haven't* heard the other songs sixteen million times (with the possible exception of "Cowboy Song"), so they have a freshness that a single which came out when I was 9 could never have for me. "Angel from the Coast" is my favorite, though my opinion of "Cowboy Song" has aged particularly well.

Anyway, I recommend this album highly. As a record in my collection from before 1977 that is not the early work of band I discovered after then, this is a definite rarity, and so you should probably just believe my opinion unquestioningly.

## Rainbow

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### *Straight Between the Eyes*, 1981 CD

For some reason, Rainbow and Journey are forever linked in my mind. Since I detest Journey, this has a tendency to color my subconscious opinion of Rainbow, too. It has something to do with the fact that this album has a song called "Stone Cold", whose title reminds me of a Journey song ("Stone in Love"?). Regardless, I managed to subdue these prejudices long enough to purchase this album, which I fondly remembered having taped off the "Midnight Album" feature of some Dallas radio station back around when it came out.

In the ever-shifting world of rock interconnections, Rainbow is right in the thick of things. Ritchie Blackmore and Roger Glover are once-and-future members of Deep Purple (next). Singer Joe Lynn Turner would later be in Deep Purple, and both Deep Purple's singer Ian Gillan and former Rainbow singer Ronnie James Dio would later sing for Black Sabbath. Rainbow drummer Bobby Rondinelli would later join Black Sabbath. There's bound to be more to it than that, even, but I'd have to do *research* to find out, and that's not the point of this book.

So, history aside, this record has much in common musically with Deep Purple, Bad Company and, Georgia points out, Foreigner. There is a strong bluesy feel to much of the album, but at the same time there are songs like "Bring on the Night" and "Power" (the muted-string guitar noises on this song are my favorite part of the album) that are as guitar-driven as some metal. There is also a Foreigner or Cheap Trick-like

"It's a small arena, Mom, but it's definitely an arena we're playing in" feel to songs like "Stone Cold", "Tite Squeeze" (sic).and "Miss Mistreated". This is American car-culture music; songs my friend Mike and I would have blared as we drove away from the high school on a Friday afternoon.

## Deep Purple

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### *Perfect Strangers*, 1984 LP

"What?!" I can hear Deep Purple fans screaming. "He's going to review Deep Purple solely on the basis of *Perfect Strangers*? What is he, crazy? What about 'Smoke on the Water', man!? Duh duh duh, duh duh da-nah?"

The answer, actually, is yes. Blithely ignoring Deep Purple's 1972 album *Machine Head*, which contains "Smoke on the Water", "Highway Star" and "Space Trucking", on the unassailable grounds that I don't have it, here goes.

On the heels of Gillan's one album stint with Black Sabbath, and Ritchie Blackmore and Roger Glover's sabbatical in Rainbow, here is Deep Purple's "comeback" album. It sounds like what you would expect it to sound like, if you know the components. Rainbow's influence calms Gillan down somewhat from *Born Again*, while Gillan in turn seems to energize Blackmore and Glover. Keyboardist Jon Lord returns Deep Purple's organ sounds to the mix, and Ian Paice's steady drum-bashing keeps the whole thing rolling.

The songs are uniformly excellent. "Knocking at Your Back Door", "Nobody's Home" and "Perfect Strangers" are as good as anything Deep Purple has done. There isn't one *single* riff here to replace the one in "Smoke on the Water" in the repertoire of the world's beginning guitarists, but these songs are a lot more mature than "Space Trucking" or "Highway Star", and for all the other influences at play here there is no mistaking any moment on this album for anyone's but Deep Purple's.

There's also some top-notch lyrical innuendo. A "master of many tongues", indeed.

## Law and Order

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### *Guilty of Innocence*, 1989 CD

As my record collection skirts around hard rock, Law and Order are a point of close approach. Indeed, all the similarities to other bands that occur to me are to hard rock bands who aren't in my book. Aerosmith

and Led Zeppelin are clear influences. Shane's voice is like a somewhat less-shrill Robert Plant, but where I find Plant completely unappealing, Shane has a subtle sincerity to it that I find fascinating. His melody lines seem conventional at times, but then swerve at the last minute across unexpected notes, which seem to take much more conscious effort than a lot of singers would even think to put into their delivery.

Musically, I'd say that Law and Order are a shade closer to metal than Aerosmith, though that may be because Georgia was just playing some *early* Aerosmith where their blues roots were especially evident. Still, there is quite a bit of blues influence evident on this album ("Delta Prison Blues" and "Whiskey" are the most obvious examples), more than on the subsequent one (which I bought first), and thus I don't like this one as much as the other. Southern tinges are detectable, though the cover of Lynyrd Skynyrd's "The Needle and the Spoon" is a very New York rendition. "Downtown Suicide", on the other hand, is heads-down rumbling heavy metal.

### *Rites of Passage*, 1991 CD

I find it hard to quantify why, but this Law and Order album reminds me of Rush. There's a new drummer, but he isn't anything like Neil Peart. There are some additional keyboards, but nothing of the magnitude of Rush's synthesizer uses. It must simply be something in the melodies, combined with a certain thoughtful quality to the lyrics, though I'm not at all satisfied with that answer. It's *early* Rush that I think of: "Beneath, Between, Behind", that sort of thing.

At any rate, I like this album a *lot*. This is one of those records that I rarely think to describe as "one of favorites", but that keeps creeping back into my CD player just the same. The guitar bluesiness that I disliked about the first album is very much subdued here, under a more forceful rhythm section mix, lots of harmony vocals, and more overall production ambiance. In actuality there are several songs with blues structures, notably "The Truth About Me" and "River", but somehow the sour taste that blues usually gives me is absent. Perhaps it's just conscientious tuning.

The lyrics to these songs, and the liner notes for that matter, are especially interesting. Although the punctuation isn't what it might be, and the comments about psychoanalysts and the phases of societal passage rites contain a stray clause that I'm pretty sure should have been deleted, for the most part these songs read as if the person who wrote them spends a decent amount of time actually *thinking*. "The Hope and the Hunger", about mental instability (I think), the relationship song "Mary", and the despairing closing song "Is Freedom

Slavery?" are all leagues more intelligent than almost anything else in Mega Therion. "Plague of Ignorance", however, is the most remarkable. The song starts with the contrast "So the white man who's a bigot / Hurts a black man out of fear / He's too blind to see the truth. / While another black man breeds hatred / Using racism as his tool / He thinks he needs no excuse." It then goes on to place a huge share of the blame on organized religion, the chorus crying "And these religions, these corporations / They prey on your belief". It's not like churches have gotten a traditionally easy time from rock and roll, but so much of the time the rage they inspire is relatively inarticulate, in the mold of "I went to *your* churches", in Suicidal Tendencies' "Institutionalized", that when deeper and more telling criticism shows up it is all the more refreshing.

Also, the song rocks. A high point in a surprisingly strong album.

## The Cult

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### *Love*, 1985 LP

I may be the first person to characterize the Cult as hard rock, but I think it's a pigeonholing that should really catch on. Previously, through what I must assume was astute PR, they have simultaneously managed to be taken for "alternative", "gothic" and metal. Two factors, however, convince me that hard rock is a much more appropriate characterization: first, singer Ian Asbury reminds me of Jim Morrison, who I detest, and second, Georgia likes them.

This album was disappointing when I bought it, and has fallen further in my esteem since. Even the presence of Big Country drummer Mark Brzezicki cannot obscure the grating effect Asbury's voice has come to have on me. Asbury's American Indian fascination doesn't cover much common ground between us, either. Still, "Revolution" and "She Sells Sanctuary" (the song I bought the record for) remain enjoyable. The former sounds, excepting the voice, like *Forever Now* era Psychedelic Furs. The latter sounds like Gene Love Jezebel.

The album also features one of the three unrelated songs in my library called "Nirvana" (the other two are by the Blake Babies and the Icicle Works, and then there's Nirvana themselves).

## The Screaming Jets

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### *All for One*, 1991 CD

Well, I hope you enjoyed that short trip through hard rock, sort of like a tour of France that consisted of having a croissant in Holland. The rest of Mega Therion swoops briefly through the minefields of "pop metal" on its way to "progressive metal" and the fringes beyond. Easing us into the commercial underbelly of metal, though, is this Australian band that I call "Hard Power Pop", a moniker I won't bother trademarking.

While the sustained, distorted guitars and hammering drums mark them as a metal band, the Screaming Jets aren't even slightly dark or sinister, preferring to pack each song full of pop harmonies and killer hooks. This is by far the most cheerful and genuinely catchy metal record I know of, and it is such without ever becoming saccharine, the usual risk.

The lyrics are occasionally less than festive, as in "Needle"'s "Held an old friend as he died" and the Vietnam saga "Blue Sashes", but if you don't read the lyrics you'll never know. Actually, now I've told you, so you will, but the point is that the words don't drag the exuberant spirit of the music down an inch.

If I had to single out songs, "C'mon" is what I'd blare at a beach party, "No Point" is the one I'd use to try to convert Ultravox and Dire Straits fans, and "Starting Out" sounds the most Australian to me (not much), but the hooks really don't stop at any point. This album came in two spots above Metal Church's *The Human Factor* when I did my top ten lists for 1991, and if you've been reading this book straight through (a frightening thought, even if that is the way I wrote most of it) you'll know that that's high praise from me.

### *Tear of Thought*, 1993 CD

The next album isn't quite as giddy. The melodies and harmonies are still there, but this record is much harder and angrier. From the opening image "Blood drips down venetian blinds. / I cut myself on the glass I grind. / I'm on my knees on the floor, / Carpet stained with whiskey and blood." to the sinister closing line "It's someone else's turn to fix the feeble", this is very clearly not a cheerful album, and the darker, edgier production makes it even less likely than on *All for One* that you'll lose the anger in catchy tunes.

I would have expected, given that the catchiness was certainly what I loved about *All for One*, that I wouldn't like this one as much due to the change of tenor. This is half right: I don't feel that this album is as *special*. I wouldn't recommend it to people who don't

normally like this sort of thing, which I might have done with *All for One*. Within the context of heavy metal, though, this is a fine album, and a better one for its additional muscle, and at times, bluesy guitars, slower drumming, and singer David Gleeson's warm mid-range voice give this album a hard-rock cast closer to Aerosmith than to the bands that follow here. "Helping Hand", with its surging horns, has a jazzy swagger, "Think" has some surging bass gusto, "Rich Bitch" dumb slide-guitar bravado, and the slow, sad ballad "Shivers" would be perfect mid-set crowd breather.

On the other hand, "Living in England" is a thrashing, place-name-dropping punk-metal anthem with the odd, but enticing, refrain "Living in England I don't have to act like I'm having fun", "Here I Go" starts off disconcertingly like UFO's "The Writer", and "Best of You", "Hard Drugs", "It's Alright", "Dream On" and "Nightchild" all sound like the Screaming Jets circa the previous album. I'd be displeased to see the hard rock strut take over all the way, but for now the band seems to have struck a decent balance.

(CD note: my copy, a European release I picked up in Amsterdam, has 16 songs, and I know from glancing at it that the US version has only 12, so serious fans may want to consult an importer.)

### *Living in England*, 1993 CD5

I was surprised to find this promo single, as I wasn't aware that the Screaming Jets had *got* any promotion in the US. Nonetheless, here it is, and a brief experiment it turns out to be, the four tracks clocking in at just eight minutes. The first two are both the album version of "Living in England", one with the seven-second "Rule Britannia" intro and one without. The last track is the album's secret :22 bonus track, "Worms", an amusing fragment.

In the middle, though, is the reason I bought this: a cover of the Sex Pistols' "Pretty Vacant". The Screaming Jets do a very credible and faithful job with this, and it actually makes a much better companion-piece to "Living in England" than anything else on *Tear of Thought* does. If this represents the band's next direction, they may be in for exciting things.

## Quiet Riot

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### *QR III*, 1986 LP

Unless you paid close attention, you probably thought that Quiet Riot faded snappily from sight after their hits "Cum on Feel the Noize" and "Bang Your Head". Having not paid very close attention myself, I

know *I* did. At some point, however, MTV corrected this impression by playing “The Wild and the Young”, a hilariously overblown anthem replete with fabricated million-voice choruses. Being a connoisseur of such things, I filed this tidbit as an “acquire someday”. At the time, though, I was chronically under-funded, at least in relation to the amount of money I spend on music *these* days, so it wasn’t until a few years later that a second-hand copy of this album showed up in the \$1.99 bin of Underground Records, a bin that was responsible for a surprising amount of detritus in my collection for a few years, and I bought it.

If you like shiny, synth-drenched, over-produced glam-metal (I do), this is just the record for you. And lest you think that *QR III* is a one-song album, “Rise or Fall” has the same legions-of-multi-tracks choral histrionics. If you *don’t* like this sort of vapid indulgence, though, spend your \$1.99 on a grilled-cheese sandwich or something.

## Leatherwolf

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### *Leatherwolf*, 1987 LP

Another \$1.99 (they seem to cluster together, like lint), and another song called “Rise or Fall”. The anthem here is a different song (“The Calling”), but the appeal is identical. On the one hand, this band isn’t quite as bad as Quiet Riot, but on the other hand they cover CCR’s “Bad Moon Rising”.

Figuring out which is the upside and which the down is left as an exercise for the reader.

## Keel

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### *The Final Frontier*, 1986 LP

Keel covers “Because the Night” here. I keep this record in case anybody ever claims that something else is the worst cover ever recorded.

## Y&T

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### *Down for the Count*, 1985 LP

Here is my favorite trash-metal band. Y&T actually rocks enough harder than the last few listings to qualify as different mostly on its own merits, but I actually like them for *epitomizing* the genre rather than transcending it. Although I think this album is pretty

weak, especially compared to *Contagious*, it has the quintessential pop-metal masterpiece, “Summertime Girls”. One of the greatest mindless Southern California babe-patrol songs ever composed, this song is most likely to produce the comment “Now, see, I like *this* David Lee Roth song.” Nonetheless, it’s Y&T’s song, and it’s a classic.

The rest of the album babbles along with such things as a cover of Loggins and Messina’s “Your Mama Don’t Dance”, and the oh-so-topical “Don’t Tell Me What to Wear”, delivered as if dress codes were somewhere only slightly above genocide on the moral scale.

### *Contagious*, 1987 LP

I once opened a 30-page Harvard philosophy-class refutation of Hume and Kant via Cary Grant, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein with the quote “I got a mansion, / But there’s only twenty rooms. / I think I need twenty-two, don’t you?”, from the song “The Kid Goes Crazy”, contained here. It was the only paper in my four years at Harvard that an instructor ever threatened to fail. I escaped on the strength of an appendix that refuted Aristotle, for good measure, but I still think the quote’s insight was germane. Even the most extreme decadence, you see, has its own internal logic, and my point was that all internally-consistent moral systems are logically equivalent, so why not pick one that’s at least *fun*? How was I to know that the section leader was a dour Kantian?

Anyway, this whole album is an aesthetic exercise similar to the moral argument I was making. On one level, this is the apotheosis of crap. About the deepest *intended* moments are “Ohh - ohh - ohh, / Get dangerous - it’s Contagious. / (repeat)”, “Bodily Harm destroying my defenses, / Bodily Harm whoa”, and the piquant “Rim shot rock, / She’s got it”. However, despising this music for lyrical inadequacies is like hunting a beached whale; it’s tremendous fun for a while, but it’s neither sporting nor ultimately satisfying, and after about a day of it the stench gets unbearable.

If, on the other hand, you put aside your critical faculties and *embrace* this music, you’ll discover a gleeful retreat from reason that *I* at least, enjoy lingering in.

## The Scorpions

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### *Blackout*, 1982 LP

We’re almost out of the seamy underbelly of pop metal, but no such ordeal would be complete without



the masters of “a chorus is the title repeated four times” metal, everybody’s favorite hard-rocking Germans, the Scorpions. I have opted out of most of the dynasty, but this album was a teenage mainstay. It’s hard for me to imagine a American boy being 15 without the assistance of this record, though I suppose a number must have managed. Just counting the *printed* lyrics, the nine song titles on this album are repeated 82 times, with “Blackout”’s 18 times and “Dynamite”’s 20 repetitions taking highest honors. Add in the “Can’t live, can’t live without you”s and “You give me all I need”s from those songs’ fade outs, and you have a work that is almost minimalist in its excess.

All the same, “No One Like You” seemed like the world’s greatest air guitar song at the time, lines like “Loved her in her car / Took me to the stars”, from “Arizona”, were hoarded jewels, and the album cover, with its forks-in-the-eyes and shattering glass, was considered fine art. Eleven years later, the weaknesses here are readily apparent, but this is very much an album loved not for what it is but for what we felt it symbolized, even then.

## UFO

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### *Obsession*, 1978 LP

The Scorpions’ guitarist, Rudolph Schenker, has a brother named Michael who spent some time in what I consider to be a vastly more interesting band. Actually, this is the only UFO studio album I have with Michael Schenker on it, as he eventually departed to form first the Michael Schenker Group, and then the McAuley-Schenker Group (see below). Vocalist Phil Mogg is the only constant UFO member, joined here by long-time bass-player and songwriting partner Pete Way, Paul Raymond on keyboards and guitars, and Andy Parker playing drums.

On one level, UFO is a straight ahead rock-and-roll band in the mold of, say, Bad Company, Bachman Turner Overdrive or Thin Lizzy. Certainly titles like “Only You Can Rock Me”, “Pack It Up (and Go)”, “Ain’t No Baby” and “One More for the Rodeo” look like standard fare.

However, I think UFO is seriously underrated. Mogg’s unadorned (but musical) vocal style is definitely the root of their appeal for me, but musically UFO handles elements from other genres with much more finesse than almost any of the above bands, while still displaying the power that characterizes all the bands in Mega Therion. Synthesizers, in particular, have been traditionally looked on with suspicion in heavy metal circles. Even bands like Black Sabbath who have had

keyboards for many years tend to use them only sparingly, and in a limited number of ways – usually as introductions, fills kept low in the background, or the occasional melody run (as in Dio’s “Rainbow in the Dark”). Even Deep Purple, possibly the most keyboard-aware of all the bands up to this point, leans heavily toward organ sounds rather than overtly synthetic textures. UFO, on the other hand, incorporates keyboards tastefully and unapologetically, neither trying to hide them nor relying on them. The result is a richer and more versatile sound than most metal bands produce, and opens the door to other instruments (like strings on “Lookin’ Out for No. 1”).

That sound drives some great rock songs. “Only You Can Rock Me” and “One More for the Rodeo” are smashing (at least by the power-standards of 1978). “Pack It Up (and Go)”, “Cherry” and “Born to Lose” have a loose muscularity as well. A number of UFO songs feel like covers (and some are, though there are none on this record), not because they sound like individual older songs, but because they have a simple timelessness that makes you *assume* that some other group wrote the song, since if UFO had written it they would be more famous today.

### *Mechanix*, 1982 CD

However fine a guitarist Michael Schenker was, trading him away for Paul Chapman (and a draft choice used to pick up keyboard player Neil Carter) was a fine deal. While Schenker had flashier solo technique, neither *Obsession* nor *Mechanix* are solo-centered records in the way that Judas Priest’s or Van Halen’s can be, and so I felt neither Schenker’s presence nor his loss too deeply. This album is one of the best *sounding* records around. The guitars are thick and smooth, the keyboards bright and dynamic, the drums steady in just enough ambient space to stand in for concert smoke machines. Mogg sounds sad but sincere. The tans and blues on the cover look good together (or, did on the LP; the Japanese CD reissue I have washes out the colors and screws up the back with Japanese copyright info and a redundant track listing).

And UFO’s songwriting has never been better. “The Writer”, a musing on the power of the press, is the fastest, hardest song here, and the aching “Terri” is the slowest, tenderest. “You’ll Get Love” is an oddly detached message of hope to a lonely neighbor. “We Belong to the Night” is a driving near-anthem. “Let It Rain” evokes pieces of Springsteen, Heart and the Eagles, and “Terri” and “Back Into My Life” sound a little to me like Boston, but all these echoes are as if heard from a great distance. Perhaps if UFO had been raised in America they would have utterly mundane,

and it is the distance of the Atlantic that twists this music just enough.

The one song that is a cover here, "Something Else" (by Eddie Cochran, also covered by the Sex Pistols on *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*), fits in seamlessly, sounding no more nor no less perfect than the rest of the album. I can't listen to this album without thinking of warm, calm summer nights, cicadas and the sound of cars on some nearby highway filling the spaces between songs. When I make up lists of my very favorite albums, *Mechanix* rarely occurs to me, but playing it makes me *feel good*, and that makes it a rare and precious thing.

### ***Making Contact*, 1983 CD**

For quite a while, all I knew of this album was the subset of it that appears on *The Best of the Rest*. Finally, though, I shelled out for imported CD copies of this, *Mechanix* and *Misdemeanor*, though it's still mysterious to me why they seem to be out of print in the US.

This format history ends up virtually controlling my sense of these songs. I learned *Mechanix* and *Misdemeanor* on vinyl, but I didn't even know about *Making Contact* until I got *The Best of the Rest*. I then listened to the compilation CD quite a bit, and it came somewhat to take the place of the two LPs in my mind, to inherit some of the same warm feelings I felt for the original albums. The five songs from *Making Contact* on the compilation, then, just seemed like parts of this reconfigured hybrid UFO album.

So, now that I have all three on CD, it's as if the single album is just longer than I remember, and the music flows smoothly over the album divisions. The five songs that were new to me here ("When It's Time to Rock", "Call My Name", "All Over You", "No Getaway" and "Push, It's Love"), are close enough in spirit to the ones I'd already heard that it's just as if I'd forgotten about the second side (in fact, save the exchange of "When It's Time to Rock" for "The Way the Wild Wind Blows" on *Best*, the selection there is the first side). If you're inclined to buy the compilation and be done with it, that's fine; if you go ahead and get the full album, that's fine, too.

Your choice.

### ***Misdemeanor*, 1985 CD**

More personnel changes: Paul Gray replaces Pete Way, Paul Raymond returns, Jim Simpson takes over the drums, and Atomic Tommy M is the new guitarist. I'm just trusting the credits for that list, though, as I can't hear much difference between these players and the ones on *Mechanix*. As Rush says, "The more that things change, the more they stay the same". (With typical inaccuracy, Barlett's insists that some guy

named Alphonse Karr said this. Must have been a French-Canadian roadie...)

Don't let the tattooed, gun-wielding ten-year-old on the cover fool you. This album is very much a sequel to *Mechanix*. It doesn't affect me as deeply, but that could easily be a function of the former record having hit me at a more impressionable stage, and thus taken possession of this particular corner of my attention. Nonetheless, several songs on this album are every bit as good as any of *Mechanix*. "This Time" is a great start, and I frequently find myself singing "Night Run" even when I haven't listened to this album in months.

The second half, though, seems a little bit lost to me. "Heaven's Gate", "Blue" and "Name of Love" all sound like Mogg is searching for a different direction and, not finding it, retreats to familiar territory somewhat in disarray. I don't have much that's more concrete to support this claim with, except to say that all three of these songs make me think of Rush's "Red Sector A".

### ***The Best of the Rest*, 1988 CD**

I bought this collection at a point when it seemed that it was my only hope of getting *Mechanix* and *Misdemeanor* material in digital. Having now found the full CDs, this one is somewhat superfluous in my collection, but for those of you not keen on Japanese import prices, it serves as an excellent introduction to the band later career, and quite possibly all you need of it. Meant as a companion to the live album "Strangers in the Night", which covered material from several early UFO albums (which, strangely, are still easily found on CD), this 17-song compilation covers the five albums from 1980 to 1986.

"Alpha Centauri", "Lettin' Go", "Money, Money" and "Mystery Train" (a Junior Parker song, by way of Elvis) are from 1980's *No Place to Run*. 1981's *The Wild, The Willing and The Innocent* gives us "Makin' Moves" and "Chains Chains". These are fine, but not the UFO albums that I have strong feelings about.

From *Mechanix* this includes "The Writer", "Something Else", "Back Into My Life" and "Let it Rain". "You and Me", "Blinded by a Lie", "Diesel in the Dust", "The Way the Wind Blows" and "A Fool for Love" are all from 1983's *Making Contact*, and *Misdemeanor*'s "Night Run" and "This Time" fill out the collection (evidently the band agreed with my assessment of that album, or perhaps the label did). These eleven songs are UFO at its sad, beautiful best, and with them this collection has come to make me feel very close to the way *Mechanix* by itself originally did. If you remember UFO fondly from "Too Hot to Handle"

days, and wonder what became of them, check this out. They matured rather nicely.

### *Ain't Misbehavin'*, 1989 CD

There is, I'm certain, a sordid story behind this rather abbreviated recording. In the liner notes Phil Mogg tries to bluff his way through an explanation about wanting to share something "very personal", something "raw" with "the energy that is so important to us". I don't believe this garbage for a second. Put this 27-minute EP together with UFO's subsequent disappearance from American shelves, and you have the making of some epic label-related sleaze-war. Unfortunately, I have no idea what really transpired.

What we're left with, though, is the beginnings of what would probably have been a great album. It's pretty good even in this form. These seven tracks sound like demos, or rough studio versions, but the songs are good, and the glance inside UFO's studio process that they imply is interesting in its own right. I have a feeling, though, that if whatever went on behind the scenes hadn't, we would have eventually seen a UFO album with much-improved versions of some of these songs ("At War with the World" has great potential, for one), and no sign of some others ("Rock Boyz, Rock"). In fact, for all I know, they *made* the album and just didn't think to send any across the sea.

### *High Stakes and Dangerous Men*, 1992 CD

Much to my surprise, UFO refused to fold after the ill omens of *Ain't Misbehavin'*. Mogg and Way return with new guitarist Lawrence Archer and drummer Clive Edwards for yet another album. Perhaps they should have extended the vacation just a little bit farther. *High Stakes and Dangerous Men* is a tired shadow of UFO's earlier greatness. Archer's guitar playing is bluesy in the most hackneyed ways, meaninglessly flashy and without the sense to know when to stop fluttering around and play something that actually *supports* the rest of the band. Mogg's lyric writing skills seem to have gone into remission, and this album is laden with far too many songs like "Burnin' Fire", "Running Up the Highway", "Back Door Man", "Love Deadly Love" and "Let the Good Time Roll". His singing, which always had a touch of sadness, here sounds more worn out than melancholy.

On the other hand, UFO in a slump is still better than most, and if I didn't have albums like *Mechanix* to compare it to, *High Stakes and Dangerous Men* would probably seem much more credible. Mogg is still a compassionate singer who avoids almost all of heavy metal's usual vocal clichés, Pete Way remains a reliable bassist and songwriting partner, and Edwards proves himself a sensible drummer. "Don't Want to Lose

You", with some great female backing vocals (if Stevie Lange is a woman, it's probably her), is up to their old standard, and "One of Those Nights", which credits Nicky Holland (what is *she* doing here?) though I can't really hear her, recaptures some of the mystical summer-night ambiance of *Mechanix*. "Love Deadly Love", despite the inauspicious title, is a killer song whose bass and drum-driven verses and halting chorus easily overcome the unnecessary guitar solos.

All things considered, I suppose I'm happier knowing that UFO is still working than I would be if they'd just tossed this album in a vault. It's not their best, by a long ways, but there are enough good moments to keep it from sounding like a bell with their name on it. As I write reliable rumors have it that Michael Schenker has rejoined the band, and this reunion has the potential to produce something truly great again. I'm patient, I'll wait.

## McAuley-Schenker Group

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### *Perfect Timing*, 1987 LP

They should have called this album *Rigid Timing*. I don't know of any album that sounds as much like the drum track is played by a metronome, and that includes several albums later on where the drum track is played by a metronome.

My friend Matt says that the Michael Schenker Group albums were uniformly excellent, and I bet he's right, but I haven't gotten around to buying any. This one, though, another bequest of the \$1.99 bin, is blazingly unremarkable. Without the credits and logo to clue me in, I'd never know that this band's guitarist is reckoned by some to be one of the best. Vocalist Robin McAuley is passable, for sure, but unless he's famous for some reason I don't know, it's a mystery to me why his name is on the band.

This is the kind of album that probably makes people from other musical traditions think that rock's most redeeming feature is that you can keep playing it even *after* a complete lobotomy. My only regret is that, actually, I kind of like listening to it.

## Blue Öyster Cult

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### *Blue Öyster Cult*, 1971 LP

Since *Fire of Unknown Origin* was the first BÖC album I heard, I was quite surprised to find that the band began their life as a *parody*! As a 14-year-old I just thought Blue Öyster Cult was a particularly cool name.

Musically, I don't like this album and, like *Black Sabbath*, I keep it purely for historical reasons. It's *much* funnier than Sabbath's debut, however. "I'm On the Lamb But I Ain't No Sheep", "She's as Beautiful as a Foot" and "Cities on Flame with Rock and Roll" should give you some idea of the tenor of this album. Eric Bloom is credited with "stun guitar". The music is heavy metal only in the sense that Steppenwolf is (I mean, it's so *old!*). Biker-blues is probably a better description.

#### *Agents of Fortune*, 1976 CD

Two studio albums (*Tyranny and Mutation* and *Secret Treaties*) and one live album (*On Your Feet or on Your Knees*) later, BÖC is a more sophisticated and much mellower entity. The Simon and Garfunkel-like "(Don't Fear) the Reaper" was an AOR staple for many years, and most of the Western hemisphere is probably familiar with BÖC only through that song. As much as it doesn't sound like much BÖC before or after this album, it is pretty representative of the songs here.

*Agents of Fortune* is a very backwards-looking album. People more familiar with older rock might have a better list, but I hear hints here of Jefferson Airplane and CSNY, as well as Simon and Garfunkel. The first song is called "This Ain't the Summer of Love", but while you can certainly tell it isn't, you can also tell that BÖC remembers that summer vividly. Piano and harmony permeate the album, and the occasional power chords (as in "Sinful Love" and "Tattoo Vampire") don't disrupt the mood. Patti Smith appears on "The Revenge of Vera Gemini", helping to lend that track some dark moodiness, but the rest of the album is, if not cheerful, certainly *lighter* than any of the other BÖC records I have.

#### *Spectres*, 1977 CD

If you know *two* BÖC songs, the second one is probably "Godzilla", the first song on this album. Though by today's standards a pretty tame heavy metal song, at the time it felt to me like the spiritual successor to Sabbath's "Iron Man", its four-chord riff as much a part of my life as "Smoke on the Water" or "Jailbreak".

The second song, "Golden Age of Leather", better summarizes the mood of the album, though. It opens with the Newark Boys Chorus' barber-shop a cappella, and then barrels into driving guitar, bass and drums. The multi-part harmonies of *Agents of Fortune* are still here, but the music is a step heavier and less folky, especially on songs like "Death Valley Nights", "R.U. Ready 2 Rock" and "Nosferatu".

On the other hand, "Searchin' for Celine", "Fireworks", "Celestial the Queen" and "Goin' Through the Motions" all have an upbeat, almost honky-tonk, perkiness to them that the sinister album cover tableau wouldn't lead you to expect. "Goin' Through the Motions" in particular sounds like it could have been a forgotten Motown gem by some group like The Carvells, here given a reverent refinishing.

#### *Cultösaurs Erectus*, 1980 CD

Skipping another live album and the studio record *Mirrors*, we arrive at the stage where BÖC begins to sound like the band I first grew to love. Switching producers from long-time associate Sandy Pearlman, BÖC here recruit Martin Birch, later known for work with Iron Maiden, and with his help the band's sound finally catches up to the present. The dry drums and folky guitar treatment of past albums give way to a bigger, heavier sound. Processed vocals lend an eerie science-fiction quality, as do the Lovecraftian cover art and the lyrics to "Black Blade", written by author Michael Moorcock (best known for the Elric series, a sword-and-sorcery antihero classic).

The titles "Lips in the Hills" and "The Marshall Plan" (which refers to the amplifier manufacturer, not the architect of Europe's US-aided post-WWII rebuilding effort) make sure you don't think the band has forgotten its tongue-in-cheek roots, but the music here has come to take itself seriously. Perhaps finally realizing that they could be quite good at it, BÖC starts with this album to carve out a niche for themselves in Mega Therion more sophisticated than core heavyweights like Black Sabbath and Iron Maiden, but not as ornate as the progressive metal bands listed next. Like UFO they work synthesizers into heavy metal in a way that most of the genre does not, but where UFO does it sort of by feel, working it in as just another normal rock instrument, BÖC lets it stand out more and help to distinguish their sound.

"Hungry Boys" shows that boogie hasn't entirely left their systems, but it shows just as strongly the change in sonic emphasis. The guitars are louder and the piano less prominent, and the vocal harmonies gutsier and less precious, and the weird synthetic percussion noises wouldn't have appeared on previous albums, either.

#### *Fire of Unknown Origin*, 1981 CD

This is the album that really introduced me to BÖC, and as with UFO and Black Sabbath, it is the album that remains in my mind their most definitive. While I feel somewhat self-conscious about the fact that in all three cases the album I heard first is my "favorite", in all three cases I bought the albums in

question at an age when buying albums was a rare occasion, and when my record collection, accordingly, was an order of magnitude smaller than it is today. Any album I owned back then got listened to a *lot*. I still listen to favorite albums over and over again today, but merely being in my collection can't guarantee airplay any more, and in the process of writing this book I am listening to some records that I haven't played for years. Albums like *Mechanix*, *The Mob Rules* and this one, then, were daily companions in my life, and lodged themselves deeper into my psyche than many albums I acquired later ever had a chance to.

In fact, the BÖC tour promoting this album was the first rock concert I ever saw. "Blue Öyster Cult, live at the Dallas Convention Center, with special guests Aldo Nova and Dokken." My friend Marc Elliot and I went, and we sat in the front row of the first balcony. My overwhelming impression from the evening: "LOUD!!!!" I maintain that nobody really needs to hear Dokken at such volumes (there's some questions whether there's a need to hear them at all...), and BÖC themselves brought enough amplification to create wind solely through loudspeaker vibrations. They had the huge mechanical Godzilla behind the drumset, and Albert Bouchard pelted it with drum sticks throughout the night. They had guitars with mirrors on the back for reflecting spotlights into the audience. Buck Dharma had a guitar shaped like the BÖC upside-down question-mark-cross symbol. It was awesome.

All that said, I still feel no need to apologize for loving this record. "Veteran of the Psychic Wars" (lyrics by Moorcock, again), "Heavy Metal: Black and Silver" and "Vengeance (The Pact)" are grand epics. "Fire of Unknown Origin" and "Burnin' For You" provide some radio fodder. "After Dark" and "Joan Crawford" show some of the old BÖC tunefulness, the latter featuring the classic lines "Policemen are hiding behind the skirts of little girls. / Their eyes have turned the color of frozen meat" and "Catholic schoolgirls have thrown away their mascara / They've chained themselves to the axles of big Mack trucks". And "Don't Turn Your Back" shows that like their sense of humor, the quieter side of the band hasn't disappeared.

### *The Revölution By Night*, 1983 CD

Skipping yet another live album (BÖC must have the highest ratio of live albums to studio albums of any band), this record shows the band mostly staying the course set with the previous two. This one is a bit slicker than *Fires of Unknown Origin* (Bruce Fairbairn replaces Martin Birch), but the sound is not *that* much changed. Aldo Nova's guest appearance on "Take Me

Away" is unfortunate, from my perspective, but the damage is minimal.

Nothing here hits me with the same impact as "Veteran of the Psychic Wars" or "Vengeance (The Pact)", but there are more songs of the radio-friendly "Burnin' For You" variety, like "Take Me Away", "Shooting Shark" and "Veins". "Shadow of California" and "Feel the Thunder" bring "Golden Age of Leather" into the present. "Light Years of Love" and "Eyes on Fire" fill the mellower introspective niche.

The funniest song, by far, is "Let Go", a intentionally made-for-singalong rocker with the chorus "B-O-C, / You can be whatever you want to be. / We got the power, we got the key, / We're B-O-C".

### *Club Ninja*, 1986 CD

I didn't skip anything in *this* gap. After a few years of silence, BÖC returns with, for the first time in their long history, a different lineup. Absent are keyboard player Allen Lanier and drummer Albert Bouchard, replaced by a number of people I've never heard of. Producer Sandy Pearlman is back, though.

Without prior knowledge of BÖC's satirical past, you might take this album very differently. It is the most straightforward rock album in the BÖC canon, both lyrically and musically. Titles like "Dancin' in the Ruins", "Make Rock Not War" and "Beat 'Em Up" could be easily mistaken for rock's, shall we say, less thoughtful side. And even knowing the band's history, it is not entirely clear to me that this record provides sufficient evidence to be confident that critical distance from metal's clichés has been maintained.

Even if it hasn't, though, this album is harmless fun. From the space-Oriental excess of the cover art to the overblown choruses of "Make Rock Not War" and "Madness to the Method", this is Eighties air-guitar music. Keep a mirror nearby while dancing around to it, as you'll want to make sure frequently that your hair looks okay.

As an aside, not only did I buy this album out of the \$1.99 bin, but I recently replaced the LP with a CD that was, itself, only \$1.99!

### *Imaginos*, 1988 CD

Lanier and Albert Bouchard return for the next album, though most of the supporting players from *Club Ninja* are still present. Guesting here, in the "Guitar Orchestra of the State of Imaginos" are Marc Biedermann, Kevin Carlson, Robbie Krieger, Tommy Moringiello, Aldo Nova, Jack Rigg and Joe Satriani, though I couldn't really tell you where specifically they appear.

Stylistically this is a partial return to pre-*Club Ninja* form. Lyrically, this is a concept album telling

the disjointed story of Imaginos, a magical child born in early-1800's New Hampshire, who goes on to acquire a mirror with great, if unexplicated, spiritual significance to the native culture of Central America, which somehow in turn leads to World War I.

I don't understand the story, and frankly, this interferes with my appreciation of the album, because it seems *important* throughout that I should, yet I don't. There are a number of excellent songs here, like "In the Presence of Another World", "The Siege and Investiture of Baron Von Frankenstein's Castle at Weisseria" and "Astronomy", but the more closely I listen to them the more conscious I am of not having the slightest clue what the hell they are talking about, and the more uncomfortable this incomprehension makes me. The culmination of this tension comes with the song "Blue Öyster Cult", which somehow integrates a secret organization bearing the band's name into the tale, probably explaining the recurrence of the band's ankh-like symbol in all its album covers. The answers must be in there, but I can't find them. BÖC fans who can find them, though, or alternately can ignore them, will probably like this album a lot.

## Queensrÿche

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### *Queensrÿche*, 1986 CD

Queensrÿche are the founders of a significant metal sub-genre, but not on this record. The four songs on their short 1983 debut EP are sped-up Judas Priest, pure and simple. It's not bad stuff, but it isn't why Queensrÿche is important. The CD adds "The Prophecy", an outtake from the *Rage for Order* sessions (thus the 1986 date on this entry), which does show Queensrÿche's forte, and provides a reason other than curiosity to buy this record, at least for serious fans.

### *The Warning*, 1984 CD

Queensrÿche's distinctive style begins to emerge in places here. The tempo changes and synth stabs in "Deliverance", and the visitors-from-outer-space noises and odd off-beat vocals in "NM186" best indicate the direction *Rage for Order* would take the band in. Without the context of the rest of the band's career, however, it isn't clear whether these songs are the exception or the rule, and the rest of this album is still very much in the mold of its predecessor.

### *Rage for Order*, 1986 CD

The first word that will occur to you on looking at or listening to *Rage for Order* is, I promise,

"overproduced". From the precisely coifed, posed, costumed and lit band photos to the shiny, heavily processed sound of the first track, "Walk in the Shadows", this record immediately violates most of the unspoken rules of hard core metal-cultural purity.

Where bands like Keel do this in the interest of commerciality, however, Queensrÿche is establishing an entirely new aesthetic, separate from just about all prior metal, but still discernibly allied with it. This album is the official dawn, according to me, of "progressive metal". As the name implies, this corner of Mega Therion draws on the musical complexity of such straight progressive rock bands as Yes and ELP, but channels their virtuosity into a powerful heavy-metal casing, rather than making complexity its own end.

Calling Queensrÿche "overproduced", then, is like calling Picasso "inaccurate". The raw "nothing between our Marshall stacks and your sweaty ears" ethic of Mega Therion's other extreme is not what Queensrÿche is after, any more than Picasso's fruit-from-all-sides cubist still-lives aspired to be Vermeer's intricately symbolic staged tableaux.

The transformation effects many changes in the band's sound. Geoff Tate's vocals are much less shrill than on the first two outings, and extra echoes and reverb aren't entirely responsible. Keyboards are much more prominent, and guitars are used more often in a keyboard-like way, with long sustained chords often taking the place of the more usual strumming. The drums are heavily processed, sounding at times like cannons and at other times toned way down for contrast. Overall, the feeling of *space* on this album is crafted with almost unprecedented attention.

Both tempo and meter changes are frequent, but where bands like Metallica change tempos like they are slamming through right-angle turns without banking, Queensrÿche uses them more like evasive action, making many changes in succession rather than single isolated changes. The musical twists and turns are less intricate than the rhythmic ones, and Queensrÿche doesn't try to outdo Voivod with individual chord-progressions, but song structures are quite deliberate and not at all the verse-chorus-verse-chorus rock stereotype.

There are several standout songs, my favorites being "Walk in the Shadows" and "Surgical Strike", but the importance of the album is not contained in any single track; its whole is the thesis statement of a new direction as discrete and significant in its own way as *Paranoid* and *Ride the Lightning*.

### ***Operation: Mindcrime*, 1988 CD**

Having created their own sub-genre, Queensrÿche followed up *Rage for Order* with perhaps the most ambitious concept album since Rush's *2112*. An Orwellian futuristic nightmare, *Operation: Mindcrime* is the story of a disillusioned young man singled out to be the instrument of a complicated assassination plan. Where Blue Öyster Cult's *Imaginos* attempted to span a hundred years and three continents and instead left me adrift somewhere near Easter Island, and Savatage's *Streets* bogged down in musical extraneousness included to "advance the plot", Queensrÿche uses these 15 tracks to tell a much more focused tale, and to tell it not in linear narrative but cinematically, in impressions and snapshots of moments. The result is, I think, decidedly more successful. With the emphasis not on what is "happening" but on the characters' thoughts and experiences, each song connects you to the story by itself, without depending as heavily on threads sewn in previous songs. Additionally, in nearly an hour of music there is nothing here that feels like it is not *musically* self-justifying. You can appreciate this album in its entirety as a musical whole, without having to be aware of the narrative content, something I cannot say of *Streets* or *Imaginos*.

The biting, often brutal, lyrics add to Queensrÿche's appeal as well, providing a raw contrast with the polished music that was less evident on *Rage for Order*. There have been albums with more intellectually-stimulating lyrical content, but rock music offers few more *complete* and *coherent* artworks.

### ***Empire*, 1990 CD**

Coming in the wake of the concept album, *Empire* can hardly avoid seeming scattered. I get the feeling that to an extent the common thread that links these songs is that they didn't fit in the previous album. I also have a feeling, however, that that is more a compliment to *Operation: Mindcrime* than a criticism of *Empire*.

And thinking of these songs as *Mindcrime* outtakes also fails to do justice to the stylistic progress that this album displays. *Mindcrime's* lyrical focus meant that musically not much was different than on *Rage for Order*. Freed from that focus, *Empire* advances the band's music as much as the previous record did their ideas. Most remarkable to me is the bass sound on this album, which is one of the deepest, fullest, grittiest and coolest I've ever heard. Shifting percussion treatments and dramatic fly-by vocal effects contribute to a strikingly mature and robust sound that proves Queensrÿche is not content just to *occupy* the niche they created.

This album also features "Silent Lucidity", Queensrÿche's mega-crossover MTV-mainstay hit, and "Jet City Woman", another successful video-track. Those two, however, are my *least* favorite songs on the album, and were even before I realized they were going to be singles. "Silent Lucidity" is a nice ballad, but not what I like Queensrÿche for. "Jet City Woman" has a chorus so unoriginal that I find it somewhat painful to listen to. My favorites, instead, are "Best I Can", an uplifting song about overcoming a disability, with the touching lines "I won't be torn between / The man in the chair / And the man that's in my dream / I'm going to melt the two men into one", and "Another Rainy Night (Without You)", a love song updated by the perfect modern touch "But tonight I'll...pace the floor one hundred times in an hour / And check the voice-mail for a message you've called." The anti-drug-culture title track is a close runner up, summing up the effect of crack-dealing on inner-cities with the image "Black man trapped again, / holds his chains in his hand".

### ***Operation: Livecrime*, 1991 CD+VHS**

Two words for this release: Don't Bother. I was taken in by the pre-release hype about how this "limited edition" recording of the last full live performance of *Operation: Mindcrime* would only be on sale until Christmas, never to be seen thereafter, so I rushed out and bought mine the week it appeared. That was Christmas 1991, and I'm *still* seeing them in stores. Some limited edition...

Marketing resentment aside, there's little good reason to own this, in my opinion. The live performance is about as close to the original studio versions as it could be, but the studio album still sounds better, and the video is decidedly underwhelming. There's a glossy booklet telling the album's story, but one of the appeals of the story to me was precisely that I didn't *need* notes to follow and appreciate it. True Queensrÿche devotees will, I suspect, not heed my warning, but I consider myself a pretty serious Queensrÿche fan and this box adds nothing to my life.

## **Fates Warning**

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### ***Night on Bröcken*, 1984 CD**

The Fates Warning of their first three albums is substantially different from the band that hits their stride on *Perfect Symmetry*. Being a hopeless completist, though, and coming across the two-discs-in-one-box reissues of the first four albums for a reasonable 40

guilders each in Amsterdam, I filled out my collection anyway.

This album sounds *way* too much like Iron Maiden. Actually, when I listen closer I realize that it isn't so much that the *band* sounds like Iron Maiden, as it is that singer John Arch is almost an *exact* Bruce Dickinson clone, with the same phrasing patterns, same timbre, the same sorts of lyrical concerns, everything. The band sounds a *bit* like Iron Maiden, I guess, but it's more that they sound like rather standard heavy metal, and in the early days Iron Maiden did too.

Of course, if you *like* early Iron Maiden, these could be positive things. *Night on Bröcken* is a credible heavy metal album. It's nothing to compare to the band's second phase, though, and because of this it doesn't really impress me much. Competent, but no more.

### *The Spectre Within*, 1985 CD

My copy of *Night on Bröcken* came boxed with the second Fates Warning album, *The Spectre Within*. Some progress is evident here. The songs are fewer and longer, for one change, and this reflects some more-ambitious songwriting experiments. The addition of producer Brian Slagel (the first album was self-produced) helps with the clarity of the band's sound, as well, and this in turn helps make the longer songs possible. Arch's singing is evolving, too. His voice still has some of the *tone* of Bruce Dickinson, but there's nothing he can do about *that*. The parts that he does have control over, though, his cadence and delivery, are beginning to take on their own distinctive character. His prize trick at this stage seems to be a knack for moving pauses and stresses around in a sentence so that even staring at the lyric sheet while he sings I have trouble following along, even though no individual word is particularly obscured. Words I expect to be short are drawn out, and phrases I expect to be drawn out he whips through almost before I can notice that he's reached them.

So, *The Spectre Within* finds the *band* holding Fates Warning back. They're willing to take on harder song-structures, and Arch is developing his own singing style, but the band's *playing* remains basically unremarkable. The bass and drums are solid, the guitars churn and wail vigorously, but every professional heavy metal band in creation has a solid rhythm section and driving guitars. That's what *makes* them heavy metal bands. Fates Warning at this stage is just another one with unfulfilled promise.

### *Awaken the Guardian*, 1986 CD

*Awaken the Guardian* goes backwards. I've checked the dates twice to be sure, and yes, this album comes

after *The Spectre Within*, but it sure doesn't sound like it. Brain Slagel is still producing, but this album is muddy and muted. Arch shows *some* of the technique from *The Spectre Within*, but an alarming amount of Iron Maiden regression along with it, for all the world as if this album had come between the first two. Metal clichés are *way* too prevalent here for a band that showed such potential, however speculative, for avoiding them, and there are some genuinely painful moments, particularly the saccharine "Guardian" and the turgid and overlong "Prelude to Ruin". I'm glad I wasn't following Fates Warning at the time when this album came out, as I would have been quite likely to have given up on them.

### *No Exit*, 1988 CD

For *No Exit*, John Arch departs and is replaced by Ray Alder. Whether coincident with this or because of it, Fates Warning takes a noticeable step forward for this album. Not only is it substantially better than *Awaken the Guardian*, which it shares the reissue box with, but it's even a strong improvement over *The Spectre Within*, and the earlier album's potential starts getting converted into actuality.

It's a good start, but it *is* only a start. The ambitious 21:25, eight-part epic "The Ivory Gate of Dreams" is the most adventurous thing here, but even it only hints at what is to come. The band is starting to play and *think* like their future, but they still *sound* a lot like their past. Their new producer, Roger Probert, cleans up their sound impressively compared to *Awaken the Guardian*, but the big sonic change wouldn't come until *Perfect Symmetry*.

On the other hand, they've safely outlived the Iron Maiden phase. Alder's singing is a significant factor, of course, as he doesn't sound like Dickinson, but the music has also matured in a different direction from Iron Maiden's. In fact, from this point on, Fates Warning's career closely parallels that of Queensrÿche. *No Exit* occupies a comparable position in Fates Warning's development to that held by *The Warning* in Queensrÿche's, though in fact I think *No Exit* is a more interesting album on its own merits. I consider it a *good* heavy metal album from the prehistory of an *excellent* progressive metal band.

### *Perfect Symmetry*, 1989 CD

This album, in turn, is Fates Warning's *Rage for Order*. Several changes are immediately apparent.

First, there is a new drummer, Mark Zonder, who is credited with "acoustic and electronic drums". He backs up this expanded sonic palette with a wide rhythmic range, and this makes a world of difference in the impact of these songs. Former drummer Steve



Zimmerman wasn't holding the band back or anything, but Zonder has a very distinct personal style, which is a rare commodity in rock drummers, much less metal ones.

Second, the production of this album is very much slicker than that of *No Exit*. It's hard to accurately imagine what the previous album would have sounded like produced this way, but it is possible that merely the change in production styles could have raised it into league with *Perfect Symmetry*.

Third, the crude album art and ragged logo of *No Exit* are replaced by a sleek updated logo and a dark textural photograph. Platitudes about judging things this way notwithstanding, changing logos is a big deal for a metal band, and this change shows that Fates Warning is serious about wanting to be taken seriously as more than just another metal band.

Fourth, this album features some occasional keyboards (courtesy of Kevin Moore from Dream Theater). These are used pretty sparingly, but the guitar sounds here are actually more keyboard like, which contributes to the casual impression that there is more synthesizer playing here than there actually is.

Lastly, and this is partly just another manifestation of the second thing, Ray Alder's vocals are delivered very differently here from on *No Exit*. From being, frankly, towards the shrill side, he has refined his delivery to a slightly less-grating and more drawn out style, using many more long notes, and notes held longer, than even Geoff Tate usually does.

All this is not to say that *Perfect Symmetry* really sounds the same as *Rage for Order*. Fates Warning is, I think, somewhat more subtle musically than Queensrÿche, and thus somewhat less accessible. Where *Rage for Order* punctuated the progressiveness with more conventional high-energy moments like "Walk in the Shadows", Fates Warning takes a purer approach to progressive metal, letting the complicated song structures stand on their own (though both "The Arena" and "Nothing Left to Say" have substantial primal drive behind them). For some this will make this album seem less exciting than Queensrÿche's, and for some people Queensrÿche's concessions will be seen as compromising. To me, though, they appeal slightly differently to the same mood.

### *Parallels*, 1991 CD

As Queensrÿche's *Empire* bent their sound towards more conventional songs, *Parallels* too takes steps toward accessibility. The notable distance the band covers in getting from the previous album to this one, though, is not primarily in the "hit" direction. Instead, they continue to sound increasingly like themselves and unlike anybody else. The touch of producer Terry

Brown (known for producing all the Rush albums up to *Signals*) is evident, and though Fates Warning integrates his presence into this album as if he had no history, it is worth noting here that despite appearing widely separated in this book, the stylistic distance between Queensrÿche / Fates Warning / Dream Theater and Rush / IQ / Marillion in Market Square is actually fairly small. Were this book to be constructed in four or five dimensions, rather than just one, this connection would be more apparent. On the other hand, trying to read a five-dimensional book would probably make your head quickly assume the consistency (and reading level) of a box of lasagna noodles accidentally run through the dishwasher. The tradeoff I've chosen, then, is to sacrifice complete accuracy in the hopes of not actually killing any readers.

I have divided these six groups, then, because though I think they arrive at sounds that are not too different, they do so from different directions, and my experience of them has been very much from the junction *outwards*, rather than toward the space in between them. If you like one set and don't know the other, though, by all means stagger out to a record store and correct the omission. After all, what's money for, if not to buy music?

Back to *Parallels*, though. I vacillate between a) thinking that the presence of such hummable songs as "Life in Still Water", "Eye to Eye", "Point of View" and "We Only Say Good-bye" makes this a much more accessible album than the prior one, b) thinking that as Fates Warning moves away from the traditional elements of heavy metal they are losing the strongest connection they had to a larger potential audience, and thus becoming, ironically, *less* accessible, and c) thinking that with a few more bands of the quality of Fates Warning and Dream Theater, this sub-genre would acquire critical mass and begin to support and justify *itself*, and a) and b) wouldn't matter.

Whichever way I sway, though, this is a unique and superb album. The confidence, focus and polish shown here are remarkable, and the band has grown much since *No Exit*, which I consider praise of *Parallels* far more than criticism of *No Exit*.

## Dream Theater

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### *When Dream and Day Unite*, 1989 CD

If you like Fates Warning, you will like Dream Theater, and vice versa. I will make very few predictions in this book with more confidence than I make this one. Not only are the bands personal friends

(Dream Theater members appear on both *Perfect Symmetry* and *Parallels*, and both bands figure prominently in each other's thank-you lists), but they are professional peers. They clearly play the same sort of music, the same sort of way, though neither band is a copy of the other.

Dream Theater uses keyboards as standard equipment, which Fates Warning does not, and I think Dream Theater tends to play a little heavier and faster. They also compress their equivalent of Fates Warning's first five albums into this one. *When Dream and Day Unite* has their "old" vocalist, Charlie Dominici, and has some token immaturities, at least compared to *Images and Words*. On the whole, though, it's pretty comparable to Fates Warning's *Perfect Symmetry*, which came out the same year. It has a similar penchant for tricky rhythms, a similar unrelenting intricacy (there are no crossover hits hiding here), similar production, and of course Kevin Moore actually plays keyboards on both albums. If you like one, get the other.

#### *Images and Words*, 1992 CD

Dream Theater plays a bit heavier and faster on this album than Fates Warning did on *Parallels*, but if you had played me this record blind and told me it was the new 1992 Fates Warning album, it would not have occurred to me to doubt you. "Wow, another great record", I would have said, with enough gusto and sincerity that you would look nervously around for cameras, wondering if we were in a commercial. Likewise, if I hadn't heard of Fates Warning first, I could easily have believed that their back catalog were previous Dream Theater releases.

All that is another way to say that *Images and Words* is an even better album than *Parallels*. I fully expect these two bands to leapfrog each other as long as they keep making records (if they would only tour together, so I could evaluate them simultaneously...), and this one is about a year better than Fates Warning's 1991 album.

Dream Theater gets *their* new vocalist here, James LaBrie, who sounds terrific. From an aside in the liner notes I think that they auditioned ex-Fates Warning singer John Arch for the job, among others, and I think they did the right thing picking LaBrie. His smooth voice is of the same type as Ray Alder's, and it complements their musical style *much* better than Arch would have (unless he's improved, which is quite possible, I guess). Producer David Prater gives the record an awesome aural space (it sounds like the lavish cover *looks*), and the remaining four members inhabit it as if defying anybody to question their tenancy. They show no signs of tiring of complex epics, of which there are several here, but they also vary the mixture with a

few shorter, more easily apprehended songs. "Another Day" is a stunning, beautiful ballad that with half-decent promotion (which it didn't get) ought to have been another crossover hit like "Silent Lucidity". "Surrounded" starts out slow as well, and when it picks up it actually reminds me of Pallas (and Marillion gets a thank you in the notes, strengthening the Mega Therion/Eden connection further). "Wait for Sleep" is the most radical departure, a soft two-and-a-half minute piano and synth song that never does slam into overdrive, as often as you might expect it to.

The epics are what Dream Theater's identity is built on, though, and there five impeccable ones here. "Pull Me Under", in an abridged form, got some MTV airplay, and for a little while it looked like the band might achieve critical mass of exposure and become real stars. (Certainly the buzz about them in metal and progressive circles was unprecedented, and I've yet to hear of a prospective fan who thought they might like Dream Theater who wasn't basically blown away by this album. "How do I get the other one?" quickly became the most commonly asked question in progressive metal net circles, and it was almost unnecessary to ask which band was meant.) "Take the Time" and "Metropolis-Part I" are even better, and "Under a Glass Moon" and "Learning to Live" are right behind. All five members are unbelievable musicians (you *have* to be in order to play this sort of music, of course), and the resulting noise is a true joy to listen to. Their lyric writing isn't especially notable (it seems like they want to emulate Neil Peart, but they haven't learned to put enough concrete detail in to anchor the songs and make them *stories*), but it's easily good enough not to detract from the songs at all, and as band flaws go, this is one that I'd gladly accept if it meant that everything else would work as well as it does for Dream Theater.

## Vai

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#### *Sex and Religion*, 1993 CD

Georgia and I were watching television one Saturday night, flipping between Headbanger's Ball and American Gladiators, and probably motorcycle polo or something on ESPN. We flipped back to MTV just in time for a song to end at one point, and the credits for the next one came up announcing a new video by "Vai". I was about to flip away, as I'm not generally much for instrumental guitar heroics, but suddenly I dimly remembered something about Steve Vai having gotten a band and a new singer for his new

album, and so we stayed to see if the result was anything interesting.

The song got off to a decent start, albeit with some guitar whiddling that wasn't necessarily what I was after. Suddenly, a little ways into the video, this singer stalked onto the set like a cross between Robocop, Peter Garrett and Edward Scissorhands, and all hell proceeded to break loose. The song, "Down Deep into the Pain", flung itself from haunting, soaring parts to frenetic screaming interludes with the abandon usually reserved for caged, rabid, radiation-induced monsters in Japanese horror movies. The singer, shaved bald with strange patterns painted on his skull, and dressed in some uncomfortable-looking array of leather and metal, definitely didn't look like being the new singer in a band nominally centered around (and named for) its virtuoso guitarist phased him in the slightest, and the song was overwhelming. When it ended, both Georgia and my jaws were hanging slackly. (Now, people often say "my jaw dropped" by way of expressing their astonishment, but rarely has their actual jaw actually dropped when they say this. Ours had.)

The next day, I went out and bought the album. The whole album doesn't have quite the instant impact that "Down Deep into the Pain" did on video, and in the end it was the song that made my year-end list, not the album, but the album comes admirably close to living up to that song's potential. There is plenty of impressive guitar, for sure, but it rarely is allowed to overwhelm the band or the songs. Terry Bozzio, on drums, is a match for Vai *anyway*, and bassist T.M. Stevens (aka Shaka Zulu) doesn't feel out of place. Devin Townsend, the singer, doesn't do as much crazed screaming on the rest of the album as on "Down Deep", but the soaring lyrical parts of that song are not flukes.

Most of the record, in fact, is appealing progressive metal that should probably appeal to fans of the Queensrÿche/Fates Warning/Dream Theater axis. Parts, like the straightforward "Sex and Religion", the grungy "Dirty Black Hole", the Asian-ish instrumentals "Touching Tongues" and "State of Grace", the funky "Survive", the perhaps ill-advised "Pig", and the experimental noise/atmospheric collage "The Road to Mt. Calvary", would be unexpected on a Dream Theater album, but "Here and Now", "In My Dreams with You", "Still My Bleeding Heart", "Down Deep into the Pain" and "Rescue Me or Bury Me" might not be. The album is uneven (or varied) enough that I'm not sure it's made me a true Vai convert, but I'm interested enough to pay attention to the next one.

## Faith No More

We now move out of the main progression of Mega Therion into the miscellaneous leftovers. Faith No More and the two bands that follow are not much like anything else here, and I have grouped them according to this common quality.

### *We Care A Lot*, 1987 7"

I am not a single-buyer, by nature. Most of the singles you will come across in this book are ones I have because they have additional songs not available on the albums they are taken from, which I also have. In a few instances, though, I have singles because a particular song cries out to me "I am a fluke, a song you love because of some trick of fate, not because you will like anything else this band ever does".

Such was the novelty appeal of this hilarious stomping rap-metal tribute to global consciousness. Professing their political correctness in elaborate detail, to the accompaniment of a relentless drum-march reminiscent in its simplicity of "We Will Rock You", this is a song for the Eighties, both then and in our memories.

### *The Real Thing*, 1989 CD

It was to my surprise, then, that Faith No More failed to sink tracelessly into one-hit obscurity. Much to the contrary, this stunningly original record will make you forget about "We Care A Lot" very quickly. Faith No More are not, by any means, the only band to blend elements of funk, rap and metal. Suicidal Tendencies and the Red Hot Chili Peppers were there first, to name two, but in my opinion neither achieves a fusion with the same strange warped logic as Faith No More does here.

Imagine, if you will, the following elements: heavy metal guitar in the mold of Slayer; almost-classical keyboards, heavily emphasizing piano and string sounds; a funky, popping bass; drums played *hard*; and singing that swings abruptly from guttural shouted chants to a nasal (but melodic) whine. "Epic", the track with the highest rap quotient, is the song that got the most airplay, but most of the songs involve some similar balance of elements, from the strangled refrain of "Surprise! You're Dead!" to the soft acoustic moments of "Zombie Eaters" and "The Real Thing". The result is more powerful to me than RHCP, and richer than Suicidal Tendencies.

The result is also odd enough that at times I find it grating, and though I respect this album intensely, it didn't make my top ten for its year. Unlike most artists that I like, I can't listen to Faith No More repeatedly, as

overexposure sets in quickly. It's hard to tell, though, whether this is a failing of mine or theirs, so I just mention it as a point of interest.

The CD adds two songs, neither of which make particular musical sense with the rest of the material. One of them, however, is a cover of Black Sabbath's "War Pigs". To my disappointment, Faith No More don't really do anything stranger with it than speeding it up a bit, though they threaten to for a few beats here and there.

### *Angel Dust*, 1992 CD

Given the substantial critical acclaim for *The Real Thing*, the long wait between albums, and the inherently unstable nature of Faith No More, *Angel Dust* was a record I waited for with very mixed anticipation. The responses I've read have, almost unanimously, hailed it as courageous, uncompromising and refreshingly unique. And, to the extent that this means "I like it", I'm with 'em. The specific terms they use, though, I'm not so sure about.

The truth is that, aside from scattered random noises, some odd processing, and a couple of simply bizarre interludes (the muttered country-on-Quaaludes "RV", and the album-ending campfire-side melodica rendition of the "Midnight Cowboy" theme), I don't hear too much here that is all that different from *The Real Thing*. I think this is a better album, but better in the sort of ways you'd expect from a couple years of experience and a bigger studio budget, rather than the sort of quantum leap represented by, for example, Talk Talk's *Spirit of Eden*.

Every time I listen to this record, I really like it. From "Be Aggressive"'s demented cheerleader backing-vocals to "Jizzlobber", whose lyrics I think I'm probably better off not reading, this is a strong and involving album. Nonetheless, when I'm *not* listening to it, I never miss it, and when I put it on it is almost invariably because I ran across it while perusing my CD rack, not because I stormed home from work urgently growling "Faith No More, Faith No More" under my breath. I don't understand, and thus can't really explain, why this is. Perhaps there's MSG in the CD paint. That could be. Next time I'll try *not* licking the label.

## Sisters of Mercy

### *Some Girls Wander By Mistake*, 1992 CD

This is the sort of CD that every band should do, and I *mean* CD, not album. This 79:30 disc contains, complete, the first six Sisters of Mercy EPs, otherwise

completely unavailable on disc and awfully hard to find on any format. I paid a lot for it as an import when it was first released, but compared to the hard core collectors' prices I would have had to pay for the EPs this is a peerless bargain.

The contents, then, are really *The Damage Done* (1980), *Body Electric* (1982), *Anaconda* (1983), *Alice* (1983), *The Reptile House EP* (1983) and *Temple of Love* (1983), containing 3, 2, 2, 4, 6 and 3 songs, respectively (one of which was repeated, for a total of 19).

The CD does not, however, proceed in strict chronological order. Instead, it begins with *Alice* and continues in order, and then starts over with the first three EPs in order. There is a very, very good reason for this: the first six songs Sisters of Mercy released are basically terrible. Rather than start out on such a trying note, Andrew Eldritch seems to have opted to begin with the point at which the songs really began to sound like the band's "mature" work.

Now, when I say "terrible", I'm being somewhat evasive. The first six songs are fascinating in their own way. You can clearly hear the seeds of Sisters' trademarks, but the histrionic power of later Sisters' work is almost completely lost in the low-fi inside-a-cardboard-box production and incredibly wimpy drum-machine sound. On *The Damage Done* it is pretty obvious that nobody can really play any instruments. The drum machine, Doktor Avalanche, arrives in time for *Body Electric*, and helps out immensely, but in its debut it sounds frankly cheesy. "Anaconda" is getting much closer to the band's imminent realization, but still sounds like they added reverb by some ploy very similar to wrapping aluminum foil around a Slinky.

On "Alice", the band finally cranks up the bass and Eldritch's spectral vocals, and these two things suddenly turn Sisters of Mercy from people you want to treat to music lessons into one of rock's most distinctive presences. These are not heavy metal songs yet, by any means, but even this early their music is centered on a relentlessness that is as *powerful* as any metal band. The monster-guitar underpinnings of later work are less evident on most of these early songs, but the intent is there.

"Alice" proves to be an early peak, as most of the rest of *Alice* and *The Reptile House* do not live up to its promise. "Phantom" is a long, mesmerizing instrumental. "1969" is the Sisters' version of ol' good-time rock and roll. With the partial exception of "Burn", *The Reptile House* is too limp for my tastes.

The final EP, however, redeems all the others. "Temple of Love" is perhaps the quintessential Sisters of Mercy song. Over an unwavering and unstoppable drum track, punctuated by machine-gun fills, an incredibly distorted guitar plays a strangely catchy hook something like an Egyptian translation of the

Batman theme. The bass waits to come in into you've almost gotten used to the tinny bass-less sound, and its entry thus seems much grander than the production alone makes it. And over it all are Eldritch's surreal monklike incantations. If fog started pouring out of my CD player during this song, and all the lights in the apartment turned dark green, I wouldn't think it at all unusual.

"Heartland" isn't as mind-blowingly cool as "Temple of Love", but it keeps the energy flowing, leading to the chronological finale, an other-worldly deconstructed cover of the Stones' "Gimme Shelter". Although this rendition is actually less than six minutes long, it feels like it goes on for hours. It *starts* at about half-speed (it sounds like you've got a 45 on 33, a reference that some fraction of you already don't get), and it slows grindingly down until, by the end, the instruments give out entirely and Eldritch is left alone to scrape to a complete halt. A more memorable cover you will rarely hear.

#### ***First and Last and Always, 1985 CD***

Having found their niche at last, the Sisters turn in a dark and disturbing first full album. This album was remixed, remastered and re-released in 1992, presumably polishing the production to later standards. I haven't bought one of the new copies, though, because the relatively stark atmosphere here is part of what makes this album different from the other two. On the whole I do prefer the slicker, bigger second and third albums, but this one has a sort of gothic purity that is worthwhile in itself.

"Black Planet", a harrowing meditation on ecological desecration, and the title track and "Logic", songs that I don't know what they are about, are the centerpieces for me. The drums boom, Eldritch sounds strained, the guitar is mixed too low, and through this clouded lens the band's brilliant bleakness shines coldly through. The other songs are even more angular and unapproachable. Where the early work is hard to listen to because the band was still figuring out what made it *it*, this album is hard to listen to by design. This is not a criticism, though, as it is a rare album crafted with as clear a sense of itself independent of conventions.

#### ***Floodland, 1987 CD***

I expect that to many early fans this album is a crushing sell-out. I prefer to think that, having done bleakness as well as it could be done, the Sisters of Mercy have simply decided to quit that effort while ahead, and have moved on to try another experiment. The new shinier Sisters are decidedly less alienating. The spare production of *First and Last and Always* has

been replaced by ominous ambient space, courtesy of the always-histrionic Jim Steinman. The formerly-clicking drums now crash like footsteps of steel-shod giants on the world's iron roof. Eldritch sounds like there are about ten of him, several of them possibly dead, and wailing female backing voices add an accompanying Valkyrie touch. Someone bumped the guitar fader up a ways, and throbbing keyboards augment the pulsing bass.

The song paces vary. "Flood I", "Flood II", "Driven Like Snow" and "Torch" are slow and deliberate. "Never Land (a fragment)" and "Colours" are dark but subdued instrumentals. (Actually, "Colours" has words, but given that there are only 20 of them in a 7:18 song, I'll call it an instrumental on principle.) "1959" is a piano-ballad that is not related in any way I can tell to the older song "1969". "Dominion/Mother Russia" (how did Memphis get into this song?), "Lucretia My Reflection" and "This Corrosion" are faster, pounding, danceable tracks. "This Corrosion" in particular rivals "Temple of Love" for inexorable energy, and for sounding like the soundtrack to some ominous blacklit future city. It also, at 10:55, demonstrates the feature of many Sisters of Mercy songs that if you like them you can turn them way up and listen to them do basically the same thing for practically forever. "This Corrosion" could be all of this album's 60:46 and I'd still love it.

#### ***Vision Thing, 1990 CD***

This is the album that eliminated any doubts I had that Sisters of Mercy belonged in Mega Therion. I defy anyone to claim that the awesome "Vision Thing", "Detonation Boulevard", "When You Don't See Me" and "More" are not heavy metal, without resorting to historical prejudices. And "Ribbons", with its blood-curdling cries of "Incoming!" is just as intense to me as Slayer's "War Ensemble".

Sonically, this album continues in the line from *First and Last and Always* through *Floodland*, and where the last album sounded big, this one sounds *huge*. Every element is somehow louder, clearer and more preposterously gigantic. The first Doktor Avalanche could well have been one of those little Boss beatboxes that look an early GameBoy prototype; the current model sounds like Eldritch has managed to bolt bionic drumming arms onto that floating torture robot that Darth Vader used on Leia in *Star Wars*. The other albums lack band credits, so this may not be the first album to use two guitarists, but it's the first one to *sound* like there are two guitarists. Maggie Reilly's backing vocals sound even cooler over Andrew Eldritch's even more larger-than-life singing.

"Vision Thing" itself opens the album, a bitter, sarcastic response to George Bush's trivialization of "vision" as checklist item. "It's a small world and it smells bad. / I'd buy another if I had / Back / What I paid / For another motherfucker in a motorcade." "What do we need to make our world come alive?", Eldritch asks. Surely not a president who doesn't seem to even understand the *problem*, much less feel any sense of moral urgency about it.

"Ribbons", next, is an impressionistic collage of images ("Flowers on the razor wire", "Love is a many splintered thing", "I see no purple light / Crashing out of you") that feels to me like the Gothic version of "Pretty in Pink". "You look good in ribbons" is a counter-cultural variant of "Isn't she pretty in pink?", the ambiguity between *wearing* ribbons and being torn into them very much intentional, and reflective of the culture's aesthetic. The apocalyptic sound effects (including the "Incoming!"s) are as much part of the composite image as the lyrics. As if conscious that "Pretty in Pink" has established the basic narrative, this song concentrates on the narrator's impression of the girl, not her plight (plights like this being something of a cross-cultural standard, anyway). My favorite detail is "I tried to tell her / About Marx and Engels, God and Angels. / I don't really know what for." There is an odd intellectual/spiritual component to Eldritch's writing that this moment captures beautifully.

"Detonation Boulevard" follows the aesthetic out of the victim-narrative and onto some fog-enshrouded (virtual?) road. Merging images of noise, flames, angels, neon, information, machines and explosion with hammering drums, galloping synthetic hi-hats and churning guitar, this might almost be the quintessential encapsulation of the Sisters of Mercy style if it wasn't so short (under four minutes). It's got all the elements, it just doesn't drum them into your head for *long* enough.

"Something Fast" has my favorite lyrical moment on the album. "You can stand all night / At a red light anywhere in town / Hailing Maries left and right, / But none of them slow down". This is as good an example as any of Eldritch's fondness for finding angstful moral-decay-despite-religions'-best-efforts insight in clever word-play, and although I understand the temptation to dismiss the intellectual content on the basis of the apparent linguistic frivolity, I think that's a mistake. Of course *some* of these songs basically *have* no intellectual content, and the next song, "When You Don't See Me", is one of those. Musically, it sounds like the missing five-and-a-half minutes of "Detonation Boulevard", though, so I don't much care *what* it says.

"Doctor Jeep" is a companion piece to "Vision Thing", similar musically but turning the narrative focus around 180° and focusing on the things that actually make up the squalid world, rather than on its

lack of leadership. The way Andrew sings "Businessmen from South Miami / Humming AOR", it sounds like there's an invasion of them on the way, like killer bees or something, and I suppose in a way he's right. The chorus, "Meanwhile, in the Sheraton, / Doctor Jeep plays on and on and on", I keep wanting to interpret as referring to a drum machine, but the drum machine is called Doktor Avalanche, not Doctor Jeep, so I guess I don't understand it.

You can stop thinking about it, though, as "More" switches off the brains and settles into this album's longest song, and closest approach to "This Corrosion"'s inexorable drive. That finally out of the way, the band then uncrates some acoustic guitars and a new drum-pattern for the somewhat-hushed album-closing dirge "I Was Wrong". The self-condemnation implied by the title turns out to be merely a martyr's ploy to set up criticism like "I can love my fellow man / But I'm damned if I'll love yours". Still, there's the occasional genuine emotion peeking through. "Pain looks great on other people; / That's what they're for", but I get the feeling that the narrator says this because for once the "other people" have not performed their function in this regard, and some of the pain has hit *him*, after all.

### **More, 1990 CD5**

The longer Sisters of Mercy songs are the better, but in retrospect I'm not sure that the ten extra seconds that the "extended version" of "More" here claims to have are worth the price of a CD single. I think, actually, that the long version here is the album version, and the edited version is the one unique to this CD5. And who needs a *shorter* Sisters of Mercy song?

This disc also has the otherwise unreleased song "You Could Be The One". It's a good song, but it sounds *very* much like "When You Don't See Me"—so much so that I don't wonder why it didn't make it onto *Vision Thing*.

### **Temple of Love (1992), 1992 CD5**

I usually think it's pretty lame when bands remake one of their old songs and re-release it. In the hands of people like Real Life and Modern English it feels like a crass attempt to milk a bit more cash out of a band's one faded moment of glory. I'm willing to make an exception here, though, for the same reason that I like Megadeth's cover of "Anarchy in the UK": this version sounds like what "Temple of Love" would have been if it was originally recorded in 1992, brilliance utterly untarnished.

The original "Temple of Love" was my favorite Sisters of Mercy song *despite* the thin production. In its new form is so much better I can hardly believe I ever put up with the old one. The full force of *Vision Thing's*

mega-mix production is brought to bear here, the Arabian feel boosted by the inspired addition of the seductive voice of Ofra Haza. Words are insufficient to describe the effect. I got to see the Sisters of Mercy in concert around this time (on an abortive tour with Public Enemy that I could only rationalize as intended to draw “everybody who wears black or *is* black”), and “Temple of Love” had me up and convulsing wildly, which entertained my companions almost as much as the song entertained me. This version comes much closer than the original to capture that mood.

As if that wasn’t enough, the CD5 also contains the American edit of “I Was Wrong” (like the album version, but half as long), the Canadian remix of “Vision Thing” (longer! cool!), and the German version of “When You Don’t See Me” (slightly longer, very slightly different). None of these versions are too remarkable on their own, but they serve perfectly as after-dinner-mints to “Temple of Love”’s main course.

### *Under the Gun*, 1993 CD5

Sisters of Mercy put out a greatest-hits compilation in 1993, and “Under the Gun” was the token new song on it. A slow song that sounds an awful lot like a bunch of other Sisters of Mercy songs, it probably would have been a fine album track, but I doubt it would have made a best-of on its own merits. Ex-Berlin singer Terri Nunn contributes some vocals, but there aren’t nearly as impressive as Ofra Haza’s on the remake of “Temple of Love”. This single includes two different mixes of “Under the Gun”, the second one even slower and to me less remarkable than the first, which I think makes better use of the throbbing bass and Eldritch’s spoken rant.

In between is a “1993” version of “Alice”, which is good but again not as notable as the 1992 remake of “Temple of Love”.

## Living Colour

Picture this: my friend Matt and I are standing around at The Paradise waiting to see Adrian Belew’s band, the Bears, on the *Rise and Shine* tour. Now I don’t mean this as a quality judgment one way or the other, but the Bears are certainly one of the *whitest* rock bands available. When some local DJ introduces an unannounced, unadvertised opening act called “Living Colour” (who nobody, at this stage, had ever heard of), and four black guys with dreadlocks come out, we’re thinking to ourselves, “What dimension were the promoters in when they thought up *this* combination?”

Living Colour proceeded to demolish the place. You don’t easily impress a crowd of Belew fans with

technical virtuosity, but I think it was pretty clear almost immediately that anybody in Living Colour could hold their own beside Belew without much trouble. I still think they were an odd pairing with Belew’s slick arty guitar-pop band, but they rocked hard enough that it really didn’t matter who they were or what genre they played. By the time the Bears came out, we were *warm*.

### *Vivid*, 1988 CD

I have a firm policy of always buying the albums of opening acts I like (if you can’t earn a purchase that way, after all, what’s the point of there *being* opening acts?), so I rushed out and bought *Vivid*. I loved it immediately, but it didn’t seem to be getting any press or airplay for the longest time. Several months later Living Colour came through Boston again and played at T.T. the Bear’s Place, a room that holds, I’m guessing, about 100 thin people. I spent the concert standing two feet from Vernon Reid’s effects pedals. He seemed kind of annoyed. (Not at *me*.)

Anyway, I’m reveling in this experience because a few months later Epic decided to chip in some publicity, and Living Colour suddenly became *huge*, and soon they were opening for the Rolling Stones. I didn’t know Nirvana before *Nevermind*, I didn’t know U2 before *War*, *Chronic Town* passed me by, but damnit, I knew Living Colour before their hype. Thank you for indulging me for a moment.

Anyway, *Vivid* is an awesome record. As I said at the beginning of this chapter, heavy metal has historically been an overwhelmingly white genre, just as rap, soul and funk have been overwhelmingly black (*all* music in the Nineties remains sadly race-segregated). Living Colour, though, are one of the signs that cultures are starting to mingle. On the one hand, Vernon Reid’s slashing guitar and William Calhoun’s crashing drums suit them for Mega Therion without question. On the other hand, their music is flavored with generous infusions of funk, rap, soul and jazz (Reid played with Ronald Shannon Jackson’s Decoding Society before Living Colour, and also made a bizarre album with Bill Frisell called, descriptively, *Smash and Scatteration*). The resulting hybrid is either the most danceable metal band ever, or the hardest R&B band, or put better, a band that defies both sides’ stereotypes. Living Colour were founding members of the Black Rock Coalition, a NYC collective intent on getting rock bands with black members treated as rock bands, not “black music”, but listening to this record it seems pretty ridiculous that anybody would need more persuading on this subject.

The album begins with “Cult of Personality”, a song that would go on to be a reasonably successful

single. Calhoun's drum stomp propels the song, and Reid's Hendrix-after-a-transporter-accident guitar-leads punctuate it. Pay too much attention to these elements, though, and you might miss Corey Glover's seditious equation of Mussolini, Stalin, Ghandi and Kennedy as the cult's beneficiaries. Reminding mainstream culture that some of its heroes aren't necessarily black culture's is a hobby of Living Colours.

"I Want to Know", "Middle Man" and "Desperate People" are relatively standard rock fare, lyrically unremarkable. The band's social agenda rears up again with "Open Letter to a Landlord", though, a slow song that merges soul and country, if you can believe that. "Now you can tear a building down / But you can't erase a memory. / These houses may look all run down / But they have a value you can't see." This perspective on slums, that efforts to tear down the tenements and build "better" buildings fail to account for the residents' desire to care for and identify with their neighborhood, not some ersatz neighborhood infrastructure craned in a dropped in their midst by outside developers, this perspective casts an entirely different light on the debate on *how* to "improve" slums. It implies that a neighborhood must be improved from within, that the first step ought to be to identify the good things about it, so that they can be preserved and strengthened in the process of fixing or eliminating the bad things. This probably isn't a new idea, but I'm not very well-informed on the subject of slum-rebuilding, and it was an insight I'd not heard expressed as coherently before.

For a light interlude to perk you up after "Open Letter to a Landlord", the band snaps into the ultra-funky "Funny Vibe", with the help of Public Enemy's Chuck D. and Flavor Flav. The lyrics of this bouncy song are actually serious after all, posing the simple question "No I'm not gonna rob you, / No I'm not gonna beat you, / No I'm not gonna rape you, / So why you want to give me that / Funny Vibe?!" This strikes, I think, at the biggest hurdle to racial harmony that we currently face. My impression (warped by my environment, I'm certain) is that most racism these days is *learned*, and that we're stuck in a vicious circle where people with black skin have been traditionally discriminated against, which has resulted in the poor inner-cities being disproportionately black, and because poverty has tended to breed violent crime, violent criminals have turned out to be disproportionately black, which makes white-skinned people nervous about black-skinned people on a purely *statistical* basis (a random black-skinned person is more likely, statistically, to be a violent criminal than a random white-skinned person is), which ends up polarizing *both* groups' impressions of themselves and the other, and serves only to perpetuate the division, which reinforces

the social schism and the cycle begins again. This is a *very* difficult situation to bootstrap ourselves out of quickly, and if there's any way out of it other than slowly, arduously undermining these stereotypes until nobody learns them any more, I haven't heard it.

Actually, there *are* at least two good ideas that I've heard. One was a science-fiction story in which somebody came up with a virus that turned white people black. Anybody who could figure out how to do this for real would probably earn a lifetime subscription to the Nobel Peace Prize, and we could all forget about skin color and concentrate on stamping out religion. Ice T describes a slower version of this idea in *The Ice Opinion*, which is to simply breed the "white race" out of existence. This could be done in one generation if everybody would cooperate. As he explains, "If everybody was fucking everybody else, the world would have to change. If we had a mono-type race, everyone would have to get along. ... The white race is the only race that requires two white people to make a white baby. ... If people just get along, you can eliminate the white race." Some smart-ass anthropologist is bound to make the argument that a mono-type race would be *culturally poorer* in the long run, that human culture as a whole is better off if there are cohesive subgroups to prevent total homogeneity. This isn't as stupid as it might sound, but I think currently my counter-argument is "Hey, we've had thousands of years of cultural diversity, and it's gotten to the point where we're all living too close to each other to be able to afford it any more. If you want cultural separation back soon, let's get to work on space colonization, but this one planet has gotten way too small for it."

Back to the music, the next song is another step toward integration, an eye-opening cover of the Talking Heads' "Memories Can't Wait". This is followed by "Broken Hearts", which sounds like a slow song in the mold of "Open Letter to a Landlord" that has somehow had whipcrack drums grafted onto it, and the funky Mick Jagger-produced "Glamour Boys", and then the boisterous theme song "What's Your Favorite Color?".

The album ends on one last jab at the status quo, the vitriolic "Which Way to America?", which simply points out the startling chasm between the version of America you see of mainstream TV and the version you see looking out an inner-city window. I think this is one area where we're starting to see change, as inner-city life has begun invading mainstream media in earnest, *especially* in music, and in fact this album was an important crossover in precisely that way.



### *Time's Up*, 1990 CD

Living Colour's second album finds the band hurtling in all directions at once, producing a vastly ambitious record that strives to go way beyond their debut but, for me, falls short in actual appeal.

"Time's Up" starts the album off as full-speed trash. Several instrumentals directly pay the band's debt to their African roots. "Love Rears Its Ugly Head" and "Solace of You" are slow and slinky. "Elvis Is Dead", "Type" and "Information Overload", bridging the middle of the album, come the closest to replicating both energy and the accessibility of the first album. Here, though, the band seems almost apologetic about them.

Thanks to increased industry clout, the album features guest performances by Little Richard, Mick Jagger (who also produced a couple tracks on *Vivid*), Queen Latifah and Doug E. Fresh, and those were only the ones I've heard of. The band's soundscape is as varied as their guests, with studio processing and additional instrumentation playing a much bigger role here than on the first album.

For me, though, the many colors of this album's expanded palette seem to just wash over me, and I have a hard time picking individual ones out. This may well have been the band's *intention*, but I find that while it makes this album in a way more *impressive*, the first one was more fun to listen to.

### *Stain*, 1993 CD

I was somewhat apprehensive about the next Living Colour album, then. Would it go back to their original drive, would it go further into ethnic experimentation, or would it do something else entirely? The relatively straightforward lead single, "Leave It Alone", didn't decide matters one way or the other, but I decided to give the record a chance.

Good choice. The band hasn't abandoned the influences shown on *Time's Up*, but it has done a better job of integrating them back into music that I like more. New bass player Doug Wimbish adds some low-end muscle, and perhaps his arrival helped to refocus the band. Reid uses many fewer guitar textures here, sticking more often to the sound of a jet engine straining at a very large dog-chain, and Calhoun's rhythms stick more to propulsion.

"Go Away", the crunching opener, serves both as a statement of musical direction and a reminder of Living Colour's political consciousness. "I see the starving Africans on TV, / I feel it has nothing to do with me. / I send my twenty dollars to Live Aid; / I pay my guilty conscience to go away.", Corey sings, and it's clear from the fact that he has to keep repeating "Now go away!" that it hasn't. "Ignorance is Bliss", next, is similarly

themed, and its interplay between Wimbish and Reid's lockstep groove and Calhoun's martial snare crack is fascinating.

"Leave It Alone", as I said, seems pretty normal to me. The drums are almost awkwardly steady, and Reid's crazed guitar-synth is mixed low enough not to interfere with the flow of the song. "Bi", however, is funky and irreverent, taking an intentionally naive glee in the refrain "Everybody loves you when you're bi!" "Mind Your Business", just to keep the pace varied, is *extremely* heavy, and switches from near-subsonic stomp to frantic slam for the choruses. "Ausländer" isn't as heavy or as fast at either extreme, but involves similar principles.

"Never Satisfied" is clearly hung around a simple, but charged, pattern from Vernon, the other players just filling in around him and letting him lead through slow cycles. I'd love to hear this one with just Reid and Glover. "Nothingness", on the other hand, with airy guitar-synth and loping bass, is the most reminiscent here of *Time's Up*, Corey easing through the soft vocal part while the rest of the band surround him in textures.

It's back to rock quickly, though, with "Postman", a menacing song that is not about mail delivery (though it's amusing to imagine that it is, some sort of bizarre postal-worker persecution complex that would terminate, of course, in the obligatory disgruntled-postal-employee shotgun fusillade). I'll let you figure out yourself what the "post" in the title is, since it's a cleverly disingenuous name. While you're at it, you can puzzle out candidates for what "WTFF", the next title, stands for. It is a chaotic instrumental, almost certainly owing its existence to Doug Wimbish's previous tenure in Tackhead, and I have a theory about what the title is *intended* to stand for, though I think the track is interesting enough *not* to prompt that question.

"This Little Pig" opens with the sound bite "56 times in 81 seconds. Something like this:", which I assume comes from the trial of the LA police officers who beat Rodney King, and refers to the number of blows struck. With that allusion as context, "This Little Pig" is a furious song that transforms nursery-rhyme imagery into a scathing social indictment. The deceptive titling continues with "Hemp", which many people will probably expect to be a pro-marijuana anthem of some sort. In fact, it's an atmospherically accompanied reading of a poem by Andrew Fairley that sounds like it is coming out of one of those round children's toys that make different animal noises when you turn the dial and then pull the cord. The liner includes the text of the poem, though, and the best interpretation I've come up with is that it's the musing of a man about to kill a woman he is obsessed with. It's a pretty interesting poem, but I'm not at all sure what to make

of its inclusion, and the fact that I can't quite fit "Yet your words will be unfaithful before I set you free" into the story in a sensible way makes me wonder if there's some other interpretation I'm not getting.

The last song, "Wall", is to me the musical climax, Vernon Reid's caterwauling guitar and some bass parts that sound as if they've been pitch-shifted about seven octaves up sliding into grooves and out of them for a powerful song that then closes out the album with some disturbing looping, resampling and dialog that ends with the tag line "The wall between us all must fall", which is as good a way to end an album as any I've heard.

Somehow, though, *Stain* is an album whose effect on me is much greater than the individual songs would indicate. "Wall" and "Nothingness" are probably the only individual songs that stick with me in the way that "Cult of Personality" or "Open Letter to a Landlord" did, but the album as a whole has such an impressive *sound* to it, a simultaneous exhibition of force and personality, that I'm thoroughly engrossed in it even though I'd be hard-pressed to explain its appeal with any particular fifteen-second clip.

#### *Leave It Alone*, 1993 CD5

This single bolsters "Leave It Alone" with the "full version" of "Hemp", and two unreleased tracks. The first, "17 Days", is a brilliant Prince cover and worth the price of the single all by itself. Living Colour is, among their other talents, a peerless cover band, and this is as good as their versions of "Memories Can't Wait" or "Talkin' 'Bout a Revolution". The other b-side, "TV News", is similar in arrangement to "Nothingness", but a little more upbeat. Including it on *Stain* would probably have made *Stain* seem a little more like *Time's Up*, and perhaps that's why they didn't.

This longer version of "Hemp" probably makes much more sense than the shorter one on *Stain*. I say "probably" because while this version includes a long stretch of text in the middle of the poem that is skipped in the other, and while it sounds from what I can make out of it like it may provide some additional information and motivation that would help explain the end of the printed poem, the reading is so badly distorted that I can only make out phrases here are there. There's something about a sheep with someone's name printed around it's neck, I think, and something about lies and whores. It seems like there's something there worth reading in its entirety, and it's mysterious to me why the band abbreviated it to begin with, or why, having done that on the album, they didn't print the complete lyrics along with this complete recording. Or failing those, why they didn't record the poem so that one could actually understand the words. It's as if

they don't *want* me to understand it. I guess I should oblige.

#### *Ausländer*, 1993 CD5

This single is much less interesting. It includes the 7", "Dubländer" and "Radio Days" mixes of "Ausländer", none of which strike me as preferable to the original in any way. The fourth track is a strangely mechanized live version of "New Jack Theme", and not a very good recording of it, either. Worth the \$.50 I paid, but not much more.

## **Bill Frisell and Vernon Reid**

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#### *Smash and Scatteration*, 1985 CD

I like Living Colour; Vernon Reid is in Living Colour; Vernon Reid made this album with fellow guitarist Bill Frisell before starting Living Colour; I will like this album.

Everything was fine up until the last clause of that chain of thoughts, which led to my purchasing this obtuse album. A collection of nine avant-garde art-jazz instrumentals performed mostly on guitar synthesizer, there is nothing even remotely resembling Living Colour here. Two songs even feature Reid playing *banjo*, and while this is an amusing idea, I find the songs themselves pretty painful to listen to. Neither Frisell nor Reid can drum-program their way out of a leaking wading-pool, and the songs where they try make my rhythm muscle hurt. On the other hand, the songs where they *don't* try do a good approximation of a mathematical Drunkard's Walk. There's no relief here. The worst moments are "Burden of Dreams" and "Fr, Fr, Frisell", which are guitar-synth solos by Reid and Frisell, respectively, "recorded live with no over-dubs". All I can say about these is that I don't suppose over-dubs would have improved them substantially, either.

# Underground

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from the Jam song "Going Underground" and various other references

## Soundtrack

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Sex Pistols: "Anarchy in the U.K."

The Jam: "Down in the Tube Station at Midnight"

New Model Army: "Green and Grey"

Fugazi: "Shut the Door"

Soul Asylum: "Nice Guys (Don't Get Paid)"

Nirvana: "Lithium"

The Pixies: "Gigantic"

Buffalo Tom: "Taillights Fade"

The Psychedelic Furs: "Pretty in Pink" (original version)

Manic Street Preachers: "Stay Beautiful"

## Introduction

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To an outside observer, heavy metal and punk may seem indistinguishable. To a devoted fan of either, the other may seem like the other end of the world. There are elements of truth in both views. The most-common ground is that both forms of music are incredibly high-intensity. Where heavy metal channels that intensity into controlled power, however, control is absolutely antithetical to punk, and thus punk doesn't *channel* its aggression at all, preferring to spray it about like Python-esque vomit or a sawed-off shotgun blast (choose your metaphor).

At least, that was traditionally the case. Metal's gods were musical virtuosos, while punk simply rejected as delusion the notion that you had to learn how to actually play your instruments at all. As both genres evolved in each other's presence, however, each began to assimilate alien elements. Thrash- and speed-metal arose, incorporating some of punk's mania into metal. And some punk musicians, despite their best efforts, actually learned to play their instruments pretty well.

The ideological differences are actually much more significant than the musical ones. Where Mega Therion was basically escapist, Underground is confrontational. Mega Therion is an imaginary world where you are an invincible warrior leading a life filled with awesome, but simple, challenges, which you overcome. Underground is an all-to-real world where you frequently get the shit kicked out of you both

physically and spiritually. The threat offered by the music in Underground is often less obvious, as it doesn't hide behind flaming pentagrams and swooping demons, but for this same reason it is much more dangerous and affecting. Ozzy Osbourne may drive Iowa's sons to suicide, but the Dead Kennedys will have them out on the streets torching Fotomats. That neither things were their creators' intent is in a way irrelevant.

Underground, then, is my collection of bands whose primary appeal, it seems to me, is their raw energy. This fabricated community meanders from the roots of British punk to some of its later progenitors, then crosses to the US and skitters around the country in a vaguely regional trek from California to New York, D.C., Minneapolis, Seattle and Boston, and concludes with some stray artists that show some of the musty tunnels that lead out of Underground.

Into the vitriol, then.

## The Sex Pistols

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### *Never Mind the Bollocks, 1977 CD*

Certainly the most important record discussed in this book, and possibly the most significant album made since rock's inception, *Never Mind the Bollocks* is punk's definitive explication, and a record you simply must own and understand. There are other components to musical literacy, but very few of them exist in such a concise, self-contained form as this record. There is, in one sense, little point in my describing it, since it really doesn't matter whether you think you will like it or not (or, indeed, whether you actually like it when you hear it).

Since part of the point of writing this book is getting to write about my favorite records, though, I will go ahead and talk about this one. The musical highlights of this masterpiece are Johnny Rotten's borderline-tuneless cross between a sneer and a croak, somehow elevated into an amplified whine that could probably save your dentist a bundle on drilling equipment, a cheap guitar played very loud and very hard by Steve Jones, who doesn't let an undue concern for accuracy dull his style, and Sid Vicious turning in some of the worst bass-playing ever funded by a major record label. These mix to produce the *angriest* sound that ever was.

And it only gets worse when you listen to the lyrics. The most notorious songs are the banned-in-Britain duo "Anarchy in the U.K." and "God Save the Queen", which rip into an unstable England like crazed drunken buzzards into a huge rotting beached whale.

"No Feelings", "Liar" and "Problems" just lash out at whatever happens to be passing. "Bodies", sadly overlooked by pro-Life forces, is a scathing indictment of abortion. And the Pistols round out the album by blasting "EMI" the record label that chickened out of releasing this album. There are no answers here, just desperate, frustrated, heady rage.

And perhaps the most overlooked secret here is that through all this anger and sloppy "What do you mean I can't play, I paid £7 for this fucking guitar" playing, these are a dozen of the greatest *songs* rock has produced. This part of the lesson, in fact, has been missed by observers both outside of punk and inside it. The Sex Pistols couldn't play particularly well, but they didn't *revel* in their incompetence so much as they simply chose to blithely ignore it. They are not saying "any noise can be music", they are saying "enthusiasm can be substituted for technique", and these two statements are very different. Later waves of punk would venture into intentional discord and sonic deconstruction, but the Sex Pistols only veer into those areas occasionally by accident. Their version of punk was a *social* revolution, not an *artistic* one; they aren't trying to change music, they're just reminding everybody that even if Yes and ELP arena-shows had turned the popular focus to the virtuosic end, the spectrum of what was *already* thought of as rock *does* still include music this technically simple. If you like "Louie Louie" and "Wild Thing", there's no particular *artistic* reason why you wouldn't like "God Save the Queen", too.

### *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle, 1979 CD*

The vast number of record-shaped things available with the Sex Pistols' name on them aside, they really only made the one record. This hilarious/appalling/fascinating collection documents the rest of the career that wasn't. The hand of Malcolm McLaren, the Pistol's manipulative manager and overall media menace, is very evident in the disco medley of "Anarchy in the U.K.", "God Save the Queen", "Pretty Vacant" and "No One is Innocent", the orchestral French-language rendition of "Anarchie Pour Le U.K.", the German version of "Belsen Was a Gas", called "Einmal Belsen War Wirflich Bortrefflich (Belsen Vos a Gassa)", and the symphonic version of "EMI". The Pistols' completely incompetent side is also fairly represented by the incoherent "Johnny B. Goode / Road Runner", Sid Vicious' brilliant "My Way", Tenpole Tudor's chaotic "Rock Around the Clock" and the classic b-side "Friggin' in the Rigg'n". There is also great grist here for comparisons with other artists in this book: compare the Pistol's version of the Who's

song "Substitute" with Marillion's, and their version of "Something Else" with UFO's.

Where *Never Mind the Bollocks* is a record you owe it to yourself to own, *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* can be ignored without invalidating everything else you think about music. If you like the former album, though, I promise you'll find this one entertaining. I've intentionally left a few particularly choice selections undescribed, to preserve the element of surprise.

## Public Image Ltd

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### *The Greatest Hits, So Far, 1990 CD*

The Sex Pistols sailed way past annoying into greatness; PIL catches a heel on the hurdle and crashes ungracefully into the ornamental moat just beyond. I could listen to *Never Mind the Bollocks* over and over, but I find the first five songs on this album ("Public Image", from *Public Image*; "Death Disco", "Memories" and "Careering", from *Metal Box/Second Edition*; and "Flowers of Romance", from the album of the same name, PIL's third) basically unpleasant, and not in a good way, songs that miss precisely the social/artistic lesson that the Sex Pistols taught. "This Is Not A Love Song" is a slight improvement from my point of view, but it still augers into my skull. Things pick up for me at about the point when most people probably get completely fed up with Johnny Lydon and start thinking that Johnny Rotten was a different person entirely, not just a name change, with PIL's fifth studio album, 1986's *Album*. "Rise" and "Home" represent it here, and both are buoyant, catchy, richly arranged and produced pop gems, with Lydon's monotonal whine used as if it was cilantro, not styrofoam peanuts. Co-producer Bill Laswell does great work here, turning a ambitiously confrontational but unlistenable PIL into something like a cute, cuddly sounding, stuffed cactus.

"Seattle", "Body" and "Rules and Regulations", from 1987's *Happy?*, are a bit darker, but not much less accessible. "Body" is unmitigated dance music, playing Lydon's made-for-the-club-floor "We want-we want your body" chorus chant over a steady, pounding drumbeat. "Rules and Regulations" may be a tad too slow to work the crowd into quite as thick a froth as "Body", but at least they won't stop dancing.

From 1989's 9 come "Disappointed" and "Warrior". It's pretty hard to believe from either the music or the lyrics that Lydon/Rotten was part of both "Liar" and "Disappointed". I can't find it in myself to hold his past against him, though, because "Disappointed" is an absolutely first-rate rock song, of the sort I wouldn't mind putting into a time capsule

going either direction, as part proof that music was alive and well as of the end of the Eighties. Who would have thought, listening to "EMI", that anything good could come of mixing Johnny Rotten's nasal attack with a huge angelic women's choir? "Warrior", by contrast, is a forgettable near-House dance track, good for little else.

The eco-retribution anthem "Don't Ask Me", new as of this compilation, ends it. Lydon has traveled far from Sex Pistols days, but seeing as he's had 12 years, that seems reasonable. And with a ringing sign-off like "The package is product - perfected eternal / A crap in a cling wrap / I never met a prime minister or president / Who told the truth yet", it is clear that the spirit of "Holidays in the Sun" is altered but not bowed.

### ***That What Is Not, 1992 CD***

Encouraged by what I liked on the compilation, I raked in *That What Is Not* shortly after its appearance. Realizing that the highs I liked on the greatest hits record were probably peaks, not representatives, I had guardedly low expectations. The record did surpass those.

In style these ten songs are closest, unsurprisingly, to "Don't Ask Me", although none of them has that song's exuberant novelty appeal. Instead, this is a pretty standard rock record, spanning the range of dynamics and tempos that most reasonably well-crafted such records do, but containing nothing as commanding as "Disappointed". On the other hand, "Covered"'s horn stabs are a neat touch, the thrashing pace of "Love Hope" is an intriguing historical pretzel, and it's still Lydon singing. I like this record just fine when I listen to it, and if you put up with PIL's career all the way up to this point I doubt this album will be the one that finally drives the moldy wooden stake of disenchantment through your PIL posters, but this is another album that I don't miss much when I'm away from it.

## **The Jam**

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### ***In the City, 1977 CD***

The Jam are another of the pillars supporting punk. The Sex Pistols' energy took shape as anger, but the Jam's drive came out as if they had piled up a bunch of old soul, r&b and The Who albums, cranked them up to 78, and somehow got the needle to play them all at once. Paul Weller's reactionary leanings show through most plainly in "I've Changed My Address", "I Got By In Time", "Non-Stop Dancing", "Takin' My Love" and the actual oldie "Slow Down".

The rest of the album could have been done by a different band. Weller turns up his always-thin guitar and lets some raw noise peek through his crisp, punchy playing. Bruce Foxton's deep bass takes frequent trips up into melody, but always returns to prop up the low end before it droops too far. Rick Buckler hits his cymbals a lot. "Sounds from the Street" shows both the limitations and potential of Weller's voice. Technically, it needs a lot of work, and the falsetto is a ill-advised manoeuvre, but at the same time, it is clear that Weller and Foxton are straining to bring powerful melodies to lyrics rich with social conscience and urban awareness.

"Away From the Numbers", "In the City", "Time for Truth" and "Bricks and Mortar" are part of the same attempt. "Bricks and Mortar"'s "They're pulling down houses / To build car parks" is a very Jam observation, lacking only some unfathomable Britishism and an explicit London reference. On the whole, though, this is a schizophrenic album that can't decide whether to go forwards or backwards.

### ***This Is the Modern World, 1977 CD***

The resolution that The Jam came to is stated in the album title, the first song title, and the first line, all of which are "This is the Modern World". Weller would never wholly escape the pull of his past, and in fact the course of the Jam graphs like a cannonball, arching up away from its ground for a time, before returning to it, having covered a considerable distance and mashed some buildings or a pirate ship or something like that.

The roots still peek through. "In the Streets, Today" has the pogo quality of some of *In the City's* rear-facing material (in fact, it also sounds a lot like "In the City" itself), "I Need You" sounds very Who-like, and Wilson Pickett's "In the Midnight Hour" is hardly cutting edge. Still, the band rips through this cover with a lot more aggressiveness than the reverent treatment of "Slow Down".

Everything else refines and advances the Jam's own distinctive style. The sound here is much deeper and fuller than on *In The City*. Weller hasn't improved his singing much, but only a few months separated this album from the first one. The fact that the Jam aspires to melodies and harmony, though, continues to distance them from the Sex Pistols and a whole wing of the punk movement.

Also, the Jam here are increasingly centered around Weller's lyrics. The words are pointed and clearly delivered, and there is almost no filler music to stretch songs out past their libretto. The twelve songs on this record total less than 32 minutes, and at most there are pauses between phrases. The Jam's energy is mental, to a degree approached by few other bands, inside punk or out. On songs like "Life From a

Window", they assert that punk can be poetry, too, not just barely-coherent rage. The same malaise and inequities fuel Rotten and Weller, but where the Pistols lash out at them, Weller stands back and picks them apart by sheer acuity of observation.

### *All Mod Cons, 1978 CD*

This, in my opinion, is the first fully-mature Jam album. The band's musical roots have for the first time been fully entombed in soil, so to speak, rather than poking out unhealthily naked, and the band's own style hits a new level of complexity. "Mr. Clean", "English Rose", and "Fly" show a new, confident, slow side. Weller incorporates acoustic guitar, piano, and an occasional harmonica toot into the Jam's basic power-trio approach.

"All Mod Cons" opens the album with a short, but pointed, barb at some unidentified people who, I guess, have shown tendencies to support the band only when things were going well. "To Be Someone (Didn't We Have a Nice Time)" continues the rumination on the nature of success, its narrator imagining a whirlwind rise and fall. The narrator's realization "I should have stuck to my guns, / Instead shit out to be one of the bastard sons" reads like a promise that the Jam will *not* do the same. At the same time that Weller despises the narrator's choice, though, the ending lines "It's really frightening without a bodyguard, / So I stay confined to my lonely room", show that he empathizes with the weaknesses that drive sell-outs.

"Mr. Clean", despite the mellowness of its opening, is a chilling, distinctly-punk threat to the comfortable middle classes. Where some punk lyricists are content to treat older generations as a completely different species, utterly detestable, Weller is careful to identify the enemy as former *friends* who forsook their ideals. This makes the following cover of Ray Davies' "David Watts" all the more ambiguous, as on one hand David Watts is the last kind of person Weller wants to be, but on the other Watts refined, conventionally-successful existence has an undeniable instinctive appeal.

After the traditional love-song interlude of "English Rose", "In the Crowd" returns to overt cynicism. With deftly executed melodic bass runs and multi-layered guitar, including a rare solo towards the end with the chorus of "Away From the Numbers" echoing in the background, this song is, at 5:46, perhaps the longest song the Jam ever recorded. It justifies that length by summarizing the band's musical progress so far, and hinting at their aspirations for the future.

For "Billy Hunt" the band puts its heads back down and plows through a short, fast, noisy sprint that

makes sure you don't think that learning to play their instruments has curbed their energies.

The album hits its peak, though, in the last two tracks, "A' Bomb in Wardour Street" and "Down in The Tube Station at Midnight". These two songs are probably the primary reasons why London and the Jam are inseparable in my mind. Explicit references to the city are the source, I'm sure, but the *music* has embedded itself in my psyche by now so deeply that when I actually went to London for the first time in 1992, there was scarcely a moment when one of these two songs wasn't running through my head. Of course, when I was there London didn't seem like it was dying in the throes of hate crimes and subway muggings, but the feeling of vulnerability and, beyond that, the sense that London was a city with enough promise that injustice there was worth an outcry, strongly colored my impression of the place. The day I got back to Boston I went out and replaced all my Jam vinyl with CDs.

### *Setting Sons, 1979 CD*

"Girl on the Phone" opens the next Jam album forgettably. After that, though, the level of brilliance that *All Mod Cons* reached at the end is restored and sustained for tracks 2-9 of this, my pick for the Jam's best album. *Setting Sons* is the summit of the Jam's career curve. The following album starts the band's descent towards dissolution and Weller's solo career, but here the tensions of past and future are in perfect balance.

"Thick as Thieves", a tale of joyful abandon that eventually turned on itself, is as good an allegory for the life of the Jam, and perhaps of punk itself. Recklessness was at the heart of the vitality that fueled the punk movement, but that recklessness was inherently self-destructive, and bands that were unable to bootstrap themselves out of the genre they created perished, taking the British wing, at least, of the movement with them.

"Private Hell" is the best of a family of Jam songs like "In the Crowd", "Down in the Tube Station at Midnight" and "That's Entertainment", which focus on the aching bleakness of "ordinary" life. "Alone at 6 o'clock-you drop a cup. / You see it smash-inside you crack, / You can't go on-but you sweep it up, / Safe at last inside your Private Hell". Weller's level of keen observation is rarely equaled in rock lyrics. If Raymond Carver and J.D. Salinger had gotten together to form a rock band, they would have probably done better, but this will do.

"Eton Rifles", a fast, aggressive song like "Private Hell", trashes a reactionary youth group, "Little Boy Soldiers", a more complex song akin to "Thick as Thieves", attacks the government's willingness to send

young men to die for their “causes”, and the two tracks are among the Jam’s best left-wing political anthems. “Burning Sky” and “Smithers-Jones” turn Weller’s attention back to ideological traitors. “Burning Sky” is sung from the point of view of a sold-out “realist” to his old idealist friends, explaining that “there’s no time for dreams when commerce calls”. The senses in Weller’s delivery both of hatred for this point of view, and of fear that it is largely correct, are plainly audible. “Smithers-Jones”, whose cello and timpani accompaniment is uncharacteristic only on paper, is another sad evocation of the bleak lives that, ironically, await most who sell-out hoping to avoid exactly that. “Saturday’s Kids” turns the camera momentarily on the young people in government housing tracts for whom the question of whether to sell out or to remain true to their ideals simply never comes up.

The tenth and last song, a cover of “Heatwave”, harkens back to the Jam’s early days, and thus seems very much out of place to me on this otherwise coherent album. I levy only a small deduction, however, and my overall praise for this album remains effusive.

#### ***Sound Affects, 1980 CD***

From the first echoes of the thin, reverberated snare of “Pretty Green”, it is clear that the Jam’s decline as one of punk’s standard bearers is beginning. Whether you consider this the decline of the Jam, as well, or not, depends on how able you are to take this and the rest of the Jam’s remaining catalog on its own terms. As someone who does *not* enjoy the Style Council or Weller’s later solo work, hearing echoes of that future here and in *The Gift* is in a way painful. However, the Jam was long gone before I ever got into them, so my sense of loss is more intellectual than personal.

The energy that previously showed itself as aggression, here is increasingly channeled into tighter and snappier musical arrangements and song structures. Studio effects are more prevalent than on the first four albums, and Weller is trying harder than ever to smooth over his singing’s rough edges. “Monday” is perhaps the most reactionary song here. There are no covers on this album, but “Monday” could easily have been an old r&b standard.

The two songs that define “Sound Affects” for me are the middle ones, “Start!” and “That’s Entertainment”. Admittedly, this could be because I’ve listened to them on “Snap!” far more than I’ve listened to the rest of this album. Still, “Start!”, with its scrupulously clean drum and bass tracks, spiced with thin, punchy guitar and what sound like horn stabs, is clearly the forerunner of the Style Council’s white-Motown sound. And “That’s Entertainment”, a soft,

folky acoustic-guitar driven song with some of Weller’s best depressing cynical lyrics, shows the union of the old and new Jam spirits in a way that, sadly, almost no other songs really attempt to do.

#### ***The Gift, 1982 CD***

Weller, Foxton and Buckler share liner credits here with trumpet player Steve Nichol and saxophonist Keith Thomas, whose presence is felt strongly. The Jam of old is not much to be found here. “Running on the Spot” is about the noisiest track on this album, and even it is far more tightly controlled and clean than anything from previous records.

The singles, “Precious” and “Town Called Malice”, are perhaps the stylistic extreme. “Precious” is loaded with horns and wocka-wocka guitar noises that remind me of the theme songs to bad Seventies TV police shows. “Town Called Malice” works in organs, clap-along percussion and a very treble-heavy mix, and Weller’s soulful singing is a far cry from the hoarse-but-sincere efforts of “Away from the Numbers”.

No song on this record aspires to merge the Jam’s aesthetics the way that “That’s Entertainment” did, but “Just Who Is the 5 O’Clock Hero” and parts of “Carnation” come closest.

This was the band’s last studio album, and it’s easy to see why.

#### ***Dig the New Breed, 1982 CD***

We now enter the Jam’s posthumous retrospective zone. The first of these is this live album. The selection here does a pretty good job both of conveying the power of a live Jam show, and covering the spectrum of their career, though both endpoints are slighted.

“In the City”, recorded in 1977, and “Standards” from early 1979, are the only songs from the first two records. “All Mod Cons”, “To Be Someone” and “It’s Too Bad”, from late 1979, and a 1982 recording of “In the Crowd” represent *All Mod Cons*. A 1982 recording of “Private Hell” is the only song from *Setting Sons*. “Set the House Ablaze”, “Start!” and “That’s Entertainment” cover *Sound Affects*. “Ghosts” is the only song from *The Gift*. The remaining three songs are a cover of Booker T. Jones and Eddie Floyd’s “Big Bird”, and the great non-album singles “Going Underground” and “Dreams of Children”.

The quality of the performances is excellent, but this is still an album for Jam fans only. As an introduction to the band it pales in comparison to *Snap!* or its variants, and all the original albums are more important than this. If there is one Jam album you aren’t going to own, this is it.

### *All the Choice Cuts (Snap!), 1983 CD*

As an overview of a band's career, the double-LP *Snap!* was absolutely unequaled. Sadly, CD re-releases of it are *among* the releases that fail to equal it. The running order, then, of the 29-song original:

"In the City" and "Away from the Numbers", from *In the City*; the fine single "All Around the World"; "The Modern World" from *This is the Modern World*; another single, "News of the World"; "Billy Hunt", "English Rose", "Mr. Clean", "David Watts", "'A' Bomb in Wardour Street" and "Down in the Tube Station at Midnight" from *All Mod Cons*; the killer singles "Strange Town", "The Butterfly Collector" and "When You're Young"; "Smithers-Jones", "Thick as Thieves" and "The Eton Rifles" from *Setting Sons*; "Going Underground" and "Dreams of Children"; "That's Entertainment" (demo version), "Start!" and "Man in the Corner Shop", from *Sound Affects*; the singles "Funeral Pyre", "Absolute Beginners" and "Tales from the Riverbank"; "Town Called Malice" and "Precious" from *The Gift*; and the impressive late singles "The Bitterest Pill (I Ever Had to Swallow)" and "Beat Surrender".

Every CD version of this that I've seen, and I've seen five or six, omits several songs. The one I picked as marginally preferable is an Australian Polydor release called *All the Choice Cuts*. It omits "Away from the Numbers", "Billy Hunt", "English Rose", "Mr. Clean", "The Butterfly Collector", "Thick as Thieves", "Man in the Corner Shop" and "Tales from the Riverbank". All of these are album tracks except for "The Butterfly Collector" and "Tales from the Riverbank", both of which are on *Extras*, so I have all of these omissions on CD elsewhere.

Still, part of the wonder of the original is the awesome scope of the musical journey from "In the City" to "Beat Surrender", and the omissions detract somewhat from the progression of the journey. They are especially galling when I observe that the CD is only 65:40, far below the medium's limit.

At any rate, this or the other versions of it still serve as a tremendous introduction to a tremendous band, and since they contain a number of essential songs not otherwise available on CD (or LP, for that matter), I wholeheartedly recommend the compilation both to Jam fans and neophytes alike.

### *The Peel Sessions, 1990 CD*

Four songs, recorded in early 1977 for Peel's UK radio show, this is hardly a necessity for anyone but a serious Jam collector. The versions here of "In the City", "Art School", "I've Changed My Address" and "Modern World" are raw, angry and powerful, but the versions of those songs everywhere *else* are raw, angry and

powerful, too, and somewhat better produced. Ten minutes, ten bucks? Up to you, but I wouldn't pass up anything for it.

### *Extras, 1992 CD*

The best gift a Jam fan could ask for, this rarities compilation is an incredible 26-song, 76-minute disc of b-sides, demos and other miscellany, with excellent liner notes.

The 11 b-sides are: "The Dreams of Children" (from "Going Underground"); "Tales from the Riverbank" (from "Absolute Beginners"); "Smithers-Jones" (the guitar-bass-drums version, not the album's orchestral version; from "When You're Young"); "Disguises" (a Who cover; from "Funeral Pyre"); "The Butterfly Collector" (from "Strange Town"); "The Great Depression" (from "Just Who Is the 5 O'Clock Hero"); "So Sad About Us" (another Who cover; from "Down in the Tube Station at Midnight"); "Pity Poor Alfie/Fever" (from "The Bitterest Pill"); and "Move On Up", "Shopping" and "Stoned out of My Mind" (1 and 3 are covers; from "Beat Surrender").

There are also: 5 demo versions of Jam album tracks ("Burning Sky", an intense Billy Bragg-like Weller-only rendition of "Thick as Thieves", "Saturday's Kids", "The Eton Rifles" and "But I'm Different Now"); two songs from a fan club flexi-disc ("Pop Art Poem" and an alternate version of "Boy About Town"); a demo version of the "Start!" b-side, "Liza Radley"; demo covers of Lennon and McCartney's "And Your Bird Can Sing", The Small Faces' "Get Yourself Together", and James Brown's "I Got You (I Feel Good)"; a Jam demo recording of the later Style Council hit "A Solid Bond in Your Heart"; and the three previously unavailable songs "No One in the World", "Hey Mister" and "We've Only Started".

Very cool.

### *Live Jam, 1993 CD*

The gradual trickle of Jam archive material continues with this encyclopedic 24-song, 76-minute collection of live recordings, selected to complement *Dig the New Breed*. Most of the songs, in fact, are from the same *shows* as those on *Dig the New Breed*, though overall this disc sounds better to me. The 1979 recordings, from two shows in December, are "The Modern World", "Billy Hunt", "Thick as Thieves", "Burning Sky", "Mr. Clean", "Smithers-Jones", "Little Boy Soldiers", "Away from the Numbers", "Down in the Tube Station at Midnight" and "Strange Town". An October 1980 show, unrepresented on *Dig the New Breed*, provides "The Eton Rifles", "When You're Young" and "'A' Bomb in Wardour Street". A couple December 1981 shows give us "Pretty Green", "Boy



About Town", "Man in the Corner Shop", "David Watts", "Funeral Pyre" and "Town Called Malice". April 1982 contributes "Move On Up", "Carnation" and "Heatwave", and a December 1982 show that also wasn't featured on *Dig the New Breed* tosses in "The Butterfly Collector" and "Precious".

In terms of original albums, this is one from *In the City*, one from *This is the Modern World*, five from *All Mod Cons*, six from *Setting Sons*, three from *Sound Affects*, three from *The Gift*, and five non-album songs. Because this distribution more closely matches the graph of how much I liked each Jam album, I end up enjoying this album more than I do *Dig the New Breed*, and the fact that it's nearly twice as long is another bonus. Perhaps for this second factor more than the first, this is the only Jam release I'd consider recommending *over* one of the best-ofs as an introduction to the band. The versions here of some of these songs, particularly "Little Boy Soldiers" and "Down in the Tube Station at Midnight", are overwhelming, and the bell-curve of selections actually makes the band seem more consistent than they actually were in practice. This can be seen as a bad thing, though, and for the most part this set skirts around the band's early and late stylistic digressions (the two late 1982 recordings do feature a few extra musicians, but that's about it). In the end, perhaps the decision between starting with *Snap!* or this comes down to whether you want a historically accurate sense of the band's whole career, or whether you want a *viscerally* accurate sense of the parts that, I think, were what made the Jam such a powerful force.

Jam fans, on the other hand, need make no complicated aesthetic calculations. Buy.

## Time U.K.

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### *The Cabaret, 1983 7"*

The Jam's drummer, Rick Buckler, resurfaced briefly in Time U.K., a band about which I know no additional information. There's no need for external reasons to like "The Cabaret", a blistering and infectious song that sounds like what the Jam might have become in an alternate universe where Weller's childhood was different. The b-side "Remember Days" is janglier, but still sounds like the Jam's lost twin.

The second disk of the double-pack 45 I have is a mock radio show with a corny interview of the band and snippets of enough killer songs to prove that the band had at least an album's worth of strong material just waiting.

### *Playground of Privilege, 1985 12"*

"Playground of Privilege" and "Puppets Don't Bleed" aren't quite as good as "The Cabaret", I think, but they are both better than "Remember Days", and they are both excellent. The band, while still showing inevitable hints of the Jam, sounds a bit more like the Psychedelic Furs here.

It is mysterious to me why this band didn't turn out to be a big success. The four songs on these two singles provide more good material than many good bands manage in a whole album. My admiration notwithstanding, there are no other releases by Time U.K. that I've ever heard of.

## Sharp

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### *Entertain Me, 1986 12"*

Buckler and Time U.K. singer/songwriter/guitarist Jimmy Edwards are joined here by Bruce Foxton, whose solo album, reviewed next, didn't go much of anywhere. The three songs on this single, "Entertain Me", "So Say Hurrah" and "Next Generation", are decidedly stranger than the Time U.K. songs. The drums sound synthetic, and there are strange, sometimes-discordant keyboard parts, eerie sound effects and weirdly processed vocals. Supporting this odd, if distinctive, sound are three excellent songs, and once more my hopes were raised that the Jam's superb rhythm section would get another chance at big things.

Sadly, that didn't happen, and to the best of my knowledge I'm the only person in the world who has heard this record without actually being involved in making it.

## Bruce Foxton

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### *Touch Sensitive, 1984 LP*

Since Bruce Foxton wrote, as best I can tell, only three songs during the entire career of the Jam, the fact that he made a solo album at all is very much to his credit. He also deserves kudos for the courage to make an album that has nothing much to do with the Jam's style or sound. Instead, Bruce adds keyboards, backing vocalists, and horns (including the Waterboys' Anthony Thistlewaite), and makes a shiny, modern, upbeat dance-pop record.

I admit, though, that I don't much care for it. I might like it better if I didn't know Foxton's

background, but then again, if I didn't know Foxton's background I would have never bought it. In the end too much of this record sounds like A Flock of Seagulls or the Thompson Twins to really appeal to me, as much as I wish it did.

## Buzzcocks

The third leg of the triangle at the base of my experience of British punk, the Buzzcocks are one of the most cheerful-sounding bands in Underground. This isn't saying very much, and they are lyrically a more cynical band than their music sounds. Compared to the Sex Pistols, the Jam and the Clash, the Buzzcocks seem to me to have been badly underrated, and when I began this book the reunited Buzzcocks (who got back together in 1989) *still* didn't have a new recording contract, which I didn't understand that at all.

A note: I bought their "complete works" in the form of the *Product 3* CD boxed set, but I will here separate the four studio albums that the box combines, and discuss them individually.

### *Time's Up*, 1976 CD

This isn't one of the four. Originally a bootleg of the band's very first recording session, this CD version made it to respectable chains that wouldn't normally carry bootlegs, which may mean that some legitimizing went on behind the scenes, or simply that HMV got duped. A 11-song demo recording done entirely in real-time (well, each song done in real-time, anyway) onto four-track in October of 1976, when Howard Devoto was still with the band, *Time's Up* is an invaluable bit of Buzzcocks history for me, as the only Devoto performance I have otherwise is "Boredom" on *Burning Ambitions*. All four songs that would later appear on the band's debut EP, *Spiral Scratch*, are here: "Breakdown", "Time's Up", "Boredom" and "Friends of Mine". It also has early versions of "You Tear Me Up", "Orgasm Addict" and "Love Battery", the never-released songs "Lester Sands (Drop in the Ocean)" and "Don't Mess Me 'Round", and covers of the Troggs' "I Can't Control Myself" and Captain Beefheart's "I Love You, You Big Dummy".

There's no mistaking this set for anything but rough demos by an even rougher punk band. Devoto sounds at least as awful as Johnny Rotten, and the rest of the band only seems competent by comparison; it's great. The Buzzcocks would go on to be one of the standard bearers of the punk movement, but this captured moment is a rare look not at what punk became, but at the impulses that *started* punk.

### *Another Music in a Different Kitchen*, 1977

On their first real album, the Buzzcocks tread a stylistic path somewhere between the Sex Pistols and the Jam. The fast, noisy music, and nasal singing, are closer in spirit to the Pistols, but the attitude is nowhere near as angry, nor the playing as sloppy. Instead, like the early Jam, the Buzzcocks' energy is frenetic but not frantic.

Lyrically, the Buzzcocks are neither as vitriolic as the Pistols, nor as detached and critical as the Jam. Instead, on songs like "Fast Cars", "Love Battery" and "Sixteen", they treat smaller, more personal, subjects with a sense of humor. In a way, the Buzzcocks treat lyrics the way the Sex Pistols' treated music, boldly asserting that you don't have to have something earth-shaking to say to write a good song. (Not that this is a revelation in rock and roll, mind you.) Where the Sex Pistols relied on anger and the Jam used social disillusionment, the Buzzcocks mined simple boredom and personal irritations.

This is especially effective on the breakneck pop of "No Reply", "I Don't Mind" and "I Need", and the grinding "Fiction Romance". The musical pace only lets up on the closing track, "Moving Away From the Pulsebeat", whose rumbling drum track and whining guitar solo drone on for a *lot* longer than anything else on the album.

### *Love Bites*, 1977

The second album, coming close on the heels of the first one, resembles it to nobody's great surprise. "Operator's Manual", "Nostalgia" and "Just Lust" are the high-speed pop-punk of *Another Music*, careening along with the buoyancy of repressed teenage sexuality. "Ever Fallen in Love (With Someone You Shouldn't've)?", "Sixteen Again", "Nothing Left" and "E.S.P.", as well as the instrumental "Walking Distance", begin to show a somewhat wider musical range than the sprints, the songs feeling more fleshed-out and less reliant on sheer speed for their identity. "Ever Fallen In Love" is one of the band's best songs, and "Sixteen Again" is a great follow-up to the first album's "Sixteen". The opening track, "Real World", is darker than most Buzzcocks songs, and the long album-closing instrumental "Late for the Train" explores further into the territory charted by the first album's last song, "Moving Away from the Pulsebeat".

The Beatles-esque "Love Is Lies" is the most ambitious new direction for the band. Incorporating acoustic guitar and smoothing out Pete Shelley's whine considerably, it shows the rare patience to let a song determine its own pace, rather than hiring track stars to chase it with a cattle prod. It demonstrates that the

Buzzcocks are not prisoners of their core style in the way that, say, the Sex Pistols or the Ramones are.

### *A Different Kind of Tension, 1979*

Maturity hits the short-lived Buzzcocks barely in time to make an effect. Less cheerful and less manic than the first two records, *A Different Kind of Tension* is just that, the band moving away from being a straight ahead punk band, and metaphorphosing into a sophisticated rock band, while not losing sight of the 3-minute pop-song aesthetic that drove their earlier work.

"Paradise", "You Know You Can't Help It", "Mad Mad Judy" and "I Don't Know What To Do With My Life" are the closest to earlier work. Debts to the Beatles are stronger than ever on "You Say You Don't Love Me" and "Sitting Round at Home". The latter, especially, starts to show the technological tell-tale signs of Pete Shelley's later solo work, with processed vocals and a much smoother overall feel than the band's earlier, edgier songs. "Hollow Inside" is reminiscent, ironically, of departed vocalist Howard Devoto's new band, Magazine.

The last two tracks are the least Buzzcocks-like on the album, and either despite or because of this, they are two of my three favorite songs the band did. "A Different Kind of Tension" is a dialog between a processed Shelley and an even more-processed robotic demon exhorting him to do the reverse of everything he suggests. It is a pretty long song by Buzzcocks standards, and a very repetitive one, but to me it hits a perfect groove, and I sail along on its undulating back, spinning around with the rotor-speaker effects.

The last song, "I Believe", is even longer and more repetitious, and I like it even more. Alternating between a litany of happy things the band believes in, and the less cheerful cry that "There is no love in this world any more", this song makes the most of two immaculate hooks. I could listen to it for an hour.

### *Singles Going Steady, 1979*

This collection unites 12 songs from non-album singles over the preceding two years. The US LP release I replaced with this CD also included "I Don't Mind" and "Autonomy", from the first album, and "Ever Fallen In Love?" and "Just Lust" from the second.

This is probably the most definitive Buzzcocks album, showing their full range, such as it is. "Orgasm Addict" and "What Do I Get?" are pure early-Buzzcocks confections, near-perfect combinations of pop and punk. "Love You More" and "Promises" are toned down only a little.

"Everybody's Happy Nowadays", with its sardonic falsetto chorus and stomping drum-only bridges, and the shouted "Harmony in My Head", show the band's

more versatile side. "Whatever Happened To?" and "Oh Shit!" backslide for a few moments into the adolescent fervor of old, and "Noise Annoys" and "Lipstick" are somewhere in the middle ("Lipstick" sounds a lot like Magazine's "Shot By Both Sides" to me...).

And this record ends, like *A Different Kind of Tension*, with two brilliant tracks that make me all the more sorry that the band fell apart so soon. "What Can't I Touch It" is an epic similar to "I Believe". "Something's Gone Wrong Again" sounds not entirely unlike Shelley's solo hit "Homosapien", but more sinister and less corny.

Which is all to say that this *album* shows what an amazing *singles* band the Buzzcocks were.

### *Many Parts*

The third *Product* CD, this contains eight songs from a early concert, the six tracks from the band's last three singles ("Parts One, Two and Three"), and the previously unreleased track "I Look Alone".

The live songs are the first album's "Fast Cars", "Moving Away from the Pulsebeat" and "Fiction Romance", the singles "Noise Annoys", "What Do I Get?" and "Whatever Happened To?", and the songs "Breakdown" and "Times Up", from *Spiral Scratch*. The performances are spirited, and the sound quality is quite decent.

The late singles are much more interesting to me. It's reasonably clear that the band is falling apart, but this doesn't stop their songs from showing fascinating unfulfilled promise. "Are Everything" sounds a bit like late Public Image Ltd. "Strange Thing" is bizarre and cacophonous. "What Do You Know", with burbling horns and some of Shelley's best singing ever, is the third of my three favorite Buzzcocks songs, and should have been the hit that kept them going. "Why She's A Girl From the Chainstore" sounds like an outtake from a four-track recording session in somebody's bathroom. "Airwaves Dream" is similarly murky, an unfriendly song that I would never have put on the front side of a single. "Running Free", on the other hand, with its beeping synthesizer line, could have been another big hit, but it sounds distinctly unfinished, and like the vocals were done in one take and shouldn't have been.

"I Look Alone", the last recorded Buzzcocks song, is a fitting end, uniting their early exuberance with the strange production of the last singles.

### *Trade Test Transmissions, 1993 CD*

For those of you who wished that the Buzzcocks hadn't broken up just when things were *really* getting interesting, you get a very unexpected present about

twelve years after you'd stopped hoping for it. Never mind the ostensible copyright date on this. Turn it on and it's 1981, and the Buzzcocks have weathered a difficult period and gotten right back on track. The potential of the band's "last" singles isn't *entirely* fulfilled, in the sense that they seemed to show the band heading off in some new direction, and this album finds them again going mostly in their original direction. There is one song, "Isolation", that to me is exactly the song that the Buzzcocks always had in them but never got out, but at the other extreme, "Palm of Your Hand" is essentially "Orgasm Addict, part 2", both musically and lyrically. The musical awareness that those singles showed *is* in evidence here, though, and makes this in many ways the Buzzcocks' richest album, stylistically.

There is the odd detail that this album *was*, actually, released in 1993, and recorded sometime not too long before then. Also, while Pete Shelley and Steve Diggle always were the chief songwriters, Steve Garvey and John Maher are gone, replaced by Phil Barker and Tony Arber, making it even stranger that the band sounds so much like they always did. So while I heartily *approve* of this album, I listen to it with an odd distance. I can't get *excited* about it, because it sounds so much like it's just a fourth disc from the *Product* box that somehow fell down behind the tray so I didn't discover it until now. I should be dancing around yelling "The Buzzcocks are back! The Buzzcocks are back!", but it doesn't sound like the Buzzcocks are alive and well in 1993 making music, it sounds like they're alive and well in 1981 making music. That's still cool, but different. If you're nostalgic for what punk used to be before grunge got ahold of it, though, and don't want to listen to Bad Green Offspring's Rancid Religion Day rehash its original genius, here's a rogue strain of that genius still, somehow, wriggling away.

#### ***Alive Tonight, 1993 CD5***

The US version of *Trade Test Trasmissions* included a couple bonus tracks. By the time it came out here, though, I'd already bought the import and a couple of singles in addition. This one has the album versions of "Alive Tonight" and "Last to Know", and the non-album songs "Serious Crime" and "Successful Street". "Serious Crime" is catchy. "Successful Street" borders oddly on dub, with somebody amusing themselves by twiddling echo knobs in a way that I don't necessarily think helps an already somewhat aimless song. The album, I think, is just as well off without these.

#### ***Innocent, 1993 CD5***

An even worse value, this single adds only one non-album track, a bluesy, straight-ahead Steve Diggle rock composition called "Inside", to the album's "Innocent" and "Who'll Help Me to Forget?". Except for a few seconds of drum break toward the end, "Inside" sounds much more like Scruffy the Cat than it does the Buzzcocks.

### **Pete Shelley**

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#### ***Heaven and the Sea, 1986 CD***

I wasn't particularly fond of any of Shelley's solo hits, but picked this up out of some bargain bin, just in case I was missing something.

Nope. This is mid-Eighties low-energy dance music on autopilot. There aren't very many songs here that are *bad*, but it all glides by so featurelessly that it's hard to get even slightly involved. Shelley puts nothing into his singing beyond staying in tune, the arrangements are uncluttered but uninspired, the drum tracks steady but sparkless, the lyrics inoffensive but ignorable. This album is *functional*, but aren't there enough *good* things to dance to that we don't need filler for the purpose? Given how unmoved Shelley himself sounds by the proceedings, it's hard to imagine anybody else being much more interested.

### **Steve Diggle**

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#### ***Heated and Rising, 1993 CD5***

I don't know the real story behind this four-song solo effort, but I can make one up from listening to it and the Diggle Buzzcocks b-side "Inside". My guess is that resuscitating the Buzzcocks wasn't quite the complete musical experience that Steve Diggle was after. A little rock blood got into him somehow (perhaps a transfusion after the Buzzcocks' original crash), and he needed a chance to play a little more expansively, and maturely, than the Buzzcocks' hyperactive neo-juvenalia would allow.

The bad news, from my perspective, is that as with "Inside", Diggle isn't nearly as intriguing in this mode as he is as part of the Buzzcocks. Yes, he can play rock music, but it doesn't seem like very special rock music to me. "Heated and Rising" has a decent chorus, but "Over and Out" sounds too similar. "Terminal" is slower, but still a bit too much like the first two. "Wednesday's Flowers" has big drums and the rest of it

gets lost in the background. I hope this turns out to be just a footnote.

## Magazine

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### *Real Life*, 1978 LP

Howard Devoto, the Buzzcocks original vocalist, left the band before their first album and founded Magazine. I review this record here because of its association with the Buzzcocks, but the music is not at all similar. Heavily electronic and atmospheric, only Devoto's voice unites most of these songs with his former band's.

The biggest exception is the Devoto/Shelley composition "Shot by Both Sides", a seminal punk anthem that would have fit right in on any Buzzcocks album. "The Light Pours Out of Me", credited to Devoto, Shelly and Magazine guitarist (and later Armoury Show, PIL and Visage member) John McGeoch, is nearly comparable, as well.

The rest of the album is harsh and angular. "Motorcade" is a sinister impressionistic narrative of either power or the lack of it—I can't quite tell. It changes tempos more than once as if somebody accidentally bumped the speed switch on the mastering deck. "The Great Beautician in the Sky", "Definitive Gaze" and "My Tulpa" are every bit as elliptical as the titles sound. This is an interesting record, but if you are interested in Magazine, I suspect that the posthumous compilation *Rays and Hail* is a better place to begin.

## Penetration

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### *Moving Targets*, 1978 CD

This first Penetration album shows the band's hardcore punk roots most clearly. Lead singer Pauline Murray's voice is still somewhat shrill and unreliable (and it sounds a lot like X-Ray Spex's Poly Styrene), and though the band has learned to play their instruments credibly, there is a DIY simplicity to most of these arrangements that is vintage punk attitude. Comparisons to Patti Smith are largely inevitable for any punk-pop band with a female singer, and an epic cover of Smith's "Freemoney" establishes them as worthy of the comparison. The band obviously owes a big debt to the Buzzcocks, too, which they acknowledge with a cover of "Nostalgia", but they don't try to rely quite as much on sheer speed as the Buzzcocks did. Penetration is actually at its most distinctive here, in my opinion, when they slow to a middle tempo like that of

"Lover of Outrage" or "Silent Community". The songs that are *really* slow lose focus, and the faster ones all merge into one in my mind, but in between Penetration shows potential for bigger things than just punk sprints or the noisy clamor of "Movement".

A good CD value, this reissue appends two non-album singles (including their first, "Don't Dictate"), and three b-sides.

### *Coming Up for Air*, 1979 LP

On their second album, Penetration begin to sound more like what Pat Benetar's early punk days might have been like if she'd had any. Pauline's voice is now clear and sparkling, and she provides strong melodies for the rest of the band to gather around, while maintaining enough of *Moving Targets'* tough edge to preserve's the band's original punk vitality. Steve Lillywhite's production gives the record his trademark unobtrusive cohesiveness. "Shout Above the Noise" and "Come Into the Open" are terrific defiant sing-along anthems, though I find myself singing along just for the joy of it, not because the lyrics strike some particularly resonant chord with me. "Killed in the Rush" and "Lifeline" are similarly upbeat, and show that the band has matured quite a bit in just the one year between albums.

The darker songs here are just as appealing in their own way, and "Last Saving Grace", "Challenge" and "What's Going On?" all skip along with me in tow. I'd have a hard time arguing that *Coming Up for Air* is an *important* album, or Penetration a particularly significant band in the grand scheme of punk history, but my visceral enjoyment of this record is way out of proportion with my intellectual assessment of its significance. It's evolution of punk rawness into vaguely polished pop tunescraft is very much in the spirit of the Buzzcocks, and thus Penetration inhabit what I consider an underrated outpost of punk, abandoned in the movement's quick retreat, and only recently rediscovered by later generations, where applying a little control to punk's energy serves to *increase* its force, like levees make the river run deeper and faster, eventually flooding several major cities downstream.

## The Clash

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### *London Calling*, 1979 2LP

A conventional history of punk would undoubtedly attribute a much bigger role to the Clash than I do. Longer lived than the Sex Pistols and more successful in the US than the Jam or the Buzzcocks, the

Clash's influence on punk music was considerable. The other musical genres that creep into their music, however, particularly rockabilly and reggae, are completely unappealing to me, and I thus find that, on the whole, I don't like the band very much. This album in particular sounds *very* dated to me fourteen years later, in a way that none of the other three bands' records do.

Still, this is an important and ambitious double album. The most appealing songs to me are "London Calling", "Working for the Clampdown", "Death or Glory" and the unlisted "Train in Vain". All four are accessible introductions to the Clash's musical universe of barely-tuned guitars, thickly-accented bad singing and attitude. "Working for the Clampdown" and "Death or Glory" are straight-ahead punk, the latter containing the classic observation "I believe in this—and it's been tested by research: / He who fucks nuns will later join the church".

"Koka Kola", "The Card Cheat", "I'm Not Down" and "Lost in the Supermarket" are slower and mellower, almost pretty. "Lost in the Supermarket" is by far my favorite, for personal reasons. Three of my friends had a "band" in high school. By "band" I mean that Marc had a synthesizer, which he kept perpetually tuned to an incredibly cheesy sound that he said sounded like guitars, David had two tom-toms, a snare drum, and a piece of sheet metal that served as a cymbal, and Mike sang. Marc had an incredible ear, and could pretty much reproduce anything he heard, albeit only in the cheesy "guitar" sound. This resulted in a vast repertoire of songs by the Animals, Beatles, T. Rex, the Who and the like, which all came out sounding, I'm sorry to say, mostly alike.

Anyway, I was a regular guest vocalist with this "band", by which I mean that I couldn't play any useful instrument either. My songs were the Psychedelic Furs' "Ghost in You", the Sex Pistols' "Pretty Vacant", REM's "Driver 8", and the undisputed high point of any "band" "concert", "Lost in the Supermarket". It was the high point for two reasons. First, it was quiet. Second, it was one of the rare tunes for which Marc would use a sound other than the cheesy "guitar" (specifically, cheesy "organ"). Thirdly, it was usually played toward the end of the "show", which meant that the audience, comprised of several hapless acquaintances wedged into a tiny couch that took up, despite its small size, about a third of the room we played in, could look forward to getting out of the room and into some other space where the temperature was not 143°.

The Clash's version is better than mine in many ways, predictably, but a part of me is always mildly disappointed that their version ends before the silly romantic verses come in that I added to mine for a

special performance when Hilary, my then-girlfriend, was in town for a rare visit. Without them, the song is rather depressing, a quietly desperate murmur of repressed pain. With them, it became a charming (to us, anyway) emotional syllogism that found personal redemption for social malaise, that found hope in a person and a personal relationship, just as its hopeless was born of people and *impersonality*, though admittedly I was hardly the first person to devise this symmetry. When I hear the original, I can't help the unreasonable feeling that it owes me a response, and that repeating its starting position isn't it.

The rest of *London Calling* is, as far as I'm concerned, disposable. "Brand New Cadillac" is an oldie cover. "Jimmy Jazz", "Guns of Brixton", "Wrong 'Em Boyo" and "Revolution Rock" are reggae-tinged, which is the kiss of death for me. "The Right Profile", an ode to Montgomery Clift, and "Spanish Bombs", a Hemingway-esque historical vignette, also strike me as too contrived.

Make up your own mind, though. This is widely regarded as the best album the Clash made, and I certainly don't regret having it around, even if I don't like it or them very much.

## Skids

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### *Scared to Dance*, 1979 CD

The Skids occupy a place in my experience of punk that is much larger than they might in yours. As particularly incisive readers who read the introduction to this book might guess, if there were such people, the reason for this anomaly is that the Skids feature guitarist Stuart Adamson, who would go on after his departure to form Big Country, one of my four favorite bands. It doesn't hurt that this historical draw is complemented by some great records.

This, the first one, is prototypical punk. "The Saints Are Coming", which begins the record, is a classic punk anthem. "Scared to Dance" and "Sweet Suburbia" are of a similar ilk, and "Into the Valley" is one of my favorite punk rallying cries.

While it is possible, from the perspective of historical revisionism, to hear hints of Big Country's later sound (the guitar solo in "Integral Plot", for instance), the Scottish influences on this record are pretty subtle. In their place are thick, but somewhat muted, guitars, even drumming that bursts into occasional spasmodic episodes, and Richard Jobson's oft-jarring voice. Even if you can't tell that Scotland is the country of origin, it is clear that *Scared to Dance* is of both the *same* time and a *different* place than most of the

rest of the early punk movement. The common energy and vitality take on a more textural and introspective expression here than in the Sex Pistols or the Clash. It is also clear that the Skids hope to be taken much more seriously as musicians than many of their contemporaries. The considered structure of songs like "Charles" is a level of sophistication above the Pistols' play-as-fast-as-you-can-until-the-singer-runs-out-of-words approach.

The impact of *Scared to Dance* is dulled a little by murky production. I can only imagine the impact it could have if *Steeltown's* sonic character could be magically applied here.

The UK CD I recently replaced my US LP with has a different track order, and adds seven songs. Actually, it adds seven single sides to the UK LP's original dozen songs, but because a couple of these singles had already been substituted for album tracks on the US version, two of the songs that are bonuses to UK buyers are album tracks to me, and vice versa.

The two songs dropped from the LP during its Atlantic crossing, "Dossier (Of Falibility)" and "Scale", are pretty cool, "Scale" particularly looking forward towards *Days in Europa*. Of the single tracks, the most interesting are "TV Stars", a crazed, barely-in-tune, live recording, and "Reasons" and "Test Tube Babies", the two sides of the first (?) Skids single, rescued from a dumpster in not quite pristine condition. All three of these are charming pure punk, and it's interesting to hear evidence that the Skids weren't *always* more sophisticated than their peers.

### ***Days in Europa, 1979 LP***

As if the Skids could hear my comments about production from 14 years in the future, the band got studio veteran Bill Nelson to produce their second album, and the ensuing record is awesome. Judicious keyboards, bigger drum and guitar sounds, and a mastering tape with wider dynamic range combine to produce an album that is simultaneously more polished and more vital than their first one. The glossy cover art helps to establish a set of expectations for this album far more ambitious artistically than what many of the band's initial peers were up to in 1979.

The triptych of "Charade", "Dulce Et Decorum Est (Pro Patria Mori)" and "The Olympian", on side 1, is an anthemic suite rarely matched. "Charade" is the most musically adventurous, "Dulce Et Decorum Est" the most rousing, and "The Olympian" the most directly related to "Into the Valley" and "Saints are Coming". Together they make a unit with considerable stylistic range, and one that brings to mind "Where the Streets Have No Name"- "Still Haven't Found What I'm

Looking For"- "With or Without You", even though this set doesn't have quite the panoramic grandeur of U2's.

Lest you think that the Skids have lost sight of the *ideals* of the punk movement, side two opens with the vitriolic "Working for the Yankee Dollar". To support this archtypical punk-principled anti-sellout message, the Skids run their Celtic folksong heritage through a food processor on high and produce a powerful hybrid that makes one wonder whether all that stuff about haggis being sheep's intestines isn't just a trick to scare away the tourists. "Thanatos" then cuts loose completely, a roaring fight song the subject of which is a complete mystery to me.

"A Day in Europa" shifts down a gear or two for a more melodic song that ranges from merry-go-round-like organ sounds to a wall-shaking bass plunge. "Peaceful Times", the album's closer, is its most ambitious track. Combining heavily processed instruments, heavy guitar, backwards singing and drums, and an ominous alien-invader-sounding spoken voice-over, the Skids produce a song that belongs on compilations with Yaz' "In My Room". You can't really dance to it, but I find that it usually roots me, dumbfounded, to the spot, listening to it, so who cares? A riveting conclusion to a brilliant album.

### ***Charade, 1979 7"***

The b-side to this single is "Grey Parade", a stately, atmospheric, martial song with a synth solo line that I could swear was imported from an instrumental section of one of the early Rush epics. Jobson's somber, semi-Gregorian vocals, which I keep expecting to break into "Little Drummer Boy"'s "Pa rum-pa-pum pum", presage *Joy*.

### ***The Absolute Game, 1980 LP***

If it weren't for *Days in Europa* coming first, I imagine I would rave just as excitedly about this album. The band's sound continues to evolve. It is phenomenal how much the Skids change musically over three albums released inside of two years; most bands would be fortunate to grow as much over a decade. The songs on this album, especially "Out of Town", sound more like those on the Armoury Show album than any of the Skids' other work. At the same time, the seeds of Big Country are beginning to poke though in several individual phrases, like the guitar parts on "The Children Saw the Shame" and the beginning of "The Devil's Decree".

On the whole, this still strikes me as a *slightly* weaker album than *Days in Europa*. The production isn't quite as clear and energized as on the prior record, and this one lacks a single song of the brilliance of "Dulce Et Decorum Est" or "Peaceful Times".

On the other hand, I like this one better than the first one, which is itself excellent. The whole first side of this album is uniformly strong, on par with "Charade" or "Animation" from *Days in Europa*. "Hurry on Boys", which begins side two, is either the album's most interesting or most annoying song, you'll have to decide which. Jobson's weird nasal sing-song vocals, combined with some strange bass instrument that might be a digeridu, produce a song that I think is very cool. The next one, "Happy to Be with You", has some of the same odd vocals, but doesn't rely on them as heavily. With its abrupt starts and stops, I like it as much as, say, "Thanatos", but not as much as "Dulce Et Decorum Est". "One Decree" is especially interesting from a Big Country point of view, as it sounds at moments strikingly like "Flag of Nations (Swimming)", a Big Country song that is otherwise very hard to understand.

The Skids again save their least characteristic song for last. "Arena" is slower and sedater than most any other song of theirs so far. The verse also sounds a lot like the Buzzcocks' "Are Everything" combined somehow with "We Will Rock You". This one isn't as successful as "Peaceful Times", though, and where "Peaceful Times" is perhaps my favorite song on *Days in Europa*, "Arena" is the one I feel least strongly about on this album. The lowest point of the Skids' second-best album, though, is not a perch to be desultory about occupying, and the song does seem to cheer up a bit by the end.

### ***Goodbye Civilian, 1980 7"***

Where I got this picture-disk 45 from I have completely forgotten, but there it is in my small stack of 7" singles. The record's surface noise is particularly bad, but it's pretty to look at. The flip side, a bruisingly fast instrumental with the made-for-b-side title "Monkey McGuire Meets Specky Potter behind Lochore Institute", is an interesting oddity to own, and probably worth the £1.50 sticker price, even if I'd had to pay it, rather than the smaller label reading 25¢ that I suspect more accurately represents how much it cost me to acquire.

### ***Joy, 1981 LP***

Stuart Adamson departed the Skids after *The Absolute Game*, but I bought *Joy* anyway, mostly because the only comments I'd ever gleaned about it were that it was "terrible", and I wanted to know *why*.

Well, I found out. It's not *entirely* awful: "Blood and Soil" and "Fields" are both good, and "Iona" is very good once it gets going. All three are not very Skids-like, resembling traditional Celtic music much more than the Skids ever did. The rest, though, is

Jobson half-singing, half-reciting forgettable poetry in a *way-out-of-tune* voice over minimal or no accompaniment. This is only *my* opinion, I stress, but it's abysmal. Jobson, in fact, would go on to make easily the worst album in my collection, *An Afternoon in Company*, which I will not review, as it is *entirely* composed of the worst sparsely accompanied poetry reading I've ever heard. The reason I'm not reviewing it, though, and the reason I don't want to spend much energy deriding this album, is that it is simply a kind of audio art that I don't care for. Somebody might think *Joy* is a masterpiece, and that would be fine, so long as they stayed reasonably far away from me.

### ***Dunfermline, 1987 CD***

Not much of the Skids work has made it into the digital domain in the US, so I picked up this compilation to partly compensate. It has six songs from *Scared to Dance* ("Into the Valley", "Charles", "The Saints Are Coming", "Scared to Dance", "Sweet Suburbia" and "Of One Skin"), four from *Days in Europa* ("Animation", "Working for the Yankee Dollar", "Charade" and "Masquerade"), five from *The Absolute Game* ("Circus Games", "Out of Town", "Goodbye Civilian", "A Woman in Winter" and "Hurry On Boys"), two from *Joy* ("Iona" and "Fields"), and "Night and Day", a *Scared to Dance* era song not otherwise known to me (though it does appear on the *Scared to Dance* CD, which I got later).

As a replacement for the original albums, it is about half-decent. The two songs from *Joy* are quite sufficient for posterity, though if they're the only ones you hear you still won't quite understand why people say *Joy* is awful. The selection from *Scared to Dance* definitely covers my favorites from that album, which is ironic since that's the one Skids record that *is* easily available on disc in the US. The five songs from *The Absolute Game* are an okay selection, but I still think the whole album is worth having. The excerpts from *Days in Europa* are *completely* insufficient, though, as my two favorites are both absent.

On the other hand, as an introduction to the band it serves decently, I guess, so thrifty would-be Skids fans may keep it in print for a little while. But watch the cutout bins, just in case.

## **various**

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### ***Burning Ambitions, 1978 LP***

Before I leave the real core of the UK punk scene, I want to mention this definitive punk-history compilation. Although the absences of the Sex Pistols,



the Jam, the Clash and Siouxsie and the Banshees are glaring, those bands are relatively well-known on their own, and their albums are easy to find. This collection, then, showcases 38 less-known but priceless punk classics.

The Buzzcocks' early song "Boredom", with Howard Devoto still in the band, is the perfect opening. Other notable tracks include Wire's homophobic "1, 2, X U", ATV's poignant "Life" ("Life's about as wonderful as a cold"), the Adverts' "Gary Gilmore's Eyes" (about an executed murderer), Slaughter and the Dogs' boorish "Where Have All the Boot Boys Gone", Generation X's Who-response "Your Generation", X Ray Spex's shrill "Identity", Adam and the Ants' bouncy "Lady" ("I saw a lady and she was naked / I saw a lady and she was nude"), Spizz Energi's "Where's Captain Kirk", the Ruts turgid "In a Rut", Sham 69's croaked "Angels with Dirty Faces", Killing Joke's somewhat more ambitious "The Wait", the Dead Kennedys' classic "Holiday in Cambodia", Blitz's "Someone's Gonna Die", GBH's sensitive love song "City Baby Attacked by Rats", and the Angelic Upstarts ragged anthem "Lust for Glory". The sleeve of this double-LP contains a Sgt. Pepper parody cover, a short written history of the movement, and several hundred very small photographs and press clippings, the most striking of which are the early concert posters announcing, among others, a Sex Pistols / Damned / Heart Breakers / Clash show for £1.80, and a Sex Pistols / Clash / Buzzcocks show for £1.

Noisy and badly played, with vulgar, furious and inane lyrics, these songs are everything punk originally stood for, and the collection is a must-have. I haven't been able to find a CD reissue of it, but the two UK-punk installments of Rhino's *DIY* series cover many of the same songs.

## Wire

### *The Ideal Copy*, 1987 LP

The presence of Wire and Killing Joke on *Burning Ambitions* provides the segue for a detour out of the mainstream of punk into one of Underground's stranger neighborhoods.

I never knew Wire as more than "1, 2, X U", until their unexpected comeback in 1986 after a 6 year absence. Where "1, 2, X U" was blistering punk in the mold of early Buzzcocks and the Sex Pistols, *The Ideal Copy* sounds much more like a technologically-updated version of Magazine, or mid-to-late PIL. Punk's slam is replaced by danceable and/or synthetic-sounding rhythms, the guitars are toned down and back, and

keyboards are a major component. "Ahead" is an excellent, pulsing dance song comparable to PIL's "Rise" or "Home". "Madman's Honey" is a mesmerizing cross between the Beatles and the soundtrack to a low-budget filmstrip about the Louvre that I remember seeing over and over again in elementary school.

"Ambitious", with its robot drum track, ominous bass synth part and almost-spoken vocals sounds a bit like Shriekback. "Cheeking Tongues" wouldn't be entirely out of character for Kraftwerk, though I think they would have left out the "dig dig digadiga dig dig digadiga dig dig" backing vocals. "Over Theirs" is like a Midnight Oil song performed by Bauhaus.

I don't know what the band spent the early Eighties doing, but they came back *much* changed.

## Killing Joke

### *Brighter Than a Thousand Suns*, 1987 LP

Killing Joke went through a similar transformation from *Burning Ambitions* days to this 1987 album. Retaining only punk's bleak spirit, they metamorphosed into a highly electronic, semi-gothic, thickly ambient band making dance songs for smoky, blacklit clubs filled with affectedly morose people wearing all black.

That sounds pretty depressing, and Killing Joke tends to live up (or down) to their name pretty well. The dark atmosphere of their music, however, makes moments of brightness all the more dazzling by contrast, and thus at moments brooding songs like "Sanity", "A Southern Sky" and "Wintergardens" come through with moments of unexpected triumph. If you find Bauhaus *underdone* and the Sisters of Mercy *overdone*, then Killing Joke may be your perfect compromise.

### *Laugh? I Nearly Bought One!*, 1992 CD

Personally, I find that I like Killing Joke in principle more than I like any particular stretch of their songs. A compilation, then, was exactly what I needed, and I bought this one without even looking at it very closely first, which is a good thing, since the packaging is terrible and there is not a single word in the liner.

The collection covers almost all of the band's career, but in widely varying depth.

"Turn to Red" is from their first EP, *Almost Red*; "Pssyche" from the live EP *Ha*; "Requiem" and "Wardance" from the album *Killing Joke*; "Follow the Leaders", "Unspeakable", "Butcher" and "Exit" all from 1981's *What's This For...*; "The Hum", "Empire

Song" and "Chop-Chop" from the next year's *Revelations*; "Sun Goes Down" from the b-side of "Birds of a Feather"; "Eighties", "Darkness Before Dawn" and "Love Like Blood" from *Night Time*; "Wintergarden" from *Brighter Than a Thousand Suns*, though the song is remixed here; and "Age of Greed" is from the album *Extremities, Dirt and Various Repressed Emotions*.

Completely unrepresented are 1988's *Outside the Gate* and the band's most notorious album, 1983's *Fire Dances*, which I have heard variously described as "frighteningly solid", "Killing Joke's best album", and as the single worst album ever pressed. "Birds of a Feather", itself, is also a strange omission, and I have to wonder who picked this selection, and why they thought it called for four songs from *What's This For*.

On the whole, this anthology emphasizes Killing Joke's venomous and destructive side to the virtual exclusion of the more-accessible, if perhaps less-interesting, side shown on *Brighter Than a Thousand Suns*. The vicious "Eighties", whose resemblance to Nirvana's "Come As You Are" when slowed down prompted a lawsuit, is the catchiest song of the 17 here. The strangest is the final one, "Age of Greed", which opens with a advertisement sound-bite describing some hideous-sounding bulk-purchasing meat club, and quickly jumps into a chaotic rant somewhere between Suicidal Tendencies and Consolidated that alternately fascinates me and sends me scrambling for the remote to turn it off.

## That Petrol Emotion

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### Babble, 1987 LP

That Petrol Emotion are linked stylistically to Killing Joke in my mind. Using fewer electronics and little of the heavy atmosphere effects of Killing Joke, That Petrol Emotion achieves a similar level of abrasiveness, danceability and political antagonism (pro-Irish, in this case) through more-conventional rock arrangements. This album's melodic peak, an extended version of the single "Big Decision", with its chanted refrain "agitate, educate and organize", is significantly mellower than most Killing Joke material. Then again, the manic burst of noise "Split!" comes just two songs later.

"Belly Bugs", with its bass-heavy riff, uneasy rumbling drums, half-siren / half-cartoon-double-take background noises, and nerve-grating guitar parts, and the similar sounding "In the Playpen", typify the album for me, and do not offer enough appeal to get this record played here very often. The partial saving grace is the last song, "Creeping to the Cross", a

scathing attack on organized religion (its chorus a sneered "I'd rather be the Devil / Than go creeping to the cross") that runs on a kinetic beat a bit like those of the Sisters of Mercy. I like this enough to say that it's worth not throwing *Babble* away, if you get it as a gift.

## Bauhaus

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### The Singles, 1981-1983, 1983 EP

Bauhaus is a pivotally influential band that I don't care much for at all, with the exception of their cover of Bowie's "Ziggy Stardust", which is on this six-song EP. One might wonder why I would like a cover by a band I don't particularly like, of a song by another artist I don't particularly like, and I can offer by way of explanation only my abiding fascination with covers. If you like Killing Joke, Lords of the New Church, or any other gloomy dark-clothed gothic post-punk dance/angst bands, Bauhaus is the original, and so probably worth checking out. I find personally that the Bauhaus-ness of these bands is what I *don't* like about them, and Bauhaus themselves are the most Bauhaus-like of all.

## Specimen

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### Batastrophe, 1983 EP

Imagine a cartoon superhero version of Bauhaus, and you've got Specimen nailed. If *Edward Scissorhands* had been made in 1983, this EP would have been a perfect soundtrack, spooky but utterly melodic, with a jaunty swagger that sounds like one of those old British musicals in which the plucky orphans throw out their evil keepers and perform complicated impromptu mass song-and-dance routines in their charming rags along grimy but warm-hearted cobblestone streets, until the enigmatic local millionaire-recluse emerges from his gothic mansion to invite them all to tea. I keep thinking that *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* is the one I mean, but that's probably just because there's a song here called "Kiss Kiss Bang Bang". It doesn't have *exactly* the plot line I described, but as I remember the music it's close enough. The fast chatter of the chorus of "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang" itself is exactly the sort of dizzy, melody driven romp that Specimen, in their own way, are masters of.

There are only six songs on this EP, and this is the only Specimen record I have (there's at least one other, perhaps more), but I really feel like I know the band all the same. There isn't much variety of style here, but

"The Beauty of Poison", "Kiss Kiss Bang Bang", "Returning from a Journey" and "Lovers" are all splendid, and "Syria" and "Tell Tail" are close behind. Rumbling drums, chunky bass, orchestral keyboards and driving power-chord guitar support a singer (identified in the credits only as "Ollie") who sounds enough like Bowie and Murphy to encourage the association, but without the sort of back-of-the-throat catch that makes Bowie's voice distinctive (and Murphy's redundant). Bold lock-step unison melodies mostly replace harmony as the operative musical principle. In fact, *everything* about this album is painted boldly, and the sort of harlequin/ghoul look adopted by the band on the cover fits their style perfectly. White face-paint, heavy black eye-liner, dyed-black (or dyed-red) hair, leather, fishnet and the sort of angst-of-a-clown expressions on their faces go along with the skin-deep macabre of the music, and the "bat" in *Batastrophe* refers to the Bat Cave, the London club that acted as this scene's headquarters. If you can picture Billy Idol without the anarcho-punk sneer (it may help to first imagine the sneer itself perched disembodiedly in the air like the grin of the Cheshire Cat), then this is what I think he'd sound like. Dated, but not expired.

## Lords of the New Church

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### *The Lords of the New Church, 1982 LP*

This is another band that owes a stylistic debt to Bauhaus, though the members of Lords of the New Church all arrive with their own punk credentials. Their music sounds often like the Damned, where guitarist Brian James came from. The Damned's brand of mellow Sixties-colored punk isn't my favorite, either, and most of this album has worn poorly for me since it was new.

When they crank the intensity up a notch, though, and Stiv Bator really lets loose, the Lords of the New Church showed the potential to cause structural damage. "New Church", "Portobello" and "Holy War" strike me this way. The album's piece-de-resistance, "Open Your Eyes", an attack on the way "they" use the media to keep "us" in ignorance, struck me at the time as about as vicious a song as you could imagine. Listening to it again, now, the harpsichord-like synthesizer parts sound very dated, and what punch the song once had has been overshadowed by so much other more forceful music that has come into my life since 1982 that I can only barely see what I once loved about this.

### *Is Nothing Sacred?, 1983 LP*

Whatever it was, it got me to buy their second album, as well, but *it* I didn't even like *then*. Having added more keyboards and horns and backed further away from flat-out punk, they now sound just like the Damned to me. Informed Damned fans will no doubt think I'm a complete idiot for saying that, but if you're an *uninformed* Damned fan, you might really like this album.

## The Three Johns

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### *The World By Storm, 1986 LP*

Somewhere between Killing Joke, the Jesus and Mary Chain, and the Sisters of Mercy are the Three Johns. Combining drum-machine rhythms, fuzzy distorted guitars, bass-heavy vocals and apocalyptic lyrics, they produce a result that is more accessible than early Sisters of Mercy, but less than late. This album's first five songs seem mostly homogenous to me, but I like the second side a lot.

"Death of the European", the most Sisters-like song here, is also my favorite. Cruising along on a solid, if unchanging, beat, it comes only "Temple of Love"'s hook and backing vocals short of true transcendence. "Coals to Newcastle" is closer in intensity to That Petrol Emotion. "The Ship That Died of Shame" works in a stronger melody and understated lyrics with some of the feel of fable, and comes out as a timeless *song*. "The World by Storm" nudges the drum-machine's speed fader back up a few centimeters and finishes the album in good style, with something (the world, presumably) exploding in the background.

## New Model Army

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### *Vengeance, 1991 CD*

If you take the Clash and substitute the sounds of the previous five bands for the rockabilly and reggae influences in the Clash's sound, and then get a better drummer, a better bass player, a better singer and lose one of the guitars, you get an unwieldy mess that you may as well not have bothered with, because it still won't be as good as New Model Army.

New Model Army keep the rumbling drums, bass emphasis and literate political commitment of Killing Joke and the rest, and strip out the excess atmosphere, noise and stylized gothic. Vocalist and guitarist Slade the Leveler doesn't have spectacular technical

skills in either area, but his voice is much more musical than most punk singers', and his guitar playing doesn't have to be flashy to flesh out NMA's spare arrangements. Robb Heaton's churning drums hold up the beat, and bass-player Stuart Morrow is actually the band's lead instrumentalist. Morrow's hyperkinetic bass lines, sprinting up and down the instrument's range, take the spotlight in NMA the way guitar solos usually do in other bands.

When it was originally released in 1984, this debut was a tight 8-song affair brimming with barely-contained ideological fervor and musical adrenaline. The CD reissue adds *ten* songs (including two Peel Session recordings) to the original eight (oddly, sequencing five *before* the original album and five *after*) without diminishing the effect, but the core eight remain the focus of the album for me.

"Christian Militia", with its chorus of "Here come the Christians, an hysterical mob / Worshipping the Devil in the name of God", establishes the band's philosophical perspective quite quickly. "Notice Me" lashes both out and in, proclaiming "I'll take any drug in the whole damn world / If you'll only notice me". Hypocrisy and ignorance are NMA's most hated foes, and "Smalltown England" condemns the country wholesale as rife with both. Their proposed response? "I believe in justice / I believe in vengeance / I believe in getting the bastard", roars the title track. New Model Army's rage is even more frightening than the Sex Pistols, because while you can tell that the Pistols are angry, New Model Army clearly *understand* what they're angry about, and who's responsible, and they sound like they have names, addresses, and all sorts of incriminating photographs. "Spirit of the Falklands" concludes the original LP with the damning "Dead men in the South Atlantic. / It's meant to warm our hearts. / They think that they died for you and me. / Oh God, what a farce, what a farce".

With the exception of the bitter "1984", the added songs are more personal than political. "I see that paying prices came so soon", laments "The Price". "Spoilt children in a row, / No-one dares to tell them 'No', / So all I wanted in the end / Was world domination and a whole lot of money to spend", says "Great Expectations".

This is a more thoughtfully critical and cynical album than *Never Mind the Bollocks*' anarchic nihilism, and this at once makes it less exuberant but in its own way more damning. The back cover of the liner quotes the band saying "This group is everything that we ever wanted and the songs are all that we felt, loved and believed in." It shows.

### *No Rest for the Wicked*, 1985 CD

After the caustic *Vengeance*, New Model Army turn around on their second album and start to point out that things *can* be improved, and more importantly, that they are *worth* improving. This cover quotes the Magna Carta, saying "To no man will we sell, or deny, or delay right or justice".

"Frightened" opens the album by saying that "people are the same as we've always been", and thus New Model Army begins trying to make peace with the world's on its own terms. "Love will build a cushion / To keep you safe from harm, / But hate will drive you onwards", Slade sings on "Ambition". Instead of hating each other, he wonders, can't we turn hatred's productive energy on the apathy and groundless fears that are *really* responsible for the sad state of the world? "Fight all the ones who divide us", says "My Country", a statement of carefully-qualified patriotism.

Johnny Rotten gave the impression that if you handed him the keys to the nation, he would smash everything larger than a toaster and then collapse, foaming at the mouth, in the nearest mound of debris. And while that might, in fact, turn out to be a productive start to the rebuilding process, it's not exactly what most people mean by a positive agenda. New Model Army, on the other hand, are one of the first bands to bear punk's flag with the sort of dignity that suggests that their interest in the quality of life is more than just visceral disgust with the status quo. They've come not to kick Caesar in the testicles and spray-paint anarchy symbols on his prone, convulsing body, but rather to try to convince him of the real errors of his ways (which, admittedly, *might* involve kicking him in the testicles, but not for its *own* sake). This is not meant as a criticism of the Pistols; *somebody* had to break the ice with their forehead, after all. But New Model Army are, I think, the next stage (or, at least, a next stage) in the development of punk ideology.

And to keep up our spirits during this difficult struggle to come, *No Rest for the Wicked* is even better, musically, than the rousing debut. A little studio polishing produces a louder, stronger New Model Army. Heaton's drums crash harder, Morrow's bass rings and pops more sharply, and Slade's singing is both rawer in timbre and more melodic in tone. Attack Attack Music is well-named.

### *The Ghost of Cain*, 1986 CD

The departure of Stuart Morrow meant that *The Ghost of Cain* became, perforce, an album of shifted focus. I don't know who is playing bass on this record, but they're both very good and not as good as Morrow. Slade/Justin Sullivan picks up the slack himself,

bringing his guitar and some added miscellaneous instrumentation forward, and letting the bass ride on it, rather than vice versa. On songs like "Heroes", he actually transfers to guitar some of what I'm sure would have been bass parts if Morrow had still been around.

The results are not at all shabby. "The Hunt" and "51st State" are songs as urgent and powerful as anything from the first two albums. The latter, especially, is said to have been largely responsible for New Model Army being refused visas to tour the US, though who knows how accurate this rumor is. Sullivan's quieter (which is *not* the same as "mellower") side begins to show on this record, as well. "Lovesongs" is a melancholy song that still manages to criticize the world for exacerbating the narrator's loneliness. "Ballad" is musically just that, with Sullivan accompanying himself on acoustic guitar, occasional mournful harmonica and light keyboards providing the only other sounds. The lyrics, however, are about the bleakest available, with such uplifting summaries of this generation's accomplishments as "Another square mile poisoned forever", and "Harvested everything, planted nothing".

Overall, this is an album most other bands would be lucky to have made, but sandwiched in NMA's career between the first two records with Morrow and *Thunder and Consolation* to come, it is sadly an also-ran.

### *New Model Army, 1987 CD*

To tide fans over during the long wait between full albums 3 and 4, this seven-song EP appeared, and it was the first time I'd heard of the band myself. The first side contains three new songs ("White Coats", "Charge" and "Chinese Whispers"), and the second has live versions of "My Country", "Waiting", "51st State" and "The Hunt".

"White Coats" and "Charge" are both amazing. "White Coats" is a Luddite masterpiece, crying in despair "How do we tell the people in the white coats - enough's enough?" The prominent keyboard part, through hindsight anyway, foreshadows the expanded musical canvas of *Thunder and Consolation*. "Charge" is the tale of a wildly unsuccessful battle, though whether it is imagined or drawn from history I can't tell you. Guitar and bass get a rest for much of "Chinese Whispers", which hammers on on drums and voice for most of its length.

The live tracks are excellent, also. "My Country" is either a recording from Morrow days, or features somebody else doing a quite credible job with his part. "51st State" and "The Hunt" are more significant than the other two, as they do *not* appear on the live album *Raw Melody Men*. "51st State" here is done partly as a sing-a-long, which is a neat effect, if a ragged one.

The unlisted bonus track, an a cappella pseudo-barbershop rendition of some strange sea-shanty fragment, is absolutely priceless, and means that this disc is a collectors' must-have. I've only ever seen it on vinyl in the US, but I found this UK CD on my 1994 London trip.

### *Thunder and Consolation, 1989 CD*

Forget collectors, *this* album is a must-have, *period*. New Model Army's best record, by far, and an easy and consistent pick for my periodic "10 Best Albums Ever" lists, this record is an absolute Masterpiece, one of those few records that is so distinctly better and unlike anything that has gone before it that it seems to me like nobody could seriously deny its impact, whether they like it or not.

"I Love the World" begins the album. Heaton is drumming more furiously than ever, his impact augmented by some studio electronics for the first time (new producer Tom Dowd making his presence known). Jason Harris' bass playing surges just below the surface, as deep and full as Morrow's was fast and dexterous. Sullivan's singing is at its most passionate, competent and confident, and Heaton and Harris' backing vocals sound great. Sullivan has bought a new, bigger, tougher amplifier for his guitar, and it sounds huge. Filling out the sound are the understated keyboards hinted at on "White Coats". You might not think that keyboards would fit in with NMA's lean attack, but you'll make other mistakes in your life, too. Far from clashing with the band's musical style, the keyboards here make the earlier albums seem thin by comparison.

As good as "I Love the World" is, by itself it could simply be an isolated great song, much as "White Coats" was. "Stupid Questions", the second song, puts this theory to rest instantly. Opening with a verse of acoustic guitar, it promptly slams into gear for a rousing anthem that makes you realize that you've been listening to NMA all along through a neighbor's wall, and suddenly a big hole has been blown in it and you are hearing clearly for the first time (and also discovering some things about your neighbors that you might have been better off not knowing).

I don't know what the title of "225" means. It's not in the lyrics, it's not the length of the song (not in seconds or minutes, anyway). It's not the atomic weight of any radioactive elements (I thought that was a good guess, though). Perhaps it's Sullivan's street address. Whatever it means, the song is a touching story of some anonymous encounter that prompts Sullivan to wonder (not for the first time) whether technological "progress" is, in fact, progress. There is no escape, however, and "Even in the freshest mountain air / The jet fighters

practice overhead". In fact, you can hear their control-tower chat in the background of the song. The song is a relentless charge that barrels along in a manner almost reminiscent of the Sisters of Mercy. A heavy, ghostly synthetic breathing sound permeates the song, as if some digital wind has the band in its grip.

"Inheritance" is even more minimal than "Chinese Whispers". Heaton's drumming and Sullivan's voice are interrupted only by a handful of single piano notes. A half-confused and half-angry message to the narrator's father, this is what Billy Bragg might sound like if he was a drummer, not a guitarist.

*Thunder and Consolation* hits its musical and lyrical peak with the poignant ballad-turned-to-anthem "Green and Grey". Keyboards, violin, acoustic and electric guitars, bass and drums mesh immaculately. The text is a bitter message to some former comrade who has turned their back on their homeland and gone off to somewhere evil (presumably America). "Do you think you're so brave / Just to go running / To that which beckons to us all? / And tomorrow brings another train, / Another young brave steals away." New Model Army hasn't forgotten their conviction that as horrible as their home can be, it is better to stay and fight to fix it than to abandon it. I can't help wonder whether Bono and U2 are in some ways the targets here.

"Ballad of Bodmin Pill" and "Family" turn introspective again. Where Paul Weller had mastered the art of observing in the details of people's lives how the little choices they thought they made were really huge and wrecked their lives, Justin Sullivan captures instead the feel, from inside, of being trapped in a life you didn't ask for, neither able to relax nor make any progress by trying, and having no evident way out. "Give me some place where I can go / Where I don't have to justify myself", he pleads in "Family".

I don't know what "Family Life" is about, but it is a pretty, bittersweet song, just two acoustic guitars and voice. It lulls you a little, the lyrics not letting you get completely comfortable, yet the soothing music lowering your guard. "Vagabonds", opening with Ed Elain Johnson's electric-violin playing against delayed versions of itself, keeps you in a half-sedated state for just long enough that you're starting to forget, growing sleepy, beginning to think that when someone says the word "chicken" you will rip off your clothes and skip around the room squawking. The band comes crashing in just in time to avert such petty party tricks, and stomps through the rest of this paean to dreams.

"Archway Towers" ends the original LP on a quietly brutal note. It builds and builds, but rather than breaking into punk fury, it pulls back from the brink and flails chaotically for a period in the middle, which excites the "crowd" (just as the lyrics talk about

the public's fascination with movie violence). The band backs off the noise, and the crowd begins chanting, trying to get it back, but they won't oblige, and eventually the crowd shuts up and the song trails softly away, New Model Army bowing gracefully out of a brilliant album.

At least, that's the way it *used* to end. The CD, rather than stop there, starts up all over again with the three studio tracks from the *New Model Army* EP, and the bonus tracks "125 MPH" and "Nothing Touches". "White Coats", "The Charge" and "Chinese Whispers" are welcome inclusions, as the vinyl EP was not released on CD itself to my knowledge, and is probably long out of print, and they fit stylistically with the rest of the album. The other two songs are okay ("125 MPH" has some particularly nifty electric-violin work), but they don't add a lot to an already virtually-perfect album.

### *I Love the World, 1989 12"*

You will probably never locate a copy of this plain-label promotional disk even if you try, so I won't torture you by raving about how great it is. Besides the album version of the title track, it contains live versions of "Betcha", "My Country", "White Coats" and "51st State". I haven't tried to hook up two turntables and do a close analysis, but the versions of "51st State" and "My Country" here are pretty damn close to the ones on the *New Model Army* EP, if not the very same recordings. "Betcha" and "White Coats" are good, too, but not so amazing that you need to come to my house and steal my copy if you don't have them. They're good enough that I'd put up a fight, though. Especially if you look especially weak and I happen to have several beefy friends over at the time.

### *Impurity, 1990 CD*

It's pretty much impossible to follow up an album as great as *Thunder and Consolation*. Either you make one that's entirely different, in which case the masterpiece gets trivialized as a fluke, or you make one that is similar, and it gets criticized as a retread. If you ignore this inevitability and just try to make another good record, though, history usually comes down on your side.

At least, that's what I feel about *Impurity*. It was disappointing when I got it, because, of course, it wasn't as much of an advance over *Thunder and Consolation* as that was over *The Ghost of Cain*. Listening to it more it is clear that, once you get over the unavoidable expectations, it is probably an even better album in some ways than *T&C*. It won't supplant the earlier record in my mind, as it is too firmly entrenched, but *Impurity* is a great album in its own right. Out of the

glare of *T&C*'s newness, it becomes possible to sit back and see the progress that the band, as a whole, has made since *Vengeance* days.

It's really quite remarkable. Few bands who began as punk have been able to mature as gracefully as New Model Army. Johnson's violin playing fit in so well that they kept him around (and in fact when I saw them in concert in 1991 he came along and played keyboards when his violin wasn't needed). New bass player Nelson fits in like he was there all along. Sullivan and Heaton still sound great together.

*Impurity* is musically even more varied than *T&C*. From "Get Me Out" which begins the record in vintage NMA form, and could easily have been a song left over on paper from the "old days", only now arranged and recorded, to the rollicking folksiness of "Bury the Hatchet" and the Spanish-sounding guitar of "Eleven Years", to the unadorned rock and roll of "Lurhstaap" (which reminds me of Blue Öyster Cult), the band's range is now impressively expansive. "Purity" and "Lust for Power" show that Sullivan's old topical concerns are still important to him, but the upbeat (!) "Bury the Hatchet" admits "Funny how vendettas just turn into a bore", and calls a truce without ceding anything to the enemy. And "Marrakesh" is perhaps the first whole-hearted love song New Model Army has done. Sullivan does skew it a bit by casting the two lovers as fugitives for some unknown crime, but the song is genuinely touching all the same.

And so is the album.

### *Raw Melody Men, 1991 CD*

New Model Army is an awesome force live, and so it was just a matter of time before they made a live album to try to capture their concert intensity. The bad news is that this recording simply doesn't reproduce the full experience of seeing New Model Army play live. The good news is that the most prominent feature it leaves out is getting repeatedly kicked in the head by braindead stage-diving skinheads who manage to shout along with the songs without the lyrics ever penetrating their tattooed brains.

The selection favors the last two albums, but covers all five: from *Vengeance* come "Liberal Education" and "Smalltown England"; from *No Rest for the Wicked* is "Better than Them"; from *The Ghost of Cain* "Lovesongs"; from *Thunder and Consolation* they do "I Love the World", "Green and Grey", "Vagabonds" and "Archway Towers", plus the *New Model Army* tracks "The Charge" and "White Coats"; and from *Impurity* they play "Get Me Out", "Space", "Innocence", "Purity", "Whirlwind" and "Lurhstaap".

The performances are excellent, though as you might expect the more recent songs sound the most like

their originals. Fans should love this album, but those who prefer the early material might be better served by the *Radio Sessions 83-84* compilation. As an introduction to the band it does an okay job, but the greatest-hits collection *History* might be a better overview than this. There's also a *History* video that I recommend.

### *Here Comes the War, 1993 CD5*

Having departed EMI for Epic, after almost a decade, New Model Army resurfaces with personnel and principles intact. Pessimism seems to have enjoyed a renewal of favor in the Sullivan household, as "Here Comes the War" is a dark and depressing prediction that these "peaceful times" are an illusion, and more violence is about all we have in store. "You screamed give us liberty or give us death. / Now you've got both, what do you want next?" NMA must have concluded that they mellowed too early, and have decided to wind up the engines of anger again and make another bombing run. Of course, part of the deal is that the band play loud and fast again, and that Sullivan scream like a wounded animal, both of which are pretty cool, so the apocalypse turns out to have a bright side.

"Modern Times" echoes the title track's bleakness, but with less-intense music. "Ghost of Your Father", the other non-album track here, sounds more like *Impurity* than the other two. Mixing in a country-ish guitar twang, and a melody that sounds like it was passed down through the ages rather than invented in some recording studio, this gentle, beautiful song makes an odd companion to "Here Comes the War", but with "Modern Times" in between the two, the three songs together make a sort of sense.

### *The Love of Hopeless Causes, 1993 CD*

The album for which *Here Comes the War* was the advance scout turns out to be a good deal less strident, on the whole, than the single lead me to expect. While that one song, which does open the album, sounds like a return to early New Model Army rage, the rest of the record is much more in keeping with the stylistic trend from *Thunder and Consolation* to *Impurity*. There's no violin, and not as much acoustic stuff as on *Impurity*, but the sense of calm musical confidence that eventually replaced the band's original frantically propulsive agitation remains. Sullivan's singing and songwriting sound better every year, and Heaton and Nelson still provide an unshakeable rhythm.

For me, though, the fact that *The Love of Hopless Causes* does follow *Impurity* so well makes it hard for me to concentrate on the album in its own right. It almost immediately took its place in my mind as the

continuation of the post-*T&C* period, and while I enjoy listening to it, it really doesn't make me feel anything that *Impurity* doesn't as well. I hope you understand that the brevity of the phrase "another great album" doesn't make it insincere.

### *Living in the Rose*, 1993 CD5

This single, subtitled "The Ballads EP", backs up "Living in the Rose" with three songs that, as you might expect, find New Model Army at their gentlest and most smoothly moving. "Drummy B" accompanies a thoughtful requiem to a departed friend with breathy bass synthesizer and mournful harmonica. I want to think that it's a personal scene from the religion divisions in Northern Ireland, but there's not much concrete evidence for this. "Marry the Sea" is even slower and sadder, Ed Alleyne-Johnson returning to provide some electric violin to go with spare acoustic guitar and soft bass and breath-synth. "Sleepwalking" is a nice mostly-guitar instrumental credited to Heaton, who may even be the one playing it. Alleyne-Johnson's violin provides some counterpoint on the second half, and Nelson inserts very occasional bass notes (perhaps six in the whole song) at useful points.

For people who really know New Model Army, this side of their style comes as no particular surprise, as it shows through at various points on several of their albums, but it's different enough from the usual perception of the band that I can see why they'd make a point of collecting three consecutive examples of it here.

## various

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### *Gimme Shelter (Alternative)*, 1993 CD5

Part of a four-single series consisting entirely of "Gimme Shelter" covers, proceeds going to British homeless charities, this edition finds itself in my clutches by virtue of the first version here being done by New Model Army and Tom Jones. This is an amusing collaboration of the sort that Jones seemed to be making a mini-comeback out of at the time, and the band handles the song well.

The other two takes here, one a funky neo-seventies version by Cud and Sandie Shaw, the other a somewhat turgid Kingmaker rendition, don't do much for me. It doesn't help that, in my opinion, the Sisters of Mercy turned in the cover to end all "Gimme Shelter" covers some years previous.

## Dead Kennedys

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We now switch gears rather drastically, re-crossing the Atlantic and backing up to the patron saints of *American* hardcore punk.

### *In God We Trust, Inc.*, 1981 EP

The first six songs on this brief gob of vitriol clock in at about seven minutes, total. The other two almost double the length of this record, but not quite. This is almost certainly the most ridiculous album I own. The Dead Kennedys' favorite song-construction philosophy is to pick a social issue, write a few verses of the most offensively phrased left-wing sentiment they can think of, put some simple guitar, bass and drums to Jello Biafra's quavering shout, and then play the whole thing as fast as the *fastest* band member can perform his part. This results in "Religious Vomit", "Moral Majority", "Hyperactive Child", "Dog Bite" and "Nazi Punks Fuck Off". Actually, "Dog Bite" doesn't appear to have a *social* issue, but the difference isn't particularly audible.

The songs' subjects are basically obvious from the titles. The lyrics to the songs are printed on the back cover of the vinyl copy of the EP. This is important, since the six songs together have about eleven words that you will be able to recognize without referring to the text. I find it impossible to listen to any of these without laughing hysterically. I don't *think* this is actually the reaction that Jello Biafra and friends were hoping for, but perhaps it is.

The seventh song, "We've Got a Bigger Problem Now" is a partial remake of the DK's earlier song "California Über Alles", alternating patches of pretend lounge music with the standard kamikaze bits. If there were an organization called "Psychotics Against Ronald Reagan", this would be their theme song.

The record ends with a cover of the theme to "Rawhide". To be quite honest, I think they could have played it somewhat faster.

### *Plastic Surgery Disasters*, 1982 LP

By contrast, this, the DKs third album, sounds like it was made by humans. The songs are longer than a minute, the lyrics slightly easier to make out, and the music played at the limit of the *slowest* member, not the fastest, which improves the output considerably.

As the DKs occupy a position in US punk music similar to that held by the Sex Pistols in the UK, comparing the two is natural. Both bands are driven by almost unprecedented energy levels, and to a certain extent the sound is similar, with fast, thin distorted guitar dominating the music. But where the



Sex Pistols write angry songs with angry lyrics, the Dead Kennedys write extremist political diatribes and set them loosely to music. Accordingly, *Never Mind the Bollocks* is a hugely better rock album. With too many of the DKs songs, the best way to appreciate them is to listen to them all once or twice to get the aural effect, and then just read the lyric booklet (a chaotic 28-page text-and-photo collage; I don't know how or whether they crammed this epic indulgence into the CD reissue). "Terminal Preppie", "Winnebago Warrior" and "Moon over Marin" are the most-musical exceptions to this rule, but if you aren't prepared for an album that is predominantly non-musical, you won't enjoy this.

The Sex Pistols really didn't have a political agenda. Johnny Rotten was disgusted with just about everything, and really didn't attempt to form a coherent platform from which to explain and justify his anger. Jello Biafra, on the other hand, is more considered critic, and DKs songs taken as a whole convey a consistent liberal, anti-suburban, anti-"family values", anti-Americana stance. Some will prefer each approach. If the Dead Kennedys were a better band it might be a harder decision for me.

## Jello Biafra (w/DOA)

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### *Last Scream of the Missing Neighbors, 1989 CD*

And, in fact, when Biafra teams up with a better band (in a better studio, several years later, to be fair), I like the result better. The first five of these six songs are the same basic genre as the Dead Kennedys. DOA aren't a massively melodic rock band, but they do hold their own against Biafra's lyrics better than the DKs. The cover of the Animals' "We Gotta Get Out of This Place" is better than the DK's "Rawhide", but neither cover is as much different from the original as it could have been.

The last song changes everything. It's called "Full Metal Jackoff", and I am pretty sure that the title is meant to be self-deprecating, Biafra not letting himself off easy for having written what is, essentially, a metal song, with churning guitars and pounding drums, though it also reminds me strongly of PIL, which is appropriate enough. If it were any shorter, this would be the only Biafra song I know of where Jello's vocal presence was overshadowed by the music. At over thirteen minutes, though, you eventually grow accustomed to the repetitive hook and the long narrative takes over after all, the fade-out chant being "Ollie for President; He'll Get Things Done".

An edited, slightly remixed version of this song could probably have been a big dance-club hit akin to

Lydon and Africa Bambatta's Time Zone epic "World Destruction". Then again, that's not at all the point.

## Ramones

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### *Mania, 1988 LP*

The Ramones are summed up nicely by Johnny Ramone's observation that the group began writing their own songs because other people's were all too hard for them to play. Often credited with starting American punk, and sometimes said to have started punk, period, the Ramones are an unlikely band to have ever been paid to perform in public, let alone begun a movement. Then again, few bands better exemplify the punk principle that you don't have to be a great musician to start a band. Taking this at its word, the Ramones have built a startlingly long career out of about the simplest music and lyrics history has seen. I don't mean that the Ramones are *bad* musicians, in the sloppy way that, say, Sid Vicious was, but rather that they have deliberately kept their music so simple that *anybody* could play it competently. If the Sex Pistol's message was "Anybody can play", the Ramones' is "Anybody can play *this*".

This approach worked pretty well, and has produced a great number of memorable, albeit largely identical, songs, most of which are in this collection: "I Wanna Be Sedated", "Teenage Lobotomy", "Rockaway Beach", "Bonzo Goes to Bitburg", "Somebody Put Something in My Drink", and the theme to one of the silliest movies ever, "Rock and Roll High School" (featuring the classic lines, "Does your mother know you're Ramones?" and "They're ugly, ugly people."). I don't see the need to have more than one Ramones record, and probably any hits collection would suffice, but any serious rock and roll connoisseur ought to be able to produce at least a few Ramones songs for those times of your life when the parts of your brain that handle all reasoning more complex than making sandwiches shut themselves off completely. I mean, it's better than television...

## Fear

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### *Live...for the Record, 1991 CD*

Another seminal American punk band, Fear made only two studio records (*The Record*, and *More Beer*). The issue of this 1986 concert recording brings the total number of official Fear albums to three, and the band is threatening as I write to record yet another one.

On the one hand, there is very little laudable about Fear. The Sex Pistols were nihilistic, the Dead Kennedys were ideologues and the Ramones are inane, but Fear are stupid, intolerant and offensive, to no useful end. "More Beer" is about their most thoughtful message.

On the other hand, Lee Ving is an intense singer, and the band is actually *good*, which is a rare quality in their circles. Both studio albums are genre classics, and this live album contains much of both.

On the first hand again, this record contains an extended between-song joke that really drives home what a waste of mental space the band is. In the end, if you like punk, you should go buy a Fear album, but don't pay more than you have to for it, and if you, too, write a music guide, make your Fear section short like mine.

## Naked Raygun

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### *Understand?*, 1989 CD

Naked Raygun sounds to me like they *wish* they were Fear. Fortunately, from my perspective, they don't succeed. "Treason", my favorite song on this album, has a serious anthemic quality that Fear lacks completely. "Wonder Beer" takes one of Fear's favorite topics and twists it into more than just a celebration of drinking, saying "If there are gods they must be drunk", which sounds about right. The crashing "The Sniper Song" isn't going to get Eric Spicer course credit towards a psychology degree, but its lyrics show that he actually had his brain engaged while writing it, which I think produces better results than, for example "Beef beef beef, beef bologna".

Musically, Naked Raygun falls approximately midway between Fear and Social Distortion, towards the mainstream and hard rock margins of punk. You'll find no synthesizers, fancy studio tricks or barbershop harmonies here, but the band is powerful and solid as well as fast. Frill-less.

## Gang Green

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### *Can't Live Without It*, 1990 CD

Boston has a band obsessed with alcohol, too. This live album starts out with "Let's Drink Some Beer" (Gang Green's answer to Fear's "Let's Have a War", one assumes), and proceeds promptly to "Bartender". A series of songs intervenes whose titles, at least, don't

have anything to do with beer, and the album concludes with the Gang Green theme, "Alcohol".

I bought this album for three reasons. First, it was a *really* cheap cutout. Second, Gang Green is a significant part of Boston rock history, and in fact I used to get them confused with the Bags back before I actually *met* the Bags (or had any idea what they sounded like). Third, and most significantly, it has the one Gang Green song that I'd wanted badly for a long time, their banzai punk cover of 'til tuesday's "Voices Carry". I'm not sure it's accurate to call their version "reverent", especially with the lyrical additions they insert in this live version, but whatever their intentions, the tune holds its own, and to me this demented, screamed version just emphasizes what a great song "Voices Carry" is, *however* it is done.

I didn't actually care whether I liked the *rest* of this record, but I definitely do. Recorded at *one* show in London early in 1990, the band on tour to promote *Older...Budweiser*, this album documents a show of such brutal intensity that if I hadn't actually *been* to London more recently than 1990, I wouldn't be completely convinced that the place was still standing. Gang Green aren't technically that impressive a band, but listening to them play live, over a decade after punk supposedly died, there's no denying that the movement's zombie corpse can dig itself out of the grave every once in a while, strap on an electric guitar, and explode into the audience's eager faces about twenty times a second for more than forty minutes. The remarkable thing isn't how short these fifteen songs are, but that the band has the stamina to keep up their manic pace for any two songs in succession. I heartily recommend this album for anybody who pines for a listening experience roughly comparable to lying on a bed made up of boxing gloves attached to the ends of running, upside-down, jackhammers.

## SSD

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### *Power*, 1992 CD

SSD is Boston's *original* contribution to hardcore punk. Another band with a fondness for short songs (29 of them in 63 minutes), SSD was to me this shore's answer to the Buzzcocks. Would this have occurred to me if they hadn't have covered "No Reply"? Yes, I think it would, for the same reason that their version of the song sounds remarkably like the original. SSD's beginnings, their development and to an extent their attitude all resemble the Buzzcocks'.

Both bands play fast, but basically play pop music, however warped. In both cases, the early stuff is *mostly*

fast, and the later work gets more sophisticated. Neither band relies as extensively on lyrics as, say, the Dead Kennedys or the Jam. Both bands broke up after just a few records. Both bands have CD career-overviews that begin with "P".

Conversely, Springa began as a shouter, not a whiner like Devoto or Shelley. The Buzzcocks moved away from punk toward electronics and less-confrontational music, while SSD moved away from punk towards heavy metal. The Buzzcocks never covered an SSD song.

This expansive compilation seems to do a good job covering SSD's career, though since it's my only exposure to them I'm only guessing at that. The 29 tracks cover the years 1981-1985 with 4, 7, 10, 3 and 4 tracks respectively (plus one undated one) and at least nine of the songs did not appear on the band's four vinyl releases, so existing fans will want this compilation, too.

I arrived in Boston five months after SSD's last show, so SSD is a learned component of my history, not an experienced one. I've never heard anyone cite them as a big influence, cover their songs or play them on the radio (or for that matter, anywhere outside of my apartment), but Trouser Press gave them an entry longer than Squirrel Bait's, but shorter than the Lemonheads', and I figured I could fix half of that.

## Minor Threat

Sliding down the East Coast to Washington, D.C., we encounter Minor Threat, the definitive straightedge punk band, and Fugazi, its musical successor. There are several excellent *non-musical* reasons to like these two bands:

Frontman Ian MacKaye also runs the Dischord label, and refuses all major-label offers, preferring to keep control and do things *right*. Dischord CDs keep record stores honest (or make them look bad, depending) by printing the label's direct, postpaid price on the outside, and while major labels have pushed "list" prices above \$15, the four Dischord CDs here go for \$10, \$10, \$9 and \$8. That's right, not only are they priced in round dollars, not .99s, but the prices have come *down*!

Straightedge is easily the most philosophically-responsible wing of punk music, disavowing alcohol, drugs, sex and violence without diluting punk's manic energy and rage in any way.

MacKaye insists on keeping ticket prices for his bands' shows low, and prevents clubs from opening hours before show time in order to sell more drinks. He also refuses to sell overpriced T-shirts.

MacKaye hates slam dancing, and does his best to run concerts where people don't get kicked in the head.

Despite sticking resolutely to these industry-unfriendly principles and getting virtually no radio airplay or publicity, both bands have achieved strong cult status, and their live shows fill up effortlessly.

### *Complete Discography, 1989 CD*

Another good reason for completists like me is that the entire recorded output of Minor Threat is compiled on this single CD. 26 songs, 48 minutes, \$10.

And the best news of all is that even without all those *external* reasons, this is an awesome album. Minor Threat strips just about everything non-essential out of rock music (including, in MacKaye's case, hair), and pours all the energy they can find into what's left: drums, bass, guitar and shouting. Unlike many punk bands, though, they keep these elements in balance, and manage not to lose an underlying sense of *music*. This is not basically pop in the way that the Buzzcocks were, or metal in the way that SSD became, but rather rock music on its own, original terms.

The songs are sequenced chronologically, as all compilations should be, making it easy to follow the band's stylistic development. The first ten are from 1981's *Minor Threat* EP, and are the fastest and most furious. The position statement "Straight Edge", the bitter "Bottled Violence" and the defiant "Stand Up" draw Minor Threat's line in the sand, and would make a good three-part theme song for the Guardian Angels. The band's title song, "Minor Threat", explains that the "Minor" in the band's name can mean *either* "insignificant" or "young". Which one they really intend I'll leave as an exercise for the reader.

The next four songs are from the *In My Eyes* EP, just a few months later. These are a little less noisy, each instrument a little more distinct. The text of "Straight Edge" here gets boiled down to "Out of Step"'s succinct "I don't smoke, / Don't drink, / Don't fuck. / At least I can fucking think". "Guilty of Being White" is similarly direct, saying "I'm sorry / For something I didn't do". The cover of "Stepping Stone" is perfectly in character.

Songs 15-23 are from the album *Out of Step*, which came out in 1983. These songs are longer (which isn't saying much) and more complex (which is), but no less intense. The pair "Think Again" and "Look Back and Laugh", with their refrains of "Think again" and "Try", summarize Minor Threat's message perfectly: forget whatever useless crap you think you know and try to do better. A fine idea, and some inspiring and invigorating music to accompany the effort.

The last three songs are from the band's last days, toward the end of 1983. "Stumped" is a rough one-off,

"Good Guys (Don't Wear White)" is a cover that they make sound a whole lot like "Steppin' Stone", and "Salad Days" is the band's farewell song, explaining their breakup by saying "Look at us today, / We've gotten soft and fat". They don't sound too soft or fat *to me*, but they'd be the first to remind me that *self-opinion* is the most important thing.

## Fugazi

### 13 Songs, 1989 CD

After Minor Threat burned out, its members dispersed into various D.C. bands, releasing nothing substantial until MacKaye returned with Fugazi. "Fugazi" is not listed in the Scrabble dictionary, forcing me to conclude (thought this *must* be wrong) that the band took it from the Marillion album of that name, which is the only other place I've ever heard the word. As best I can infer from "Fugazi"'s lyrics, the word means something like "incast", that is somebody whom society has rejected not by throwing them *out* (which would be "outcast"), but by grinding them up within itself. The characters in many songs by the Jam would qualify as fugazi, as I define it. Assuming I'm right (a chancy proposition, but one that, in a sense, I've built a book around, so it's a bit late to chicken out now), the transition from "Minor Threat" to "Fugazi" recognizes that youth is no longer a shield that separates MacKaye and his companions from "the world"; they are in it whether they like it or not, and this new context changes the nature of their thoughts drastically.

Although Fugazi are clearly heirs to Minor Threat's hardcore heritage, over the intervening years MacKaye learned a valuable lesson that would later make Nirvana a huge amount of money: manic punk energy is all the more affecting if it's not *all* you do. Accordingly, Fugazi sandblast a few more layers off of Minor Threat's already-lean style to come up with an almost-minimalist approach that actually might have complemented Minor Threat's lyrics better than Minor Threat's music did. It's *essential* for Fugazi's songs. Every note, every noise, sounds deliberate and necessary. Clicking rim shots replace crashing cymbals, the distortion pedals get turned *off* as well as *on*, and the shouting hits *notes*. It's quite striking, really.

The first thing you notice about the lyrics is that there are only two "fuck"s on the whole CD (which represents *two* vinyl releases, *Fugazi* and *Margin Walker*). The next thing you notice is that some of the stuff here is practically *poetry*: from "Bulldog Front": "And I would never say you act without / Precision or

care, but it's all attention / To armor, to the armor you wear so well"; or "And the Same"'s "And what they found out a bit too late / Got covered up with all that hate / And now it's nothing but reaction". Minor Threat's lyrics were the sort that made you go "Yeah!". Fugazi's are the sort that make you go "Hey, who's got the lyric sheet", and then, later, "Wow." From the anti-rape "Suggestion" to the anti-compromise "Provisional", Fugazi stakes out their ground, as they put it themselves in "Burning": "I wanted a language of my own".

### Repeater + 3 Songs, 1990 CD

I discuss each artist's albums, in this book, in chronological order, because that seems to make the most sense. It's rare, however, that you really *need* to experience albums from the earliest to the latest. This is one of those rare cases. *Repeater* was the first Fugazi album I bought, and although I found it interesting, it didn't strike me as all *that* brilliant until I got the Minor Threat compilation and the first Fugazi CD. Heard in the context of those other two records, *Repeater* changed character entirely for me.

In an incredibly courageous musical move, Fugazi constructed this album, in my opinion, by *postulating* the other two. That is, instead of refining the approach they took on *13 Songs* toward some "better" musical goal, they take the musical territory the earlier works charted and burrow deeper *into* it. This is a louder, noisier record than the previous one, but it is in *no* way a return to the same kind of volume and noise that Minor Threat used. Somehow they have rotated the universe so that they've gotten louder, noisier and more intense by going in exactly the opposite direction.

If you harbored the delusion this long that Fugazi was "Ian MacKaye's band", this album will dispel that. Brendan Canty, Joe Lally and Guy Picciotto are both as obvious and as invisible as MacKaye on this ensemble effort. It is a rare album as unified and together as this one. Anybody who tries to claim that punk musicians can't *play* had better be able to swallow a 5" plastic disc whole, or keep the sentiment to themselves.

I'd cite individual songs, but there aren't enough that are *not* standouts for that to be meaningful. This is an album that draws me in so thoroughly that while I'm listening to it the rest of the music world fades away and this music seems to be everything and nothing, both the only album anyone would ever need, and yet something so utterly separate from the rest of music that it hardly makes sense to talk about them together. As you may guess from the amount of book still in your right hand at this point, this impression is not terminal, but this is still an incredible album. If I had a big rubber stamp that said "Masterpiece" on it, I'm sure I

would have smashed *Repeater's* jewel case with it several times before it occurred to me to take the liner book out and stamp *that* rather than trying to get the ink to somehow permeate the whole thing.

### *Steady Diet of Nothing*, 1991 CD

If you don't agree with me (or learn to) about how great *Repeater* is, and why, then you probably shouldn't bother with *Steady Diet of Nothing*. In the world that 13 *Songs* sketched the borders of, and *Repeater* painted oceans and rain forests and glaciers into, *Steady Diet of Nothing* finds Fugazi pulling back and trying to fill in some of the world's details that *Repeater's* broad strokes left out, rather than trying to outdo *Repeater*, which would probably have been futile. The relation between these two albums is, to me, very much the same as that between Talk Talk's *Spirit of Eden* and *Laughingstock*. The first of each pair tears me loose from everything and sets me adrift in its universe. The second albums are the ones I play while I recover. They remind me of the universe I just left, but while I'm listening I'm really thinking either about the world I left or the one I'm returning slowly to, and so I pay the second albums much less attention than they deserve, and it is only because they provide a glimpse of the other world that is *not* loaded with the tumult of associations that I have now attached to the first ones that I am able to get out without injury at all.

Will anybody but me see this? How many people are there in the world that make any sense of my equating Fugazi and Talk Talk, two bands that even I place hundreds of pages apart in my narrative of musical experience? In other words, is there any universality to my personal experience? These are the questions that, in the end, write this book.

### *In on the Kill Taker*, 1993 CD

The initial striking thing about *In on the Kill Taker* is a visual detail. The CD jewel case is one of those ones with a clear tray, in which there is an additional space for art underneath the disc. Found there here is what looks like a sheet of yellow legal paper, with "I will not lie" written on every line in a youthful penciled hand. The intriguing detail is that the graphic on the CD itself is a blown up detail of this, isolating the repetition of "will", implying to me a clever cynicism about the truthfulness of the repeated phrase, and reminding you that Fugazi is still a band to whom things as fundamental as honesty remain pressing issues.

Age has done Fugazi no harm at all. This album not only continues to develop the musical ideas set out on *Repeater*, but it also has some of the coolest individual Fugazi songs in their canon. The furious

"Smallpox Champion" casts American generosity as a disease. The mostly-unaccompanied verses of "Rend It" remind you that the rawest punk doesn't always mean constant noise. "23 Beats Off", a deceptively simple song that sounds for the first half like it's about to break into some good-natured grubby-punk anthem about the joys of eating stolen canned meat after a good skateboarding session, turns out to be a disturbing attempt to understand the spread of HIV. "Sweet and Low" is an ambitious instrumental. "Cassavetes" is a slashing "Fuck You" to Hollywood on the filmmaker's behalf (and beats AMC to building a lyric around "Gene Rowlands" by a year). "Great Cop" is an old-fashioned, sub-two-minute, anti-authority rant. "Last Chance for a Slow Dance", the final song, features a vintage howled Fugazi chorus, "Shot shooting yourself again for what?"

With every album Fugazi makes in this vein, deeper each time out, they drive home an important, and often overlooked aesthetic point: punk and musical immaturity are not synonymous. So many punk bands matured musically by moving out of punk that it can seem that this is what maturing, for a punk band, *means*. Fugazi stubbornly insist that musical sophistication does *not* have to equate to conventional polish. This album is meticulously played and recorded, but with an unflinching dedication to punk values. When the buzzing of an amp is heard faintly in the background, I think it is not because the band can't afford to buy the equipment they really want, or because the producer didn't know how to eliminate it, it is because the buzz of amps seems to Fugazi to be a valid, and even important, part of their music, of *music*, and something they wouldn't *want* to eliminate. MacKaye's vocals are never going to sound like those of a conventionally trained singer, but where punk's original point in this regard was "you don't have to be a trained singer to sing punk", to me Fugazi's persistence is actually saying "people, *this is singing*". Fugazi isn't saying that a lack of talent is okay, they're saying that this is *not* a "lack of talent" to begin with.

The complementary point, also missed by many, is that punk doesn't have to *value* incompetence. A Fugazi album involves as much attention to detail as, at the other end of the spectrum, an IQ album does, and this suggests not only that progressive rock fans ought not to dismiss punk out of hand, but that punk fans ought not to dismiss progressive rock, either. It gave me particular satisfaction to put *In on the Kill Taker* and IQ's *Ever* on my 1993 Top Ten list in a tie. I'm not sure how many people would understand this juxtaposition, but I'm sure there should be more.

## Shudder to Think

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### *Get Your Goat, 1992 CD*

Shudder to Think is another Dischord band, who have toured with Fugazi at least once. These seemed like good credentials, so when *Sweet Relief* had a song by them ("Animal Wild") that I really liked, I went out and got this album to see if they could sustain my interest for a whole album. Disappointingly, they don't. What you think of Shudder to Think will revolve around what you think of their singer, Craig Wedren. His vocals oscillate between a throaty roar and an impossibly weak, barely-in-tune falsetto. On "Animal Wild" the falsetto parts seemed to hit at just the right parts of the chorus. On most of the songs here, they crop up at times and in ways that seem, to me at least, unmotivated. On "Animal Wild" they were exactly what those moments of the song needed. Here I rarely hear a moment of them where I *don't* think that singing normally would have been more appropriate.

Musically, the band is tight, edgy and energetic, and appropriate-enough label company for Fugazi, but they aren't nearly as innovative as Fugazi themselves, and without the vocal gimmick, I have a feeling they wouldn't sound like anything very special to me. The fact that *with* it they sound *worse* pretty much seals their fate as far as I'm concerned. You should listen to a few songs to make up your own mind, and if your record-buying is budget-sensitive you should try to hear them *before* you buy one of their albums. I'll warn you, however, that you may have trouble getting a record store to play more than one of their songs. It doesn't take a very big crowd to ensure that *somebody* in it will find Wedren unbearable enough to inspire violence. So listen quickly.

## Helmet

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### *Meantime, 1992 CD*

On my way from the East Coast to Minneapolis, New York's Helmet makes a fitting, if non-chronological transition.

Helmet's minimalism is, to be sure, not very much like Fugazi's, but to me they nonetheless fit in somewhere between Minor Threat's straightedge and Hüsker Dü's wall of noise. Helmet's version of stripped-down involves clean, unadorned drums and vocals, between which rides a wave of bass and two guitars that could drill through solid metal with Blue-Angels precision.

With heavier drums and a different vocalist, this record could have been in Mega Therion. As it is, the eerily synchronized stop-start music comes out as more *intense* than *powerful*. The vague lyrics produced by the somewhat limp singing help create the sensation that this relentless music arises from some profound disenchantment with modern life, and that *Meantime* is the evocation of some apocalyptic future. Closer examination of the lyric sheet, however, leads to the realization that there's only one song here that's actually *about* anything, and it's about the downfall of MTV VJ Downtown Julie Brown.

Perhaps this band is a failed attempt to construct a robot Pantera. It's an intriguing idea, at least partially successful, and one Interscope Records evidently paid a lot of money for, but I bought my copy used, and I don't play it much.

## Hüsker Dü

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### *Candy Apple Grey, 1986 LP*

Minneapolis' vastly influential punk patron saints, Hüsker Dü made eight records, of which this is the seventh. All the real Hüsker Dü fans I ever met basically thought the band put out six good records for SST, and then switched to Warner Bros. and effectively ceased to exist. The *Rolling Stone Album Guide*, on the other hand, gives them a suspiciously orderly set of ascending star-ratings that goes 1, 2, 3, 3\_, 3\_, 4, 4\_, 5. I'm somewhere in between.

On the one hand, I can't listen to any of the albums before this one. It's not that they are *too noisy*, so much as it is that I can sense the potential for melody, getting drowned under the noise, and that ruins the enjoyment of the noise for me.

This album isn't entirely free of that feeling, but it's pretty close. "Don't Want to Know If You Are Lonely" is the single that finally cracked my resistance to the band. After it, my favorites are the slow primarily acoustic songs "Too Far Down" and "Hardly Getting Over It". Bob Mould's lyrics are uniformly depressing, but well-written. "Eiffel Tower High" is a bit more nonsensical, but has a sort of exuberance that carries it for me. "All This I've Done for You" is a bit too thin and noisy for me, but does get its hook in my side at the end, as the title repeats.

The Grant Hart songs, "Sorry Somehow", "Dead Set on Destruction" and "No Promise Have I Made", seem almost sing-songy to me, like insubstantial pop music played too fast in the hopes that that will disguise its roots. It doesn't quite work.

*Warehouse: Songs and Stories, 1987 LP*

On the other hand, *this* album is awesome. Twenty songs, spread over two discs on vinyl, this work uses its length not for breadth but for sheer weight. I saw Hüsker Dü on tour after *Warehouse* came out, and they played the whole thing, straight through, in order, without a single moment of silence, and then left the stage. They did come back and play a few more songs as an encore, but that was essentially an afterthought. If I have a serious reservation about this album, it is that the production is, on the whole, very treble-heavy and tinny, and I think a stronger, fuller sound could have made this a much different experience, and one I would have preferred. But it's not my record, now, is it?

"These Important Years" sets the tone for the album, saying "These are your important years, your life". "Charity, Chastity, Prudence and Hope" reminds you of the band's usual lyrical fascination, misery, with an odd sardonic twist, describing the meeting of two homeless people as "It was his aluminum / That attracted her to him, / And quite a day there did unfold / Turning garbage into gold".

"You're A Soldier"'s aching chorus harmonies turn the title's three words into a heavily loaded denunciation. "Too Much Spice", an odd plea for moderation, sounds to me like the follow-up to "Don't Want to Know If You Are Lonely". "Visionary", with its way of derailing momentarily at the end of chorus lines, is pretty cool, and "She Floated Away", a half-ballad, sounds in hindsight a lot like Hart's next band, Nova Mob.

"Bed of Nails", which opens the second disk, and "Turn It Around", which starts the last side, suggest Mould's imminent solo career. His voice quavers to keep up with the heavily distorted guitar, as if it would rather not have to. "She's a Woman (And Now He Is a Man)" could be the second half of "Charity, Chastity, Prudence and Hope". And "You Can Live at Home" sounds like the band marshaled all the energy remaining and poured it into one last, chaotic burst of noise. The song trails off into repetition, a perfect ending for an epic album.

Could it have been edited down to about its half length without losing anything? Perhaps. *Should* it have been? Maybe, but then again, what are we in such a hurry for? Sit back and let the noise wash over you.

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**Nova Mob**

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*The Last Days of Pompeii, 1991 CD*

Grant Hart switched from drums to guitar and after a couple of solo releases on SST, picked up a bass player and drummer to form Nova Mob. This record is a strange concept album that somehow merges Vesuvius and the German rocket-pioneer Wernher Von Braun, in a way that is not at all clear to me. There are a number of tracks here that I can most charitably characterize as "psychedelic", like "Woton", "Getaway (Gateway) in Time", "Space Jazz", "Persuaded" and "Lavender and Gray". Mixed in amongst this not-overly-appealing weirdness, though, are three great, straightforward, folky rock songs, "Where You Gonna Land (Next Time You Fall Off of Your Mountain)?", "Admiral of the Sea" and "The Last Days of Pompeii". Why they are set in such deliberately eclectic and obscure surroundings, though, I don't know.

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**Sugar**

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*Copper Blue, 1992 CD*

Mould's return to banddom is decidedly more appealing. He picks up bassist David Barbe and ex-Zulus (and Human Sexual Response and Concussion Ensemble) drummer Malcom Travis (Mould produced the Zulus' *Down on the Floor*) to form Sugar, and the result seems to me to be the band that was lurking inside Hüsker Dü aching to get out all those years, and a big improvement on Mould's two morose solo albums, besides. Mould's distinctive fuzzed guitar gets a much-needed re-equalizing, as does his voice, and the strong, steady rhythm section gives him the support he lacked in Hüsker Dü to make music with some noise, rather than noise with some music. Occasional keyboards help fill out the sound, too.

The Boston influences on this record are very strong. Recorded in neighboring Stoughton with Boston producer Lou Giordano, who is also known to me for working with the Bags, Big Dipper and SSD, this record wouldn't have sounded out of place in the Boston section later in this chapter. "A Good Idea", in particular, is a dead-ringer for the Pixies.

"Hoover Dam" is my favorite song on the album. It sounds a little like Cat Stevens to me, and I can see the last scene of *Harold and Maude* played out on the dam instead of whatever cliff it actually takes place on. "The Slim" and "Slick" are the most like Hüsker Dü, with waves of guitar and Mould's old snarly voice. "Fortune Teller" starts out that way, but breaks

distortion's hold and ends up impressing me much more than any Hüsker Dü song. "If I Can't Change Your Mind" is the least like Hüsker Dü, with its catchy, rollicking melody, clear, jangly acoustic guitar, and sweet vocal harmony.

"The Act We Act", "Changes", "Helpless" and "Man on the Moon" just sound like Sugar. This is a striking debut, if you can call Bob Mould's 11th record a "debut".

### ***Beaster*, 1993 CD**

Not ready for a full new album, but with thirty-one minutes of left over music that Sugar apparently didn't feel like consigning to b-sides, the band put out this six-song interim EP to clear the vaults a bit and remind everybody that they hadn't gotten soft. *Beaster* is a noisy, dark, chaotic journey that always seems to me to go on for *much* longer than just half-an-hour. Most of the reason for this, I think, is the degree of relentless repetition. Mould's guitar howl scarcely ever pauses, and his vocals are buried in the sonic murk, contributing to it. Unable to focus on bass or melody or any such linear element, I find myself caught in the chord-change undertow, dragged bodily back and forth in an unending ebb and flow. There's some sort of Christ theme running through these songs, but I can't make enough sense of it for it to be the element I cling to.

Not that listening to *Beaster* is an *unpleasant* experience. In fact, I quite like it, in the way that undertows themselves could be great fun if there wasn't this associated risk of actually drowning. There are some fascinating fragments of pop songs that occasionally whirl by, particularly in "JC Auto" and "Feeling Better", and the surge always has a solid forward momentum. Still, the whole disc blends together in such a way that I have a hard time treating the whole as much other than a somewhat demented experiment in mood music for feeling dazed and vaguely angry.

## **The Replacements**

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### ***Tim*, 1985 CD**

Minneapolis's second claim to fame (not counting minor local celebrities like Prince) is the Replacements. In place of Hüsker Dü's barrage of distortion and feedback, the Replacements draw from folk, country and other influences best forgotten, and apply to them an approach which combines Soul Asylum, the Ramones and Jonathan Richman for an overall defiant (but tuneful) raggedness. Or, that's what they sound

like to me by this, their fourth album, and first on a major label.

When it works, it's a pretty potent combination. "Hold My Life", "Kiss Me on the Bus" and "Bastards of Young" are definitive post-punk anthems. Singer Paul Westerberg sounds like he psyches himself up for a performance by sinking into a mix of apathy, disgust and drunken stupor, and somewhere in that abyss finds a tragic energy and unselfconsciousness that drive the Replacements' best songs.

As you might expect from a band drawing on such an unstable wellspring of inspiration, the Replacements are wildly, if gleefully, erratic. At many times they are abrasive and corny. "Waitress in the Sky" is a campfire-song attack on attempts to dignify the people who serve you drinks in airplanes and explain how to operate seat belts. "Dose of Thunder" sounds like a Blue Öyster Cult cover. "Lay It Down Clown" and "I'll Buy" are sloppy blues.

Oddly, I find the Replacements most appealing at their deepest moments of apparent near-exhaustion. The last two songs on *Tim*, "Little Mascara" and "Here Comes a Regular", limp along on what sound like the band's last few moments of wakefulness, or perhaps the brink of tears. The effect is, to me at least, genuinely moving, as the band seems to try, but fail, to keep up its rowdy facade.

The Replacements position in my worldview could have been much higher, were it not for a few confounding factors that the band can't really be held responsible for. First, I discovered them at a time when my record-buying budget was much smaller than it is now, so discovering the Replacements didn't lead to a back-catalog buying-binge the way a new discovery does now. Secondly, *Tim* and *Pleased to Meet Me* were surrounded, it seemed, in critical hype married to admiring journalistic tolerance for the band's destructive personal lives, and both of these things annoyed me into not becoming a devoted Replacements fan. Lastly, by the time (now) that I was in a position to fill in the gaps in my Replacements library, the band had made two more albums that didn't intrigue me at all, and some of the things I'd liked best about them I'd come to like even better about Soul Asylum and American Music Club.

### ***Pleased to Meet Me*, 1987 CD**

Nonetheless, *Pleased to Meet Me* is irresistible. I didn't start making Top Ten lists until 1988, but I'm pretty sure both this album and the song "Alex Chilton" would have been strong contenders for the top of a 1987 list. Trading away guitarist Bob Stinson for some organ, sax and horns (and two draft picks), the band improves its sound immensely, and manages to



keep most of the invigorating energy of its former sloppiness without the music having to suffer.

"Alex Chilton" is unspeakably fabulous, and drove me out to find Big Star records, which turned out to be out of print at the time. "Nightclub Jitters" is a slow, jazzy song that sounds like exactly what it says it is. "The Ledge" is a great raw tale of an impending suicide. On "Never Mind", Westerberg's strains deliver a beautiful soaring melody. If anybody reading this is about to make a movie that ends on a deeply meaningful but intensely ambiguous note with a helicopter camera shot pulling back from a tortured, scorned lover standing high on some picturesque natural wonder (Mt. Rushmore would be ideal. Abe.) deciding whether to end his life or begin again, then I'd recommend using Cat Stevens music, except that *Harold and Maude* already did that, so instead you should consider using "Never Mind".

"Shooting Dirty Pool" and "Red Red Wine" are the same sort of boogie-rock as "Lay It Down Clown" and "I'll Buy", from *Tim*, but here they don't strike me as being as corny. I think they sound more integral to the flow of this album, but I might be just rationalizing an arbitrary opinion.

"Skyway" is a slow ballad with mostly just Westerberg accompanying himself on acoustic guitar. Coming after the two raucous preceding songs, it stands in even sharper relief than the similar ballads on *Tim* did there, and it set the stage perfectly for the last song, "Can't Hardly Wait", which feels in context like the unification of all the other moods of the album, and which would also be good on the soundtrack to the movie that, probably, nobody is actually making.

## Soul Asylum

Minneapolis wouldn't be that significant as a place to me just on the strength of Hüsker Dü and the Replacements, but the relatively recent addition to my world of Soul Asylum provides critical mass. As much as I would like to say that I was among the Soul Asylum cognoscenti from the beginning, it just isn't true. I knew the name, and I remember seeing the cover of *Made to Be Broken* around when it came out, but I didn't knowingly hear a Soul Asylum song until "Somebody to Shove", in 1992. That one song was enough to make me suspect that I'd missed something major, and *Grave Dancers Union* made me sure of it. I rushed out and bought the rest of the albums as fast as I could locate them. This means that these seven Soul Asylum albums are among the largest bodies of work I've ever acquired and assimilated from scratch essentially at once. It makes for an interesting perspective, but people who have followed Soul

Asylum along the way will probably not have the same experience I did.

### *Say What You Will, Clarence... Karl Sold the Truck*, 1984 CD

Soul Asylum begins life as a loud, fast, hardcore punk band who might be better suited by their original name, Loud Fast Rules. Most of this album is smashing drums, frantic guitar and bass, and hoarse shouted vocals. The CD restores five songs that were apparently left off the original EP release, but even at 14 songs the album only barely clears 40 minutes. The band's sound has a bit more dynamic range than Hüsker Dü, and sounds less like a failing electrical system, but manic rants like "Draggin' Me Down", "Religiavision" and will probably appeal to early Hüsker Dü fans. The skittish "Spacehead" reminds me a little of the Dead Kennedys.

"Broken Glass", with a shaky but enthusiastic backing chorus, sounds more like British punk bands like the Ruts or Blitz than it does like anybody from Minnesota. "Masquerade", with its superfast shouted call-and-response vocals, sounds like early Suicidal Tendencies for a minute or so, and then breaks into a strange lounge-jazz break for about three minutes (like, come to think of it, the DKs "We've Got A Bigger Problem Now") before collapsing into utter chaos. "Happy" sounds like you're standing on a median strip and two convertibles are speeding past you in opposite directions, one playing Fear and the other playing Sun Ra, both very loud, and the laws of physics are temporarily put into abeyance to allow the Doppler effect to speed up the songs' tempos rather than increasing each note's pitch. "Black and Blue", a live recording from 1981, shows that the band was wise not to start making albums then.

It is the odd slow moments, though, that most presage Soul Asylum's future. "Walking" sounds like an outtake from a punk western, if you can imagine such a thing. "Stranger" is even more interesting, as it showcase Dave Pirner actually trying to *sing*. He's basically unsuccessful, but the attempt creates an interesting vocal tension that will be used to great effect later.

### *Made to Be Broken*, 1986 CD

Later arrives quickly when you buy all these albums at once. This album finds Soul Asylum sounding both more like Hüsker Dü and more like themselves. The production is very much like Warehouse-era Hüsker Dü (*especially* the beginnings of "Tied to the Tracks" and the CD bonus track, "Long Way Home"), but the songs are starting to show signs of maturity. This album also introduces the band's only

line-up change, as *Say What You Will* drummer Pat Morley is replaced by Grant Young, joining Pirner, Dan Murphy and Karl Mueller for the duration.

Country influences are the most evident factor here in Soul Asylum's evolving sound, but it's easy to misunderstand what that means. This is still punk music, and they don't flaunt the Western elements like Thin White Rope does. Instead, the band simply seems to learn a few lessons from country music and uses them to flavor its own style. Piano, some rhythmic variation, and a more story-telling-oriented vocal delivery are the most obvious signs.

"Never Really Been" is my favorite song on this album, and the one that most directly follows from "Stranger". The acoustic guitar, shuffling drums and cowbell contribute to the feel of the song, but it is Pirner's cracking voice that *makes* it. He's still not what I'd call polished, but it's very cool to hear the sincerity in his efforts. I'm torn between knowing how good he sounds later, and loving this stage of the process.

Moments of hardcore intensity are all the more fierce elsewhere on the album, "Whoa!" going the most berserk to balance the other influences with. The combination of better production and a better (*I think*) drummer make this an album that people who like the first album should probably like even better.

#### *While You Were Out*, 1986 CD

Perhaps it's that this third album followed the second so closely, but it sounds more to me like a continuation of *Made to Be Broken* than the follow-up to it. My reaction to it, thus, is somewhat mixed. On the downside, its similarity to the previous record makes it less interesting to me in understanding the development of the band. On the upside, if this and *Made to Be Broken* were a double album, I think this half has some of the best songs. "No Man's Land" is my favorite SA song so far, and "Crashing Down", which follows it, is almost as potent.

"The Judge" and "Sun Don't Shine" are solid hardcore. "Closer to the Stars" has a Grant Hart-like snare syncopation to it, but the melody is nothing like Mould or Hart. "Miracle Mile", with its unswerving backbeat, churning guitars and deep bass makes me wonder if Social Distortion spent most of 1989 studying it. The slow song here is the last one, "Passing Sad Daydream", and it is vocally a little more secure than "Never Really Been", more like "Made to Be Broken". Its outlaw theme is also another country inroad.

#### *Clam Dip and Other Delights*, 1988 CD

This 6-song EP has a funny cover, hilarious liner notes, and mostly unremarkable music. The first two songs, "Just Plain Evil" and "Chains", are confident,

energetic and clear. They are also a little boring. "Secret No More" is an improvement, making good use of both acoustic and electric guitars. "Artificial Heart" is odd. "P-9" is a Dylan-esque interlude with credible harmony vocals, even. "Take It to the Root" sounds like a punk version of Jimi Hendrix, and could be a Bags cover. This stuff is probably interesting enough for SA fans, but if you are new to Soul Asylum, don't let the lower price on this novelty lure you into making it your starting point.

#### *Hang Time*, 1988 CD

*Hang Time* is Soul Asylum's first major-label release, and the increased studio budget is obvious. The opener, "Down On Up to Me", is edgy and oddly paced, but very much in keeping with the band's earlier work. "Little Too Clean", however, clicks into an irresistible groove and may be the first true Soul Asylum *rock* song. "Sometime to Return" wastes no time adding to that count, but "Cartoon" is folkier.

"Beggars and Choosers", as the album settles in, reminds me that, without making a big deal about it, Soul Asylum has learned to play pretty well. Pirner's voice sounds great, Young's drumming is superb, and the surge of guitar and bass wrings out more energy than ever, despite having left behind most of the characteristic punk sloppiness. "Endless Farewell" is a slow dirge, and "Standing in the Doorway" is another great rocker.

"Marionette" raises the ante again. Tossing in some quasi-orchestral percussion and the catchiest hook yet, its 3:24 plays like a Queen epic stripped of pretentiousness. "Ode" keeps you guessing by whipping through another short grungy Bags-like song. (*Rock Starve* was 1987; I wonder if Soul Asylum heard it?)

The fast "Jack of All Trades", the silly "Twiddly Dee" and the very-noisy (and presumably sarcastic) "Heavy Rotation" round out the album. Or appear to. There is actually a thirteenth track hiding on the CD, a *very* silly ditty ("ditty" is the best word for it, really) called, perhaps, "Put the Bone In", about a considerate shopper wanting to take a treat home to her dog, who has been hit by a car. It's not clear from the text whether the dog survived the impact, which makes it hard to tell whether this story is touching or grisly.

How you react to this album is probably linked to how you react to *Candy Apple Grey* and *Tim*. All three Minneapolis bands changed noticeably when they switched from indie labels to majors. In all three cases *I* think it's an improvement and a maturing, but there are undoubtably die-hard hardcore fans who will see all three as sell-outs. There's something inexorably self-defeating about only liking bands as long as nobody

else likes them, though, and I refuse to succumb to such inverted elitism.

### *And the Horse They Rode In On, 1990 CD*

And just as with Hüsker Dü and the Replacements, I like the second major-label album even better than the first. This one hits its stride with the masterful “Veil of Tears” and “Nice Guys (Don’t Get Paid)”. “Veil of Tears” adds two factors that hadn’t been too evident before this. First, this song has some of the feel of such Seventies rock and roll titans as Thin Lizzy and the Rolling Stones. Just a touch, but mixed in with the punk and country influences already at play, it works great. Secondly, the lyrics, never as significant components of Soul Asylum songs as they might have been, here attract (and reward) notice for almost the first time. “Veil of Tears” is just a taste of these two things, though, compared with “Nice Guys”, which is high on my list of the coolest songs ever. Slipping easily from quiet to huge sonic assault and back, this is a pointed character study of a city in decay, in which “the gangsters, cowboys, gypsies and free-wheelers have sold out their trades to become drug dealers”. It’s pretty sad when the rewards for traditional heroic roles are so much lower than those for destructive crime. This is what people mean when they say that teachers ought to be paid more than baseball players, too, but the fact is that our social system requires a lot more teachers than baseball players, and there are some economic arguments that the large effect the small number of baseball players have on people (and the shortness of baseball careers, at least relative to teaching) justify their salaries after all. The cowboy-to-drug-dealer conversion is even more disturbing, though, as it says that what used to be outlets for individualism have been turned to roles that sap society’s strength. The gangster-to-drug-dealer trade says that, on the other side, we’ve lost the one role for criminals that fosters at least *some* sense of community responsibility. *Are there any fields left that reward social value with financial well-being? Art, sometimes, and that’s about it. Some nation...*

This album would be worth the price to me even if all the songs other than “Nice Guys” were outtakes from a rehearsal for the Emergency Broadcasting System noise, but in fact they aren’t. “Something out of Nothing” borrows some of the funk from “Take It to the Root”. Murphy’s “Gullible’s Travels” puts Bernie Worrell’s guest melodica to good use. “Brand New Shine” starts out like it’s going to be Stray Cats rockabilly, but breaks loose on the choruses. “Easy Street”, another amazingly catchy song, takes the wise precaution of declaring, in case the band becomes megastars, that “If we ever get to Easy Street we can

say with a smile, ‘I came just for the ride’”. And in fact, they seem to have dealt with the fame that followed *Grave Dancers Union* relatively well, though it will be interesting to see what their *next* album is like.

“Grounded” is another easy-going countryish tune. “Be on Your Way” balances it out with a tension that hearkens back to the second and third albums. “We 3” is introspective and *really* reminds me of Thin Lizzy, though I can’t explain why, so your mileage may vary. And “All the King’s Friends” ends the album in good style, with some great tempo changes and a neat guitar solo.

All in all, in case I didn’t make this clear, I *love* this record.

### *Grave Dancers Union, 1992 CD*

And this is where I came in. My first Soul Asylum album, this was my #2 album for 1992 (after only Tori Amos’ phenomenal *Little Earthquakes*), and the song “Black Gold” was #2 on my Top Ten Songs list (after Tori’s “Silent All These Years”). I wasn’t the only one impressed by it. First, for a while Soul Asylum, Arrested Development and Nine Inch Nails were MTV’s idea of a “music revolution”, and you may have heard “Somebody to Shove” once or a hundred times. It looked like Soul Asylum were finally getting the breakthrough they’d deserved. Then “Black Gold” hit and did as well as, or better than, “Somebody to Shove”, and things looked *really* good for Soul Asylum. Then the gentle “Runaway Train”, with a harrowing missing-persons video, soared straight out of “music revolution” into the top ten, and won a *Grammy*, and suddenly Soul Asylum were stars, performing at Clinton’s inauguration, appearing on compilations, and releasing a few more of these tracks as singles just to give pent up Soul Asylum demand somewhere to be released. Dave Pirner wound up dating Winona Ryder, and singing Paul McCartney’s parts in the Beatles movie *Backbeat*. The good guys won one.

And even more remarkably, through all of this I’m nowhere near sick of this album yet.

The vehemence of “Somebody to Shove” prompted many comparisons to Nirvana, and there must be something to this, as I’ve listed Nirvana next. In fact, in my write up of my 1992 Top Ten lists I said that if *Grave Dancers Union* didn’t sell as much as *Nevermind* or *Ten* that I wouldn’t know why. My friend Marty said it didn’t sound to him like Soul Asylum had as much range as Nirvana or Pearl Jam, and I can see how you might think that from just “Somebody to Shove”, but the album as a whole shows far more versatility than Pearl Jam, who I abhor, and I think it even shows a wider musical range than that of Nirvana (who I liked a lot, as you’ll see).

"Somebody to Shove" is a raw, angry scream of a song, merging an aching loneliness with a need to vent pent up frustration. It is a desperate call for *contact*, of any sort, and it also rocks hard enough to finally break Seattle's lock on the media. It *sounds* like the commercial vindication of a band that has resolutely stuck to its principles, which is pretty much what this album turned out to be.

"Black Gold", when I described it on my list, got one word: "America". It's an impressionistic depiction of playgrounds, urban violence, cars, racism, desolation and personal courage, and to me touches on an amazing range of the things that make the United States unique (for both good and bad), especially given how few words it actually uses. It also has, musically, the ability to go from quiet to raging in an instant, just as could "Nice Guys" and, for that matter, "Smells Like Teen Spirit".

"Runaway Train" is a mournful, graceful country-ish song that complements the first two songs nicely. "Somebody to Shove" is furious, "Black Gold" a mixture of melancholy and anger, and "Runaway Train" mostly sad. Predictably, as this song climbed the pop charts, hardcore Soul Asylum fans began queuing up to brand them sell-outs and castigate this song as execrable. The ones that waited to kvetch until the song became a hit earn my suspicion immediately, as I defy anybody to have predicted the day *Grave Dancers Union* came out that they'd even *release* "Runaway Train" as a single, let alone that it would get Dave Pirner on national television with a statuette in his hands. The ones who thought to complain about it immediately, though, have a point, in that "Runaway Train" is the most pronounced example yet of Soul Asylum's musical progression out of straight punk into a mature musical form that owes as much to folk and country as to hardcore. Pirner has been quoted as saying that his life changed the day he realized that punk and Woody Guthrie were really all the same thing, and Soul Asylum have grown into a particularly convincing illustration of this insight. Still, if you wanted them to stick to hardcore punk, "Runaway Train" is both their farthest divergence from it and a pretty clear statement that they don't ever *intend* to go back.

Having made their point with that triptych, Soul Asylum turns the intensity back up for "Keep It Up", which rumbles and boils, and features the best "Na na na na" chorus since Greg Kihn's "Breakup Song". "Keep It Up"'s quiet side is louder than "Black Gold"'s, so it is appropriate that "Homesick", which comes next, is a higher-intensity ballad than "Runaway Train".

"Get On Out" has the feel of an old folk song ("Worried Man" is the one I'm thinking of, not "Roll On Columbia" or the "Erie Canal"s), translated into the

Nineties with delicious consequences. A light sprinkling of organ backs up the driving guitars and leads into a great rave-up ending. "New World" lets up on the accelerator again. Have I mentioned how well paced I think this album is?

"April Fool" is Soul Asylum's romping take on hard rock, appropriating several handy elements of bands like AC/DC and Aerosmith. The processed background vocals and the larger-than-life drums and guitar are both cool and hilarious, the band reveling in the genre while mocking it. Pirner's expressive voice is especially good in this setting, showing again that technical ability and musical versatility are far from synonymous.

While its tongue is lingering in the area of its cheek, the album goes on to "Without a Trace", the song from which its title is taken. With great lines like "I might as well join the Mob, / The benefits are okay", and "Trying to do the right thing, play it straight / [But] the right thing changes from state to state", this one turns its melancholy on itself. "Growing Into You" gets back up to party speed, and in a way sounds like the end of the record.

Instead of ending, though, *Grave Dancers Union* tacks on two more songs that sound as if the deliberate mood-oscillation of the rest of the album has finally spun out of control. "99%" is a wild, noisy, Sonic-Youth-like rollercoaster, just in case anybody has forgotten the band's hardcore roots. And while you're reeling from that, "The Sun Maid" ends the album, a sumptuous lullaby with sparkling acoustic guitar, tasteful orchestra, and very funny lyrics. I especially admire Soul Asylum for ending with these two songs, because, as we used to say in fiction-writing class, they had *earned* a triumphant ending, and could have gone out in hard-rocking, if predictable, fashion, with another song like "Somebody to Shove". It would have made sense in terms of pace, and it would have made the album more consistent, but it would also have made it less interesting. Together, "99%" and "The Sun Maid" show that Soul Asylum is going to stick to their own standards, and give in to pressure from neither commercialism nor their own past.

I like this album better every damn time I listen to it, and I have a strong feeling it'll end up in strong contention for the list of the best albums of the Nineties. In fact, I think I'll listen to it again right now.

## Archers of Loaf

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### *Icky Mettle*, 1993 CD

I like this album, but it's not as clear to me whether I *support* it or not. The early nineties has seen a rash of new punk bands, heirs of Hüsker Dü, the Replacements and early Soul Asylum artistically, and Nirvana, Sugar and *Grave Dancers Union* commercially. This has brought us quite a number of competent bands who understand both noise and melody, and who make songs suitable for either happy dancing in yuppie apartment living rooms or ramming two-by-fours into old black-and-white television sets in some teenage alley hideaway. Part of me applauds this trend, as I'd much rather have a glut of bands like this than dozens of Soup Dragons and Inspiral Carpets. At the same time, part of me *does* recognize the wave of them as an artifact of fashion, and wants to hear more from any specific example than just what got them along for the ride.

Sometimes I think Archers of Loaf do have an identity enough their own. Sometimes I think they don't, but that it doesn't really matter. Sometimes I think that listening to this album is just killing time. If the Archers of Loaf have a unique niche, it's a knack for melody that makes perfect sense for a band from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, the heart of Connells guitar-pop country. This is a noisy record, but the songs on it aren't necessarily very noisy by nature. There are conventional verses and choruses in here the way there are not, for example, on Fugazi records.

Part of my ambivalence comes from not knowing what *intent* to attribute here. Are these guys really pop songwriters who've decided that noisiness is currently more salable? Are they sincere punk rockers who can't help slipping into hooks every so often? Is this all they can do, or have they chosen to sound like this because this is how they *want* to sound? You'll object, I hope, that it ought to be possible to appreciate their work without having to know about the impulses that went into it. But actually, that's my point: this album seems to raise those questions itself, and then not answer them. It sounds good, but when I get to the end of it I'm not sure how much I've enjoyed myself.

## Nirvana

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Disclosure time again. I'd never even *heard* of Nirvana before "Smells Like Teen Spirit". In fact, I even passed up an opportunity to see Nirvana in September of 1991, in order to see School of Fish in the club next door. While I don't necessarily think this was

a bad decision in itself, I'd already seen School of Fish once, only a few months before. Oh well.

### *Bleach*, 1989 CD

Nirvana's first album has by now sold lots and lots of copies to *Nevermind* consumers with an extra \$15. I would love to know what most of them think of it. I like it, but its appeal is much more subtle than *Nevermind*, and it's not at all hard to figure out why *this* album wasn't the breakthrough that the second one became.

In contrast to *Nevermind*, most of the songs on *Bleach* have only one mood each. And more often than not, that mood is "murky". Now, some of you may say, indignantly, that "murky" is not a "mood", but it is *here*. Heavy bass, mumbled lyrics and forceful but muted guitars combine to form the prototypical grunge stew, for which "murky" is as good a term as any, thank you.

Kurdt Kobain and Chris Novoselic are joined here by drummer Chad Channing and second guitarist Jason Everman. I don't think Channing is as good as Dave Grohl, and the extra guitarist doesn't add much. Or rather, deleting a guitarist didn't lose much, to be historically accurate.

There are some excellent songs here, still, and serious Nirvana fans will enjoy themselves, I feel certain. "About a Girl" and "School" are really good (catchy and explosive, respectively), though live versions of them are also available elsewhere. The cover of "Love Buzz" is terrific, and has some particularly good bass playing. "Negative Creep" is especially chaotic and wonderful, as is "Scoff". "Mr. Moustache" and "Sifting" are about as grungy as is possible, with nearly-subsonic bass and chugging unison guitar. The closest I come to not liking a song on this record is "Floyd the Barber", which was a title after Primus' heart, but not as remarkable a song.

An interesting note on the back of the album points out that it was recorded by Jack Endino for \$600, though it isn't completely clear whether they mean that the entire budget was \$600, or that that was Endino's fee.

### *Sliver*, 1990 CD5

I'm guessing at the date of this four-song EP, as it contains no useful liner information. It seems to me from the sound that only Kurt is playing guitar here, but it's hard for me to tell who's drumming, and I certainly can't figure it out from the right elbow visible in the cover photo.

"Sliver" and "Dive" are the two new songs, and live versions of *Bleach*'s "About a Girl" and "Spank Through" (origin unknown) are the other two. "Sliver"

and "Dive" are both phenomenal, and begin to show signs that the conceptual breakthrough responsible for *Nevermind* is imminent. Then again, both songs are on *Incesticide*, which you'll want, so that half of this EP is obsolete.

The live version of "About a Girl" is, well, not the studio version. I don't have much else to say about it. "Spank Through" is another Nirvana song, stylistically in keeping with the songs on *Bleach*. If you can't bear to let a Nirvana song get away, you'll buy this, and otherwise you won't. So I'll stop talking about it.

### *Nevermind*, 1991 CD

Unless you spent 1991-92 in the Osmond's guest bathroom, you heard "Smells Like Teen Spirit" a million times. Then you heard "Come as You Are" a few hundred thousand times, "Lithium" until you woke up mumbling the lyrics, and "In Bloom" enough to flatten a small midwestern city, just for good measure. If you watched much MTV you also got to see "Territorial Pissings" a few times, just for variety. And if all those didn't get you to buy the album, then what the hell's wrong with you?

*Nevermind* is, to be blunt, a masterpiece. It was single-handed responsible for a paradigm shift in how music is marketed, it turned Seattle from a joke about bad weather to a cultural Mecca, and in its wake it is hard to remember that the state of rock music *before* its release wasn't actually that bad.

Like many momentous upheavals in history, this one is due to a relatively simple insight. Sometime in 1990, it must have occurred to Kurt Cobain that instead of writing slow songs and fast songs, he could write songs that have both slow parts and fast parts, in the *same song*. In fact, if he did it right, the fast parts could end up making the slow parts even more intense, and the dynamic of the changing levels could play off the lyrics well enough that he could afford to stop mumbling so much.

Depending on how perceptive you are, it either takes :15 or 1:15 of "Smells Like Teen Spirit" to be sure that he was absolutely right. There are harder, faster, louder, angrier punk bands by the dozens, but musical intensity is relative, and by including both ends of the emotional scale Nirvana is able to *effectively* outdo everybody else without having to actually *play* faster, louder or angrier.

Once the music got things started, there were other factors that fueled Nirvana's success, in my incisive analysis. First, Kurt Cobain started spelling his name Kurt Cobain, which Mommar Khadafi could tell you is a surefire way to get some extra press attention. Secondly, Kurt and Chris Novoselic were basically goofy, likable, kind-of-ordinary people, and when you

saw them on interviews they didn't seem like people who were *trying* to start a trend, nor utterly appalling wastes of human life, and you didn't get irritated to the point of incoherence by the thought that they were getting lots and lots of money, like I get whenever Guns and Roses or the Black Crowes come on. Third, the cover photo of a baby paddling blankly after a dollar-bill on a hook was a classic, and had the "fuck you" spirit that tends to excite teenagers, college radicals and other people who haven't quite been clubbed into immobility by their lives yet. Fourth, Cobain's lyrics and the band's whole attitude resonated with a whole generation of people who have basically felt dulled into a near-stupor by both the micro and macro details of their surroundings. Fifth, David Geffen was smart enough not to fuck up a good thing. Sixth, the album featured, after the last listed song, a ten minute period of silence, and then the bonus song "Endless Nameless". The long silence is a hilarious touch, and, in an amusing reversal of the usual way of things, the first pressings of the album *don't* have it, so the "collectors'" edition is actually worse to have than the easy-to-find one.

There must be some more reasons to like *Nevermind*, but the truth is that the Nineties aren't likely to make much sense without it, and twenty years from now if you don't have a copy of *Nevermind* you can pull out and show people, they will look at you like you lived through the Sixties and don't know the difference between the Sexual Revolution and the Boer War. So pick one up now while it's still not too embarrassing to admit that you don't have it *yet*.

### *Smells Like Teen Spirit*, 1991 CD5

This single features two new songs and a remarkable picture of Cobain playing guitar while balanced on his head. This photo is another in a series of good pictures of Kurt risking or sustaining painful-looking injuries in the service of his music. The liner to *Bleach* had him sprawled across the drum set, the video for "Come As You Are" has him swinging around wildly on a chandelier, and the video for "In Bloom" had him getting hit in the groin with some stage prop. And then there's the scene of Chris Novoselic hitting himself on the head with his bass during an MTV awards show.

The songs, "Even In His Youth" and "Aneurysm", are also excellent. "Even In His Youth" sounds more like older Nirvana, but "Aneurysm" would have fit in just fine on *Nevermind*. "Aneurysm" is on *Incesticide*, but "Even In His Youth" isn't. Worth \$4.99 to me.

### ***Come As You Are*, 1992 CD5**

This one is less essential. The art is unremarkable; Dave Grohl is grinning like a maniac, but then again almost all pictures of Dave Grohl seem to show him grinning like a maniac. Frankly, if I was him I'd probably spend most of my time grinning like a maniac, too. I like my job, but if you offered me outrageous sums of money to play drums *really* hard for a few years, I'd, well, I'd think about it.

The two other songs here are live versions of "School", from *Bleach*, and "Drain You", from *Nevermind*. Both are killer, but the originals weren't lacking much to begin with, so you won't be laughed out of cocktail parties for not knowing these versions. You might want to carry a copy with you to enliven such events, though, if your life involves going to too many.

### ***Lithium*, 1992 CD5**

This single's liner has, in extremely small print, the lyrics to everything on *Nevermind*, which did not, itself, come with words. Actually, that's what it *claims*, but the omission of "Endless Nameless" from the transcripts makes this statement slightly inaccurate. At any rate, the lyrics are reason enough to buy the single. To take your mind off the fact that you are paying another \$5 for the lyrics to an album you already bought, Geffen includes two more new songs, a live recording of "Been a Son", a great song about being a daughter of parents who wanted a son (this is also on *Incesticide*), and "Curmudgeon", a very cool and equally chaotic song that is otherwise unavailable.

### ***Incesticide*, 1992 CD**

By the end of 1992, thousands of critics worldwide were sitting around in eager anticipation of tearing into whatever Nirvana put out next. In a strategically brilliant move, the band launched a pre-emptive strike by putting out a 15-song rarities/outtakes compilation well in advance of their third studio album.

The fact that a band was able to sell a full-length outtakes collection after, in most people's awareness, only one album, is pretty remarkable, and the record itself is even more remarkable.

Several of the songs are repeats for the dedicated collector. "Dive" and "Sliver" are from the 1990 EP. "Been a Son" was on the "Lithium" single in live form. "(New Wave) Polly" is a remake of the *Nevermind* song "Polly". "Downer" is from *Bleach*. And "Aneurysm" was on the single for "Smells Like Teen Spirit".

The rest of them are new to me, though. "Molly's Lips" and "Son of a Gun" (both Vaselines covers) and "Turnaround" (another cover, but I don't know of

whom) are from a John Peel session. "Beeswax", "Mexican Seafood", "Hairspray Queen", "Aero Zeppelin" and "Big Long Now" are all produced by Jack Endino, making it seem likely that they are leftovers from the *Bleach* era. I have no idea where "Stain" is from.

There is also a long personal message from Kurt in the liner that does an excellent job of solidifying his reputation as "not a jerk", and is one of the more genuine pieces of rock journalism I've seen. I wish more people would write things in their liner notes, because I almost always enjoy reading them.

The collection isn't as cohesive as *Nevermind*, for obvious reasons, but it is surprisingly consistent, and well worth getting if you like the band at all. It focuses on a side of the band that is much rawer than *Nevermind* alone might lead you to believe, and as such this collection served to foreshadow a follow-up to it that wouldn't simply try to replicate it.

### **"Puss" / "Oh, the Guilt" (The Jesus Lizard / Nirvana), 1993 CD5**

The wait for the third real Nirvana album was further eased by this joint single from Nirvana and friends the Jesus Lizard. They don't play together on the songs, which would have been neat; "Puss" is the Jesus Lizard's, and "Oh, the Guilt" is Nirvana's. "Puss" is okay, but won't get me to buy any Jesus Lizard records. "Oh, the Guilt", on the other hand, makes me laugh hysterically, and uncontrollably, with joy. Cobain's singing on the chorus (if you can call it that) is completely and utterly out of control, and it's positively wonderful. I'd *really* like to hear Tori cover *this* one!

Stories I read about this made it sound like it was only going to be released in a limited run, and only as a vinyl 7", but Boston stores were well-stocked with this cheap Canadian CD5 version as of its release, so I don't know how "limited" it really ended up being.

### ***In Utero*, 1993 CD**

I don't listen to this album. I'm not sure it's fair to say that I *can't* listen to it, because it's more of an intellectual reaction than an emotional one, but I don't put it on any more, and I'm not sure whether I ever will or not. (It is the only entry in this entire book written without having the subject playing at the time.)

The reactions I have to and around this album are complicated, but they center inevitably on Kurt Cobain's suicide in 1994. I was too young for Kennedy's assassination to mean anything to me, not enough of a Beatles or Elvis fan for Lennon's or Presley's deaths to affect me personally. I've been sorry to see many

talented artists die, but until Kurt's death, no celebrity's demise had ever felt like an event in *my* life.

He wasn't a hero to me, he didn't speak *for me*. We were almost exactly the same age, but my childhood traumas were the ones that come from being smart, small and slow, not from being misunderstood or abused. There are ideals Kurt and I probably shared, but not that many experiences. When he killed himself, there wasn't any danger I'd consider it a cue for action of my own.

It bothered me deeply, though, for other reasons. While I didn't see myself in him, I recognized that a lot of people seemed to. In a star climate previously filled with people like Michael Jackson, Axl Rose, Mick Jagger and Madonna, all people who their fans are expected to admire more than to identify with, Kurt *was* his fans. He wore his own clothes, shaved sporadically, got in fights with his girlfriend, got depressed, played guitar. To the extent that Kurt's chance at success represented the dreams of everybody sitting in shabby apartments eating 13¢ hot dogs and watching staticky *Brady Bunch* reruns, his suicide was a horrifying message that the best this life could get wasn't even good enough, and it made me hope desperately that no staggered thirteen-year-old's parents or teachers would try to make it into an insensitive value-scolding. I recognize that this was speculation on my part; nobody I know identified with Kurt, and perhaps in the end it was all hype, and everybody who bought Nirvana records just did it because "Smells Like Teen Spirit" sounded so much cooler than the Black Crowes. But that's not what it seemed like. When Hole's album, *Live Through This*, came out days after Kurt failed to, it felt to me like the world was unravelling, and that there weren't very many threads left.

In a business that manufactures stars, Nirvana refused to be anything other than people. What they represented, for me personally, was an incredibly important social and artistic experiment: *could* an artist be successful without that success destroying or warping them? Could a couple basically decent guys from Washington somewhere continue to be a couple basically decent guys from Washington somewhere even after a few billion people suddenly decided to mail them dollar bills for having made some good songs with their band?

The incredibly disheartening answer that Kurt's suicide delivered was "No." To me his death was an indictment of the state of popular art and celebrity in modern Western culture, was the touch that proved that the feedback loop produced by mass adulation is in fact inimical to art, and that artists, particularly musicians, who manage to make decent art without being consumed by the machine do so only because luck favors them with few enough fans. The system is not

viable. As I read his suicide note, and he talks about stomach pains, and the commentators talk about drugs, and Courtney wishes she had been there, all I hear is "There was only one thing I could do in life, and it turns out I can't do that, either, so there's nothing left." Plenty of people have called him a coward for killing himself, but I'm not sure I see what else he could have done. He was the wrong sort of person to cope with a form of existence he didn't want and couldn't see how to escape from.

Backing up to Nirvana's music, which it's easy to forget in this discussion, I'm not sure that they weren't painted into a corner there, too. After all the media build-up to their third studio album, and the hints in *Incesticide*, "Oh, the Guilt" and interviews, *In Utero* was *exactly* the album I expected it to be. It failed to do all the horrible things it *had* to not do. The band didn't sell out, didn't soften, didn't give in on anything. After I listened to it the first time I breathed a sigh of relief, and said "Yes, Nirvana proved all their detractors wrong." Already, though, I suspected that I wasn't going to listen to it very often. After we get through all the negative things that are *not* there, there's not much positive that *is* there for me. I don't have anything bad to say about any of the songs, but I don't have any good things, either. The songs don't touch me, don't stick in my mind for any reason. It's as if *In Utero* was simply to prove a point, to earn us the right to put *Nevermind* back into heavy rotation again. But where was it going? Listening to it, can you really imagine Nirvana making another album every couple years for the rest of our lives? I can't. As They Might Be Giants almost put it, they had two albums in them and they wrote the third.

A part of me, then, although this sounds horrible, felt relief when Kurt died. "Nirvana 1989-1994" makes an incredibly compelling and affecting story in a way that I'm not sure "Nirvana 1989-" would have. In David Alexander Smith et al's *Future Boston*, the beaver-looking Phneri treat death as a cause for celebration, on the grounds that a life is a work of art, and death is its completion, so that a person's death means that their life can now be appreciated in full. The end of a life, to them, should no more be a cause of sadness in itself than the end of a book, or the completion of a painting. The story may be sad, but the fact of its completion is not. And so as sad as I think Kurt's, and Nirvana's, story is, I think he found the most powerful ending it could have had, and in killing himself completed one of the most moving works of life-art rock has yet seen.

So if it's sad to you, if it hurts, if it makes you angry? It should.



## Meat Puppets

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### *Huevos*, 1987 LP

The Arizona stop on our drunkard's walk (updating the classical description by adding a hyperspace button) is for Tempe's Meat Puppets. I don't know much about them, and can't say a thing about their other albums, but this one is forever linked in my mind to hanging out in Jenn, Maia, Judith and Andrew's room (Adams A-21) for most of my junior year in college. I feel certain they played other records, as well, but the one song that has come to define the experience for me is the Meat Puppets "Paradise", and to a lesser extent the rest of the first side.

Conventional critical wisdom seems to be that this album sounds exactly like ZZ Top, but that wouldn't ever have occurred to me on my own. The key musical elements are lots of chicka-chicka-chicka between-chord guitar strums, and the strained, but spirited, singing, which is really all that lands this band in Underground.

Still, if you ache to experience what a year of my higher education felt like, this is the record for it. The best way to listen to it, I would claim, is sitting on top of a tall step-ladder, which you would instantly agree with if you saw the sickeningly decayed, monstrous black couch that was the only other thing to sit on in their, ah, "disorganized" common room.

## Sloan

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Having already gone from Minneapolis to Seattle nominally on the way to Boston, it seems to make as much sense to buzz through Nova Scotia, Arizona and California before arriving on the East Coast. Sloan, being from Halifax, which is about as far as you can get from Seattle without actually going somewhere where the weather is pleasant, and being DGC label-mates with Nirvana, seem like an appropriate next stop.

### *Peppermint*, 1992 CD

Actually, this debut EP is *not* on DGC. By a narrow margin of mere months, the band managed to get an indie record out for important underground credibility, before being snapped up by the big time.

Of the six songs here, three reappear on *Smeared*: "Marcus Said", "Underwhelmed" and "Sugartune". The versions here are rawer, less-clearly produced, and to me, less appealing. "Underwhelmed", which in its *Smeared* incarnation is the song that drew me to Sloan, here is badly unfocused, and I wouldn't have given it a second listen. The redone version of "Marcus Said" also

sounds much-improved to me. The two versions of "Sugartune", on the other hand, are close to identical.

Of the other three songs, "Pretty Voice" is my favorite, and I'd have included it on *Smeared*. "Lucky for Me" doesn't catch me. "Torn" sounds like a lost treasure from when the B-52's were a punk band.

You could see this EP as Sloan's *Bleach*, in a sense, and it's an interesting historical artifact for fans of *Smeared*, but I don't think it stands on its own as well as *Bleach* does.

### *Smeared*, 1992 CD

The remixed, buffed, polished and cranked version of "Underwhelmed" opens this album like a cleverer Ozzy Osbourne backed up by the Primitives with a better drummer. Mind you, it takes two or three singers here to produce an overall effect similar to Ozzy's metallic whine, but they get some beautiful harmony as a welcome side-effect. The music owes a bit to Nirvana, with drum gallops leading into the fast parts, but Sloan trades Nirvana's angst for melodic hooks. The lyrics, a love song set in school, are filled with intriguing word play ("rolled her eyes"/"rolled her 'r's") and odd asides ("She was underwhelmed if that is a word / (I know it isn't, because I looked it up)"), and by the end when the girl rejects the narrator because he's "caught up in trivialities", this perspective is wholly understandable from just what we've seen of him in the song lyrics.

The range of this album is breathtaking. At different moments Sloan brings to mind the Pixies, Teenage Fanclub, Smashing Pumpkins, the Velvet Underground, Dinosaur Jr., Sonic Youth, the Jesus and Mary Chain and the Blake Babies. And yet they don't even once sound derivative to me; in fact, I like less than half of the bands I've compared them to, but I think Sloan is great.

Sloan's primary ingredients are squalling, feedback-drenched guitars, solid bass, syncopated drums, classic pop melodies (supplemented on several songs by the ethereal voice of Jennifer Pierce), tantalizing lyrical wordplay, a unique sense of *texture* and a stunning degree of dynamic control. The music is more complex than *Nevermind*'s, and thus somewhat less accessible, but the two bands are in the same general league, and I bet a double-bill would go over well.

Most albums that cover as much stylistic ground as this are almost unavoidably erratic in quality as well, but *Smeared* somehow defies this truism, at least to my ears. "Underwhelmed" remains my favorite song, but just about the whole rest of the album is right behind. The insistent "500 Up", the surging, tuneful "Sugartune" and the warped, fuzzed-out "Two Seater"

are some of my favorites, but the languid "Raspberry" is really the only song I don't feel strong positive feelings for, and I'd hardly call it "bad". The album careens from howling (the chorus of "Median Strip") to subdued (the verses of "Take It In", the very next song), but everywhere it ends up it seems to *want* to be, I essentially never feel lost.

My only complaint, in the end, is that this is one album that I think would have benefited greatly from a lyric sheet, especially seeing as the four inner panels of the liner are taken up with the package's *fourth* band photo, and a poorly exposed one at that. Even without the lyrics written out, though, a fascinating sense of *difference* comes through. Some of it is specific slang, like "L.C.", but most of it is a more general feeling of a freshness of perspective that comes from the relative isolation of Halifax. For all I know, of course, the band sits around all day watching MTV and CNN, and this feeling is entirely fabricated, but if it *feels* real, why quibble?

#### ***Underwhelmed, 1993 CD5***

The European single for "Underwhelmed" adds two unreleased tracks, "Amped" and "Sleepover". "Amped" is short, with pop potential. "Sleepover" is long and slow, filled with low guitar grumbling. Neither get nearly enough production attention to really stand out, in my opinion. Sloan, circa *Smeared*, is to me a band for whom attention to detail is critical, and these two songs are thrown off too casually to make much of an impression.

## **Minutemen**

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#### ***Post Mersh, Vol. 3, 1984 CD***

While I'm reminiscing, the Minutemen are a band that my ex-girlfriend Nora's best friend Herb adored. After listening to his ecstatic eulogies for months, I broke down and bought this random Minutemen CD, which compiles the vinyl releases *Paranoid Time*, *Joy*, *Bean Spill*, *The Politics of Time*, and *Tour Spiel*. This totals 46 songs in just under an hour, which makes them the most succinct band I know, and explains their name.

The Minutemen to me combine the DKs, Fear and late Minor Threat/early Fugazi, taking left-wing politics and song brevity from the DKs, the better playing from Fear, and the stripped-down arrangements from Minor Threat/Fugazi. It all whizzes by so fast, though, that very few of these songs make any lasting impression on me. Still, with 46 songs you don't need a very high retention rate to score

a number of solid successes. "Paranoid Chant", "If Reagan Played Disco", "Shit You Hear at Parties", "Tune for Wind God" and "Party with Me Punker" are superb, and the four covers that comprised *Tour Spiel*, Van Halen's "Ain't Talking 'Bout Love", BÖC's "The Red and the Black", CCR's "Green River" and the Meat Puppets' "Lost", are hilarious.

Like the Dead Kennedys, this is a band that I think is worth having represented in your collection, but I don't imagine that it makes much difference which disc you pick.

## **Mission of Burma**

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#### ***Mission of Burma, 1988 CD***

At last, we reach Boston. As I may have mentioned before, this is where I live (Cambridge, actually), and as a result there are quite a number of Boston bands represented in this book. Underground has a particularly strong cluster of them (plus SSD, from earlier in the chapter), and Mission of Burma is their patron saint (or the one that I will impose, anyway). This Rykodisc compilation combines the six songs from the 1981 EP *Signals, Calls and Marches*, 12 from the 1982 album *Vs.*, and six others, for a hefty 80-minute overview of the band. It's a solid portrayal of a dynamic band, and positively required for an understanding of Boston local history.

It also has several classic songs of wider influence. "Academy Fight Song" was a favorite REM encore (and went over *very* well at Boston Garden). "That's When I Reach for My Revolver" is one of American punk's finest creations, and "This Is Not a Photograph" and "That's How I Escaped My Certain Fate" back similar titles with similarly great songs. "OK/No Way" sounds like the Buzzcocks doing a Devo cover. "The Ballad of Johnny Burma" serves pretty well as a theme song. The slow, moving "Einstein's Day", and the cacophonous "Fun World" provide intriguing contrasts. The collection ends with the Stooges cover "1970", Mission of Burma in turn acknowledging *their* influences.

## **Pixies**

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#### ***Come On Pilgrim, 1987 CD***

One of the most successful denizens of Boston's Underground scene, the Pixies materialized only about half-formed on this debut EP. They begin life as a highly charged punk band with a penchant for

stopping suddenly, singing in Spanish, and screaming very loudly. Kim Deal's added vocals and an overall obscurity of attitude mark them as 4AD products like Throwing Muses, but the tide of energy overwhelms the quirkiness and atmospherics that are 4AD's mainstay.

"The Holiday Song" is probably my favorite song here, a cowboyish romp that careens along on Black Francis' demented voice. "I've Been Tired", with an even more-crazed sung/spoken intro/verse that gives way to a shrieked chorus, is a sign of coming greatness, but the overall effect of this record on me is nowhere near as strong as the second one's. I shelve it, along with *Peppermint* and *Bleach*, in the "historical interest" vault.

### ***Surfer Rosa*, 1988 CD**

Such relatively humble origins instantly forgotten, this second album crashed into my life like very few have ever done, causing me to run around for several days unable to make conversation on any other topic, as I tried to impress the enormity of the Pixies accomplishment on completely random people solely through the intensity of my enthusiasm. I've used "manic" several times in this book already, and I'll use it many more times, as it's a useful adjective, but if I could have spared it, I would have loved to reserve it for describing only this album.

The Pixies toss out the conventional verse-chorus structure and replace it with a scheme that instead alternates between "lunatics are running the universe" and "lunatics are running the universe, *and they're chasing us!*" Francis and Deal's vocals don't just sound a bit crazy, like on *Come On Pilgrim*, they sound like complete gibberish that makes *perfect sense to them*, which is much scarier, and infuses this music with riveting tension. In the moments when it all comes into sync, like in the refrain of "Gigantic", and catches you up in its wild trance, the release is more cathartic than any that a less-tense record could hope for.

Steve Albini's production beefs up Deal's bass and David Lovering's drums, and keeps Francis and Joey Santiago's guitars out of the way when they aren't in charge, which closes off the usual escape route from the *messages* of gripping punk music, which is losing yourself in the sound itself. By the time the second side comes around, "Where Is My Mind?" starts making perfect sense, which is both very frightening and incredibly exciting.

The surf-rock sweep of "Tony's Theme", with Deal's perky explanation "This is a song about a superhero named Tony. It's called 'Tony's Theme'", either convinces you that this album is an unwelcome intrusion from another dimension, or that it's the basis

for a brand new cult of eternal salvation (come to think of it, those probably aren't contradictory). "Oh My Golly!", whose mostly wordless lyrics adorn the front cover, could confirm either impression.

Perhaps the finest moments on *Surfer Rosa*, however, are the two snippets of studio dialog that surround the remake of "Vamos". I won't bother trying to describe them, but they are two of the funniest things on record that I can think of, and they fit in *perfectly* with the flow of the album, letting you know that not only does all this insanity make perfect *sense* to the band, but that they're actually *enjoying* it. If that doesn't get a sympathetic smile out of you, you're dead.

### ***Doolittle*, 1989 CD**

The third album is even better. No small feat, it manages to overshadow the newness of *Surfer Rosa* by sheer determination. "Debaser", the first song, outdoes "Gigantic" at its own game, "Wave of Mutilation" surpasses "Tony's Theme", and *Surfer Rosa* has nothing to compare with the good-natured pop of "Here Comes Your Man", or the soaring grandeur of "Monkey Gone to Heaven". And that's only side one.

The rest of the record seems to know that it has won, and that now it can have some *fun*. "Mr. Grieves" sounds like cowpunk on the wrong speed. "Crackity Jones" sounds like its title. The lilting "La La Love You" sounds like the soundtrack to an extremely bad beach movie where the good guys love Elvis (or maybe Morrissey) and the villains are into hip-hop.

"Number 13 Baby" is another song that will come back to haunt Black Francis if he ever has to get himself out of a vindictive asylum. "There Goes My Gun" is a priceless counterpoint to "Here Comes My Man". "Hey" is the Pixies' version of the blues, followed by "Silver", a western song that sounds like the cowpokes are singing a duet with the wolves. And "Gouge Away" slips all the elements back into place for one last reminder that for a while the Pixies were one of the best *rock* bands around.

### ***Bossanova*, 1990 CD**

By the fourth album, though, I was beginning to burn out on the Pixies. I'd been playing them a *lot* for two years, and my then-girlfriend Nora liked them, and the radio was playing them, and I began looking at them as something to escape, rather than to seek out. I bought *Bossanova* when it came out, but it barely made the last spot in my 1990 Top Ten list. The Pixies merger of punk energy and tight melodies was giving way in my life to renewed interests in each extreme on its own, with my chart dominated by Megadeth and Iron Maiden on one side, and the Connells and the Beautiful South on the other.

Which is unfair to *Bossanova*, a very well-crafted album that shows the Pixies adapting well to growing minor stardom. It isn't as deliberately scattered as the previous records, but this is because the band is growing, not fading. "Velouria", "Allison", "Is She Weird", "All Over the World", "The Happening" and "Blown Away" are as good as anything the band has done, and "Dig for Fire" may be their finest song, though I can no longer hear it without seeing the sterile suburban-Arizona streets that were in the scene of *Pump up the Volume* that the song played over, and thinking that "digging for fire" somehow captures both the desperation and futility that the movie's characters felt, searching for something *vital*, anywhere.

### *Dig for Fire*, 1990 CD5

In a show of support for the song, I even bought the CD single for it. This was a mistake. With some bands' b-sides it's a mystery to me why the songs weren't on an album. Pixies b-sides, however, are clearly rejects. The Neil Young cover "Winterlong" is uninspiring, and "Santo" just sounds unfinished. Georgia has a couple other Pixies CD5s, and there isn't a single song on them that I think should have been on an album.

It was at this point that my enthusiasm for the Pixies reached its lowest ebb, and I switched their rating from "buy" to "hold". The next and last album, "Trompe Le Monde", I couldn't bring myself to buy. Georgia bought it, so I've heard it, and it's certainly worth getting if you still like the Pixies. If Georgia hadn't gotten it, I'd probably have bought a copy by now just out of a nagging sense of incompleteness. Once it was in our apartment, though, there was no point in my buying it, and I stopped thinking about it entirely. Maybe by the next edition I'll feel like reviewing it.

## Frank Black

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### *Frank Black*, 1993 CD

By most accounts Black Francis seemed to have been the guiding force behind the Pixies, so I had big hopes for his first solo album under a slightly rearranged name. And the first single, "Los Angeles", delivers exactly what I was hoping for. It's crazed, tight, powerful and vivid. The sudden shifts from drifting acoustic guitar to crashing drums and electric are eye-opening, and both sides of the song are very well executed. An album of this, I thought, ought to be *very* exciting.

Is it? Well, it depends on what you mean. Musically, "Los Angeles" remains the album's high point to me, but there are plenty of songs with their own sharp hooks. The cover of the Beach Boys' "Hang on to Your Eye" is catchy, "Czar"'s driving guitar is cool, "Old Black Dawning" and "Ten Percenter" sound a lot like the Pixies, the flamenco-on-speed "Brackish Boy" is amusing, the surf-organ on speed "Two Spaces" is, also, amusing, the instrumental "Tossed" has a great groove, the sinister "Parry the Wind High, Low" is nearly as good as "Los Angeles", and "Don't Ya Rile 'Em" ends the album with a jaunty flair.

The question I'm left asking, though, is "...but what's the point?" Even though I think I like the music, I have strong impression that Frank has a record contract and knows how to crank out agreeable off-center pop songs without putting any real love or sweat into the project, and so that's what he's decided to do. I can say I *blame* him, but the album, after it's over, leaves absolutely no mark on me. I can't think of a single reason to care. The record is crafted, but not inspired. It fills time agreeably, but there's too much great music to use that time for me to need to just *fill* time. Back on the shelf with it.

## The Breeders

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### *Last Splash*, 1993 CD

My reaction to the Breeders isn't quite the reverse of my reaction to Frank Black, but it's a whole lot closer to that than I expected. The spirit of Kim Deal (and her sister Kelley) animates these proceedings in such a way that even though the band's fundamental songwriting skills don't always seem as polished as Frank's, the best of the resulting songs are *much* more impressive to me.

I like the Breeders best when Kim's penchant for haphazard, halting tempo changes and random bizarreness is catered to. "Cannonball", the first single, is clearly my favorite song here. The opening, with distorted "ah-ooh-ooh"s leading to a bass intro by Josephine Wiggs that sounds like she begins in the wrong key, correcting herself just in time for the dry, precise drums to come in, is marvelous. The mangled background chatter throughout the song, together with the charged choruses and the careful rhythm section work on the verses, make a song that I'd hold up to just about anything the nineties have so far produced. Kelley Deal's unpretentiously unschooled lead guitar playing is utterly charming, and Josephine's bouncy two-note bass part fits the song perfectly. Listening to this song is exposure to a strange and wonderfully alien brain.

Several songs have similar strengths. "No Aloha"'s stubborn first-half drumlessness and warped, tinny mock-surf guitar set up the surging second half nicely. "Do You Love Me Now?", reprised from the band's 1992 EP *Safari*, is deliciously slow and deliberate. "Flipside" sounds like the Concussion Ensemble covering Adam Ant's "Zerox". "I Just Wanna Get Along"'s spoken chorus vocals make a great contrast with its noisily churning bass. "Saints" instrumental growl and mock-Sabbath lead guitar balance Kim's unforced vocals nicely.

Some of the Breeders' experiments strike me as less successful. There are a few songs here, like "Invisible Man", "Divine Hammer", "Hag" and the country-swing "Drivin' on 9", that drift too languidly and steadily, and end up reminding me of dozens of other semi-noisy, semi-ethereal alternative rock bands with listless female singers. The two long, largely instrumental experimental numbers ("Roi" and "Mad Lucas") don't interest me much, nor does the short instrumental "S.O.S.".

So I'm not sure I'm a true Breeders devotee, but if the spirit of the Pixies is to live on in some other band's bodies, it's this band or none.

## Throwing Muses

### *House Tornado*, 1988 LP

Throwing Muses are another Boston band, and critically acclaimed at that, so I bought this album having heard nothing of it, in order to correct just that. It did not endear the band to me. "Colder", the first song title, sums up the feeling of the album for me. Take accessible, friendly guitar pop and make it not very accessible and not very friendly – make it *colder* – and you have Throwing Muses. Leader Kristin Hersh seems to be haunted by an obsessive fear of sounding like the Go-Go's, and everything about the band seems calculated to keep it at all times heading at a right angle to the seductive beacon of Bangles/Go-Go's girl-group dance-pop. The guitars are clamorous, not smooth, treading that narrow line between intentionally dissonant and just out-of-tune and off-key. Hersh's vocals seem to waver, break and falter, not because she can't do better, but because she is afraid to. Drummer David Marcizo's rhythms are stiff and halting, functioning as much to *prevent* the songs from slipping into danceability as they do as propulsion.

The Muses favorite compositional technique seems to me to be to have one guitarist pick a strange chord and play it over and over again with no discernible inflection, while the other guitarist cycles through a

series of other strange chords, few or none of which appear to complement the other. Under this the bass wanders, the drums start, stop, speed up, slow down, search for companionship, and find none. Mysterious, vague, and sometimes sinister lyrics are not so much woven into this warp as they are sprayed and drizzled on top like some sort of bitter topping that you might have asked not to have if you'd realized beforehand what it tasted like.

Ironically, for me it is the very determination to avoid pop that ruins the band, because in studiously avoiding it they have implicitly described it by negative space. In moving always at right angles to it, they have in the end just completed an orbit around it, so that it controls the flow of their music just as firmly as if it was their destination. This album ends up striking me as a pop record that is at almost every detail exactly wrong. I find myself longing for the converter box that would *invert* this. Eventually I remember that though I don't have such a converter, I do have *Talk Show*, and that's about what the result would sound like. I take *House Tornado* off and put that on.

### *Hunkpapa*, 1989 LP

So why in the world did I buy another Throwing Muses album? Well, it was a misunderstanding. You see, for most of a song, Throwing Muses slipped and got it right. "Dizzy", the single from *Hunkpapa*, is catchy, fun, kinetic, danceable, upbeat, and everything else that Throwing Muses generally avoid. I let it delude me into thinking that the band had repented, and I bought the album.

"Should have bought the single", I quickly concluded. This is a poppier album than *House Tornado*, but not enough so to make a Throwing Muses fan out of me. "Dizzy" is completely out-of-character, with the rest of the material here being much closer to the previous album than to it. The tenor of the album is, of course, the band's prerogative, but when I take over the world I'm extending the truth-in-advertising laws to require that singles which aren't representative of their albums be clearly labeled as such.

### *Counting Backwards*, 1991 CD5

Taking my own advice to heart, for once, when Throwing Muses put out another cool song, a couple years later, I bought the single. "Counting Backwards" is excellent, but even within the context of a three-song single the band can't manage a consistent mood. "Same Sun" and the "Amazing Grace" rendition that fill-out the disc are angular and unfriendly all over again.

I will not be fooled again. Throwing Muses and I go our own ways.

## Belly

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### *Star*, 1993 CD

Eventually, Throwing Muses and their second guitarist Tanya Donnelly went *their* own ways as well. Tanya spent a little time with Kim Deal's band, the Breeders, and then opted to dispense with being "the other" in anybody else's band, forming her own band, Belly. This first album was critically well-received, even though for a while it seemed like people thought "Ex-Throwing Muses guitarist Tanya Donnelly" was her indivisible full name, and I think it was a commercial success as well, monopolizing the top of the "alternative radio" chart for weeks on end.

But *why*? I like the album okay, but the strength of its apparent appeal eludes me. Plenty of it could be Throwing Muses. Whether this means that Tanya was a more important part of the Muses' sound than people realized, or whether it just means that she learned to write from Kristin Hersh, it's hard to tell. Whichever, much of this album is basically cold and unfriendly. Tanya's voice is prettier than Kristin Hersh let hers be, and the production is smoother than Throwing Muses', but after many listenings I'm driven to the conclusion that, like with Throwing Muses, the album doesn't live up to the singles.

Still, the first two singles from this album are terrific. "Feed the Tree" is a mesmerizing tune, merging some of REM's rumination with some of the Pixies' flair for oblique narrative and effective song structure. The bulk of the song is just Tanya singing with bass and drum accompaniment, but when the guitars come in they swirl around her nicely. The song's fortunes were helped by a good, simple video that concentrated on swinging around Tanya and the Gorman brothers, who help out on guitar and drums, circling like the song and letting Tanya's compelling presence carry the video like it carries the song. It reminds me of a mellower "Dig for Fire".

I bought the album having heard only "Feed the Tree", and immediately latched onto the song "Slow Dog" as the other standout, so I wasn't surprised when it turned out to be the second single. It starts out *very* much like Throwing Muses, with a sour, repetitive guitar line, minor-key vocals and some strange noises. The chorus, however, shatters the resemblance, as the band breaks into a fast, blazing-guitars surge with Tanya's powerful wail riding the crest like Maria McKee somehow stripped of twang. The lyrics, about what I interpret as the mercy killing of an old dog (or the owner's reluctance to perform it), read like some classic short story you would have had to read in middle school, teaching all sorts of lessons about

responsibility, love, mercy, life, death, and the importance of aiming carefully.

The rest of the album varies from agreeable to off-center. Hints of Throwing Muses and This Mortal Coil/4AD influences are frequent (Tanya and Kim Deal sang on one song from TMC's *Blood*), but while I don't think Belly is as successful with the other thirteen songs here as they are with "Feed the Tree" and "Slow Dog", I do think they have established their own sound more positively than Throwing Muses did, and that Tanya shows real potential as a band leader.

## Salem 66

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### *1983-1987: Your Soul Is Mine, Fork It Over*, 1987 CD

From Throwing Muses and Tanya Donnelly it is a natural step to Salem 66, another offbeat Boston band led by women. Salem 66 was critically overshadowed by Throwing Muses, but I actually like them better.

This CD compiles material from an EP, a single and two LPs recorded between 1984 and 1986, all but the last of which were produced by the Neighborhoods' Dave Minehan. The three songs from 1984's *Salem 66* are pretty awful, and it is no mystery why the band didn't feel it necessary to reissue their early work in its entirety. "Across the Sea", the 1984 single a-side, shows distinct improvement. The three songs from 1985's *A Ripping Spin* are better again.

Salem 66 only really gets going, though, with the 1986 album *Frequency and Urgency*, produced at Radio Tokyo by Ethan James, who is sainted in my canon for his work with Pop Art. I don't know how many songs this album had on vinyl, but the eleven on this CD must have been most of them, if not all. On them, the band sounds *real* for the first time, rather than some amusing spare-room hobby. The singers (and songwriters), Beth Kaplan and Judy Grunwald, are not going to win over any hardened Mariah Carey addicts, but they sing like they like singing, and they aren't afraid to try some pretty harmonies on a few of these songs ("Holiday", "Wanderlust"). Grunwald and Kaplan at this stage sound not just a little like Hersh and Donnelly, but where Hersh sounded to me like someone who could sing like Belinda Carlisle and was straining not to, Judy and Beth sound like people singing as best they can, and this makes Salem 66's efforts more appealing to me than Throwing Muses, despite significant sonic similarities.

Of course, a large part of this is that Salem 66's *music* is much more to my taste than Throwing Muses'. Susan Merriam's drumming isn't afraid to hold a steady beat, and Beth's bass and Judy and Stephen Smith's

guitars actually sound like they're playing the same song. There are few musical pyrotechnics here, but the playing provides a solid foundation that combines pop jangliness with punk jaggedness for a hybrid that is abrasive enough to bother your neighbors but melodic enough that you'll enjoy playing it even if they aren't home.

#### *Natural Disasters, National Treasures, 1988 CD*

The next album finds Salem 66 back in Venice, CA with Ethan James, a new drummer (James Vincent) and a new second guitarist (Tim Condon). Experience and the new supporting cast have an instantly noticeable effect, and you are unlikely to mistake *this* album for Throwing Muses. The driving "Lucky Penny" sounds more like Let's Active than Throwing Muses. "Secret" is prettier, airier. It and "You Can't Take It with You", the previous track, make a fascinating pair. Both have catchy, melodic verses, but where "You Can't Take It with You"'s chorus seems to suddenly lose all momentum and almost stall out, "Secret"'s bursts into a strange polka-like hop that reminds me of They Might Be Giants, except that there aren't any accordions and TMBG rarely mention Buddy Holly in their songs.

In a way, this album is less exciting to me than the 1983-1987 compilation. The early songs showed potential, but rarely fully realized it, leaving the imagination room to extrapolate Salem 66's future from a present that clearly wasn't the end of the maturing process. While this album is even better, it's good enough (and the production polished enough) that for most of this album you can imagine that the band now sounds the way they really want to, and that no further "progress" will be made. When the songs work, as with "Suffering Bastard" and the eerie concluding epic "Eightball", this is great, but hearing a less satisfying song like "The Marble" with this production makes it seem too closed, too final, and the fact that the song doesn't thrill me then threatens to extend that impression to the band as a whole. On *Fork It Over*, on the other hand, even the earliest songs, which have practically nothing to recommend them, don't adversely affect my opinion of the *band* at all.

#### *Down the Primrose Path, 1990 CD*

I needn't have worried. Returning to Boston to record their fourth album at Fort Apache with Paul Q. Kolderie and Sean Slade, Salem 66 turns in its best set of all. The change of producers appears to give the band the opportunity of making some additional tweaks to their sound, and this album finds them sounding downright professional. Both singers sound great, and the playing here is terrific. The angular dissonances of Throwing Muses have given way to the

rock power of Tribe as the most obvious point of comparison, not that there are any synthesizers here. There are very few weak spots, and I think virtually all of these songs are better than anything on the band's prior releases.

"Thaw" fires up the engines right away. A roaring intro guitar is joined by rumbling, pounding drums, and Beth's bass, when it comes in, provides a throbbing low end to balance out the slashing guitar lines. Improved songwriting is plainly evident, and "Thaw" is a composition on a whole different plane from most of what the band did on earlier albums. For the first time, I think Salem 66's songs here could survive having the vocals stripped off, which I'm pretty sure would have killed anything up until now. This strength adds a new dimension to the band's sound.

"Bell Jar" is just as impressive as "Thaw". The breathy repeated line "Have you ever been arrested?" anchors the song, and slow guitar arpeggios spin off of it, weaving a delicate melodic web that ensnares me without much strain (though for the longest time I thought the chorus' tag line was "In a Belgium of your own design", which I thought was a clever twist on purgatory, like the B-52's "Private Idaho"). "Ace of Spades" is another enthralling narrative, the Queen of Hearts struggling to explain a personal revelation to the Ace of Spades. It reminds me strongly of Throwing Muses' "Dizzy", and makes me appreciate anew that Salem 66 have managed to construct something I vastly prefer from essentially the same original ingredients that Throwing Muses simply alienated me with.

"Cinderella" may be Salem 66's best song. Hastened along by an infectious ticking that replaces the usual high-hat sound for most of the song, it weaves sinuously through a portrait of Cinderella after her marriage to the Prince that finds her lonely and unsatisfied by her "storybook" life, trapped in it just as surely and depressingly as she was in her charwoman role before she was "rescued". It's an arresting perspective, and one that, as soon as I hear it, I can't believe I haven't run across before this. I mean, after *Wide Saragasso Sea*, you would think that feminists would have gotten organized and ripped up all the other patronizing sexist "classics" once and for all, but either they didn't, or they did and everybody went "Well, yes, you're right, but this way animates better."

After the first wonderful eight-tenths of this album, it comes as a pleasant surprise to find yet another buoyant, sparkling gem, "Can't Hold a Candle to You", lurking near the end. Whole careers have been founded on weaker songs than this. Salem 66's lyrics, which weren't always that notable, have come as long a way as their music, and this song contains one of my favorite of their lines, "Do your kisses taste like water,

/ Do they rise up in your mouth / Like a flood to ruin Texas?"

Having come in with a roar, *Down the Primrose Path* chooses to go out quietly. "Lost and Found", the final track, is a slow, sad meditation on loneliness that finds Salem 66 in control of their darker side in a way that Throwing Muses never managed (and Belly didn't try). Quiet, slow-moving songs are hard enough, but for a band whose progress has mainly consisted of getting faster, stronger, louder, slowing down again without seeming to regress is doubly difficult, but they pull it off. A stirring end to a stunning album.

("Buoyant gem"? Well, it doesn't make sense, but it is what I meant.)

## Blake Babies

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### *Earwig*, 1989 CD

I first saw the Blake Babies in the dining hall of Adams House, playing to a crowd, if you can call it that, of *maybe* a dozen people. Bassist and singer Juliana Hatfield instantly fascinated me, with her striking voice and tendency to give pitches whiplash by flinging them from octave to octave at the most surprising times. The two paradigms of female vocals in popular music, technical competence and raucous rebellion, are rarely transcended, but Juliana does it. Her voice is frail and inconsistent, but she makes no compromises with it, and sings like a cross between Belinda Carlisle and Susan Sontag.

This CD is a mixture of material. Six songs are 1989 recordings (these are the ones with Juliana on bass), seven are reprised from the band's previous vinyl recording *Slow Learner*, with the Lemonheads' Evan Dando playing bass, and two are from even earlier. On the whole I like the later trio's tracks the best, but the correlation isn't as strong as my antipathy for Dando might indicate.

"Cesspool" is my favorite. It captures all the qualities I like about the Blake Babies: Juliana's vulnerable singing, Freda Boner's careful drumming, guitarist John Strohm's knack for pouncing on the distortion pedal right in the middle of a quiet part and pouncing off it again just when you're getting used to it being on. It is a pop song, but one performed with a clear sense that the band has its own identity and agenda that the songs are merely an expression of.

"Dead and Gone", "You Don't Give Up" and "Don't Suck My Breath" are the songs that best fulfill this potential, in my opinion. "Rain", a duet between Juliana and Evan, sounds like a bizarrely mellow X song. "Lament" lopes along unsteadily, like a garage

rendition of an old classic. There's even an actual old classic, the Stooges "Loose". The two earliest tracks are amusing, but no more.

### *Sunburn*, 1990 CD

The next album finds the Blake Babies more focused and more accomplished. Almost none of these songs can be blithely dismissed like several of the ones on *Earwig*. Louder guitars, more-impassioned singing and more-confident compositions all make this a stronger record than the last one.

Unfortunately, at least for me, the band seems to be strengthening *away* from the quirky origins that I found most enticing. The stranger of Juliana's vocal twitches are less in evidence here, as she slips into a more agreeable and acceptable style, so even while the band's playing substantially matures, I find the album a disappointment. There are moments in "Star" and "Watch Me Now, I'm Calling" when Juliana sings in a forced whisper, or holds notes into the zone when her breath begins to fail her, and thus rekindles my affection for the band, but for the most part I find this album blandly accessible and not very distinguished.

### *Rosy Jack World*, 1991 CD

I wasn't willing to give up on the Blake Babies just yet, though. The cover of "Temptation Eyes" that begins this five-song EP restores enough of Juliana's old inability to decide what octave to sing the next note in until *right* before the note starts that I had hope that *Sunburn* was just an anomaly. Strohm's "Downtime", "Take Me" and the Dinosaur Jr. cover "Severed Lips" don't give me what I wanted, but "Nirvana" is terrific. Over a simple acoustic-guitar accompaniment and some claps and fingersnaps, Juliana skitters through a harrowing narrative of contemplated suicide and rescue by music, with the classic chorus line "Here comes the song I love so much. / Makes me want to go and fuck shit up. / I got Nirvana in my head. / I'm so glad I'm not dead." Now, the capitalization of Nirvana here is my addition, and it's possible she was referring to the state of mind, not the band, but I like it better as the band, so there it is.

## Juliana Hatfield

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### *Hey Babe*, 1992 CD

I gave Juliana one last chance with this, her first solo album. Dispensing with Strohm and Boner, she recruits Evan, Bullet La Volta's Todd Phillips and Clay Tarver, the Minutemen's Mike Watt and John Wesley



Harding, among others, to help out. The album was well-received, critically, by which I mean critics other than me. For me it was the last straw. Bad enough that a vocalist with as much unique potential as Juliana Hatfield should cave in and make such a dully alternative album, but did she *have* to redo "Nirvana" with electric guitar, bass and drums, completely missing the perfect incompleteness of the original acoustic version? Shortly after this album came out I saw Juliana play live, and the live appearance provided triangulation that I wasn't misunderstanding the album in some obvious way. Seeing the Breeders play just after her cemented my opinion completely. As much as it hurts to give up on somebody I badly wanted to admire, what she wants to do with herself is none of my business, and I'm sure she'll recoup the loss of my support in fairly short order.

## Buffalo Tom

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### *Buffalo Tom, 1989 CD*

My instinct is to avoid albums that J Mascis has anything to do with, but I made an exception for the first two Buffalo Tom albums, after the third one really impressed me.

This one, certainly, gives me no reason to alter the general principle. Produced by Mascis, and appearing on the same label as Dinosaur Jr., SST, it shares a number of the qualities that do not endear Dinosaur Jr. to me. The first of these is that the album seems to have been recorded under the guiding motto "Who needs to clean tape heads, really?" The sound is murky, the performances slurred; the album is a surge of sound a bit like your kitchen drain backing up, sludge bubbling up out of some unseen reservoir. It is at first fascinating, then momentarily frightening as you wonder if it will stop or if it will overflow the sink and flood your apartment. Then, when it quickly subsides and a quick rinse eliminates all traces of the outburst, it becomes uninteresting. Sludge.

The other major Dinosaur Jr. similarity is the generally limp vocal style Bill Janowitz falls into at times. He doesn't grate on my nerves as much as J does, but Bill definitely has an element of J's determination to deliver lyrics with less energy than you would think possible, given current recording technology. It fits, I'll admit, with the turgid guitar that swamps the album, but I don't much care for either. And when he *does* put some energy into the vocals, which happens often enough, his voice wavers wildly, cracks, breaks and otherwise flounders. I'm not a vocal-

training purist, by any means, but too much of the time on this album the vocals just sound *bad*.

If I'd heard this album without hearing *Let Me Come Over* (in fact, I think I *did*), that would be all I had to say about it. "Bleah." However, by keeping the third album firmly in mind while listening to this one, it becomes possible for me to also hear it as the beginning of the three-album process of subtle refining that turned this muddy noise into something profoundly moving. I can look past the gratuitous cacophonous guitar solos and barbiturated production and hear kernels of emotional catharsis lurking at the core of songs like "Flushing Stars", "The Plank" and "Reason Why".

In the end the differences between the Buffalo Tom albums I love and the ones I basically dislike are pretty subtle, and my recommendation is that you start with *Let Me Come Over* and *Big Red Letter Day*, and, if you like them, try *Birdbrain*, and if you still like that, get this one. You may find my distinctions unimportant, or even invisible.

### *Birdbrain, 1990 CD*

Beggars Banquet picked Buffalo Tom up in time for their second album, *Birdbrain*, and from the first seconds of the title track, it is clear that they have made substantial progress in my eyes. "Birdbrain" is louder, clearer, better tuned, crisper, faster, and more energized than *Buffalo Tom*. The band has begun to distance themselves from J and Dinosaur Jr.'s aesthetic. The track listings here are actually typeset, and production is credited to "Buffalo Tom and J Mascis with Sean Slade". The cover art is still gibberish, but you can't expect a *complete* break with the past.

Buffalo Tom is a three-piece. They were a three-piece on the first album, too, but I mention it here because here you can actually *tell* that there are discrete musicians. Janowitz's surging, abused guitar is the main musical force, Tom MacGinnis' battering drums the imparter of forward momentum, and Chris Colburn's bass the link between the two. McGinnis is of the drum school that believes in hitting the snare drum at least ten times per measure (but never on beats one or three), with result that these songs tend to be more edgy than propulsive, rocking but tending not to do anything so smooth as rolling. Occasional bits of acoustic guitar slip in here and there, but not often. Janowitz's unsteady but increasingly heartfelt vocals cut through the howl of his guitar, which is recorded here through a distinctly better amp than was used for the debut album (but still not quite a top-of-the-line model). He is still a vocalist you aren't likely to praise for *precision*, but within this limitation he is here more *accurate* than before. It is at least clear, this time

around, *which* notes he's missing when he misses them, and at times he comes close enough that I'm inclined to give him full credit.

For the most part, though, this album still doesn't compare to *Let Me Come Over*. It gets closest right at the very end. "Bleeding Heart", the last regular album track, hangs its verses on a simple repeated descending melody that isn't likely to awaken Mozart in his grave, mumbling "Ah, now that *is* clever", but it doesn't take the *Surprise Symphony* (yes, I know, not Mozart) to give a driving song like this just enough of a hook to do some serious damage.

The last two songs on the CD are bonus acoustic tracks. The first, a cover of the Psychedelic Furs' "Heaven", is stunning. When the Furs recorded it, on *Mirror Moves*, they were in the middle of their transition from punk to pomp, and the song came across as a catchy but somewhat saccharine tune meant for when the dance-club DJ needed a slow song. Recast by Buffalo Tom as an achingly sad ballad for voice and two acoustic guitars, it is completely revitalized. The band proves that at least one of them can actually *play* the guitar, which Janowitz's usual style doesn't actually make obvious, and Janowitz's singing easily overcomes its technical limitations with commitment to the song. This cover is what "Heaven" could have been, and I guess now is.

The final track is an acoustic version of Buffalo Tom's own "Reason Why", originally the last song on their *first* album. The first version was possibly my favorite song on *Buffalo Tom*, and this one is a lot better. Coming as a pair with "Heaven", it places the band in a strange self-secured context, reminding me heavily of Hüsker Dü, but postulating that punk's nihilistic release was as powerfully tragic as it was angry. Here at the end of Buffalo Tom's second album, I feel for the first time like I understand the effect the band is trying to create, a *channeling* of the raw energy of noise, using it to create power for other uses, like a hydroelectric dam, instead of simply trying to direct its blast or, even more simply, riding it. I also feel like the *band* is only here figuring this out, or if they knew it all along, is only here finding the way.

### *Let Me Come Over*, 1992 CD

Buffalo Tom's awesome third album was #4 on my 1992 top ten album list, and the second song, "Taillights Fade", was song #8. It made these inroads against some initial prejudices, as I resented Buffalo Tom for getting the label promotion and attention that I felt other Boston bands really deserved. Enough MTV repetitions of "Velvet Roof" and "Taillights Fade", though, and I began warming slightly to the band, enough that my mind was able to make the switch from

"goddamn machine-hyped should've-been-also-rans" to "hey, one for Boston!" I bought the album on that basis, intrigued enough by "Taillights Fade" in particular to think that I wouldn't hate it, but mostly buying it because I try to support Boston bands that are any good at all.

A couple listenings later, the record's grip on me was vise-like. It is intense, brilliant, intensely brilliant and brilliantly intense. It is beautiful, painful, transported above pain and submerged in agony at once, both noisy and note-perfect. It is as inexorable as an ocean's tide and as impossible to contain. It is either a freak accident or a sign that Bill, Chris and Tom have located one of the source arteries that supply rock music with its raw stuff.

Part of this, no doubt, is just me reacting to J Mascis not being around. This album was produced by Paul Kolderie, Sean Slade and the band, and for the first time the album doesn't even *look* like a Dinosaur Jr. disc. The production is even clearer here than on *Birdbrain*, the performances even better. Taking *advantage* of the studio environment for the first time, the band uses a little over-dubbing to get both electric *and* acoustic guitars on some of these songs, which enhances their sound noticeably. Colburn's bass is more legible than on the first two albums, as well. There are more vocal harmonies than on the first two records, and even a few parts where someone other than Janowitz sings some lead.

Perhaps inspired by Soul Asylum (who were #2 on my album list that year), some country touches seep into these songs occasionally, as in "I'm Not There" and in a way "Saving Grace". Bill's voice has improved in much the same way that Dave Pirner's has, and here he sounds terrific; he has learned control without sacrificing any appealing rawness. Tom's drumming has also settled down a little, and here when he kicks into grape-shot snares-around-the-beat mode, it sounds intentional, not just the default pattern. This is also the first Buffalo Tom album whose lyrics I find invite scrutiny, and scrutinizing them accordingly reveals a series of arresting and claustrophobic emotional vignettes that are completely in keeping with the music that surrounds them.

"Taillights Fade" might seem like the least original of these songs, with a chorus line that must have occurred a billion times in songs written by under-30-year-old males since the automobile was *given* taillights, but some tiny touches in its lyrics transform it into the album's most powerful song for me. "I hit the wall, / I'm about to fall, / But I'm closing in on it", goes one segment, and the way the two-letter words at the end fall on stressed beats completely changes the song for me from one with hackneyed lyrics chosen to fit the beat to one whose words *had* to come out this

way, whether they fit badly or too well. It makes me think of Suicidal Tendencies' song "Institutionalized", in which the narrator insists that he "can handle it". "Institutionalized" is a song, for all its street-credibility, sung from the outside, a portrait of the kid as societal victim, from the implied stance of a critic of that society. "Taillights Fade" is the way that kid would see it, *trying* to "handle it", trying *desperately*, and not completely succeeding, reaching out and drawing in phrases and emotions from around him as he falls, *searching* for something that will ennoble his struggle without surrendering him to it. Salvation is *so close*.

"Frozen Lake" is the other end of this album's spectrum, a gentle, haunting song featuring chiming acoustic guitar and cello, with ghostly electric guitar noises drifting in from the background. It is the fruition of the impulses that began with "Heaven" and "Reason Why" on *Birdbrain*, a moment of hurt and confusion turned into its own cure.

*Let Me Come Over* ends with "Crutch", a song that seems to wander almost without direction through its verses, only to gather itself up for the chorus, frantic in a half-paralyzed way, twisting noise into melody with the smallest gesture, sleight of hand so masterful that often when you look away and back you wonder if anything really happened at all. *Let Me Come Over* evokes the painful stage of youth where need and destruction are both part of the same game, neither acknowledged nor fully understood, and the equally painful stage of adulthood when you realize that by growing up you left none of it wholly behind.

This time, at least, you'll have the right record to play.

### **Big Red Letter Day, 1993 CD**

Buffalo Tom's next album suffers badly in my mind from "similarly-styled album after the one I *really* liked" syndrome. It's clear, when I'm listening to it, that it does most of what *Let Me Come Over* does, as well or better, and the gradually expanding sonic palette (here adding, most notably, some soaring female backing vocals, on "Tree House") suits the music perfectly. But this time I'm *expecting* it, and without the element of surprise I find it much less affecting. I listen to these songs and acknowledge that they have all the same elements that made songs like "Taillights Fade" feel so powerful to me, but the slots the songs on *Let Me Come Over* fit into in my life are *filled* already, and that leaves these plenty of intellectual respect but little visceral connection.

For those who come upon *Big Red Letter Day* first, or who weren't hit with *Let Me Come Over* the same way I was, though, I think this album has the potential to be amazing. The band's growing confidence and skills are

both plain, the songs are enviable, the liner art is fantastic. Chris Colbourn's two lead vocals, on "My Responsibility" and "Late at Night", are well handled, and remind me of George Huntley's songs with the Connells. A very impressive album, whatever it does or doesn't do for me personally.

## **The Bags**

Lest I be accused of covert nepotism, I will point out that Bags guitarist Crispin Wood is my girlfriend Georgia's brother, and at some unspecified date in the future he and I will probably be related. And yes, I bought my first Bags record solely because of this relationship. Their inclusion here, though, is on merit, which is a good thing, because if I left them out I'd have a hard time persuading Crispin to help me proofread this tome.

### **Rock Starve, 1987 CD**

The Bags debut is solid in the way that can only be achieved by months of pent up club gigs and radio tapes, making this practically a greatest-hits album even though it's the band's first record. Like the first Cavedogs album, this is an era in Boston music.

A trio with Jon Hardy on bass and Jim Janota on drums, Jon and Crispin sharing vocal duties, the Bags' version of punk is laced with heavy (but not speed) metal, hard rock and an unusual sense of playfulness. I once saw Jim do a whole show in Peter Criss makeup (including a rendition of "Beth" that would go down in history next to Sid Vicious' "My Way", if it weren't for the fact that "Beth" is such an awful song to begin with), which I think demonstrates all three traits.

"Spread It Around", the first track, is a representative selection: steady drums (hit *hard*) throbbing bass, slashing guitar, a guitar solo (a punk rarity that betrays Crispin's love of Jimi Hendrix) and lyrics you can sing along with if you can keep a straight face. "Pioneer", the second song, became the band's virtual theme song, and for a while in Boston audiences could be counted on to behave properly, pumping their fists to the "Ye-ah, ye-ah" part that comes after "I'm a pioneer". I don't know how many of them really followed the text, a Ramones/Buzzcocks-ish tale of the quest for the unattainable girl, who in my mind is definitely a high school cheerleader in a very bad teen sex comedy, but they could relate to the "Ye-ah, ye-ah" part.

"Warm Words" is one revved up for the mosh pit. "What Do You Want?" is one of my favorites, with the great line "Oh lord, how can it be? / My lover has become my enemy" sung in hoarse fashion by Jon.

"Tailbone", a propulsive stomp about, simply enough, falling on your ass, leads into the hard-rocking "Joy Ride", about stealing cars. "Trapped" is the shortest, fastest song on a record full of short, fast songs. "Love Sick Diane" and "Nothing to Say to You" slow down for a pair of bitter anthems. "Lick My Wounds" has a taste of the machine-gun vocal delivery to come later on "L. Frank Baum". "Egg". (I just wanted to say the name.) And the album ends with the crunching tempo-shifter, "Big Wig".

Overall, *Rock Starve* doesn't necessarily show a lot of *range*, but it shows plenty of promise. The songs here are very much of a type, but they involve enough solid musicianship on the part of all three players that it seems clear that this isn't the *only* thing the band is capable of, not that there would be anything wrong with it if it was. This album is out of print, but at least in Boston used and cutout copies are still relatively easy to locate.

#### *Hide and Seek, 1989 7"*

Despite being really great, *Rock Starve* didn't make anybody rich, and got the Bags dropped from Restless Records. Undaunted, they switched to Boston indie label Stanton Park, and released this single in between albums. "Hide and Seek" is a very Hendrix-ian song, with wah-wah solos and a guitar part that sounds like the kind of strange noises that are much easier to make with your mouth than with a guitar. The flip side, "I Know", is similarly retro, and sounds to me like a cover of some song that came out right before a huge Beatles hit and was thus relegated to instant obscurity through no fault of its own. The feel of both of these songs is more like *Swamp Oaf* than *Rock Starve*, I think.

#### *Swamp Oaf (Swamp Oaf), 1989 LP*

A side project in between albums, this is Crispin, Jon and Jim indulging a slightly spacier and more experimental side than the Bags. Compared with just the short, direct songs on *Rock Starve*, these are definitely different enough that the use of a pseudonym makes a certain historical sense. Seen in the context of all three Bags albums, though, these songs aren't nearly as strange, and the main things distinguishing this album in the end are an overabundance of goofy voices, a lower production budget, and the failure to edit out some directionless instrumental noodling in between tracks. "Sad Minnow" and "Extra Eye", in particular, wouldn't sound at all out of place to me on *The Bags* or *Night of the Corn People*.

#### *The Bags, 1990 LP*

The Bags put delusions of Norsedom behind them for their second album. Experience shows, and this is an even more muscular record than *Rock Starve*. The playing is better, the production is clearer, and the band sounds more comfortable with the studio environment than on the first record, which is ironic given that that one was a major-label release and this one isn't. The musical range on this album makes *Rock Starve* seem somewhat compressed by comparison, though it's hard to say whether better production or the band's musical evolution is really responsible. Songs here are given enough space to develop, where the ones on *Rock Starve* seem more to have been crammed into two or three minutes.

"Bagpipe" doesn't actually have any bagpipes on it, which is something of a letdown to a Celtophile like me, but Hardy's snapping chorus makes up for the omission. "Evil" sounds like a maturing version of "Lick My Wounds". "Beauty of the Bud" is another Bags concert favorite, with the bold pronouncement "I am a stick in the mud, / A good ship on a sea of crud". "Atomic Coconuts" is too silly for me. The band's metal instincts show themselves on the fabulous "Dropout", which is, at almost five minutes, the longest Bags song to this point.

"Dummy", a searing, supercilious attack on a ventriloquist's puppet, should probably get some sort of prize for finding an even easier lyrical target than Ronald Reagan. It also has a few seconds of nice harmony, which is uncharacteristic for the Bags. "Thousand Acre Woods", with its slow build and bluesy vocals (like the somewhat similar "Closer Then"), also shows a side of the band previously underutilized. Due to my devotion to anything having to do with Winnie-the-Pooh, I'm constitutionally unable to dislike anything called "Thousand Acre Woods", but I'd like this song even if it had a different title. "Superpower" reminds you that they can still play *really* fast.

Sadly, this album was not released on CD. It is one of the very few things I've bought on vinyl since getting a CD player, and when I bought a new phono cartridge, recently, it was records like this I was thinking of.

#### *Dr. Lb., 1991 7"*

In a twist painfully like that scene in *Singles* where Matt Dillon explains that Citizen Dick is *huge* in Belgium, the Bags' Italian label, Helter Skelter, wanted an exclusive single to prepare for the *Night of the Corn People* album. They got a good one. "Dr. Lb." features definitely the best heavy breathing effect of any Bags song. I'd heard it live several times before seeing the

title written down, and I was surprised to find that it was “pound”, not “pow”. The flip side, “Frilly Underwear”, is a recently recovered tape from a groovy 1964 Bags appearance on the Ed Sullivan show.

Also, *red vinyl!* Shows you how far behind the Italians really are...

### **L. Frank Baum, 1991 7"**

To build up to the new album here in the US, Stanton Park released this single of the Bags consummate masterwork, an epic tribute to the author of *The Wizard of Oz*. This one song has the Bags heaviest, prettiest and thrashingest moments, as well as some of Jim's best drumming, Crispin's most powerful guitar, and Jon hitting a couple notes that I wouldn't have thought a human voice could produce without surgery. The flip side, “Max Roach”, is an instrumental extracted from a multi-tracked section of *Waiting for Maloney*.

### **Night of the Corn People & Waiting for Maloney, 1991 CD**

Released just in time for the Bags' second-to-last gig to be a record-release party, their third album is their best, and the band's subsequent dissolution is all the more regrettable because of it. *Night of the Corn People* is the first 12 songs; *Waiting for Maloney*, the last track, is a 20-minute-plus mock-rock-opera actually recorded several months earlier. All the progress from *Rock Starve to The Bags* is duplicated from *The Bags* to this. The production, playing, singing and composition all continue to improve, though I admit to preferring the demented cover art of *The Bags* to the painting of “Night of the Corn People”, a joke which I don't understand.

“Amsterdamned”, the opener, is a funny story of a hapless hitchhiker's adventures abroad. “The Mole” is a funny story about, well, er, some sort of bad habit. Dressing up like a Mole, maybe? Beats me. Great song, though. “September” is, I believe, the only recorded rock song about an affair between astronauts. “A Pile of Money” explains the principle of entropy thus: “A pile of money, / A pile of money. / Spent some, lent some. / Left with a penny, / Just a penny. / Too small to save, threw it away”. “Covered Up” and “Who's Laughing Now” are more sophisticated, and then “Naked Lady” and “I Smell Rat” balance them out in furious old-Bags style.

The slower “Moving to the Country” and “Barb Jones” then pave the way for “L. Frank Baum”, which is to me the climax and the conclusion of the album and the Bags career.

The record continues, however, with the lethargic “Matter of Time”, which for me blends into *Waiting for*

*Maloney*. An anti-rock-opera, or more accurately a rock anti-opera, *Maloney's* entire plot is this: the band, wondering why Maloney hasn't shown up, calls him; he says he'll be there in a while; eventually, he shows up, and they jam. There are a number of very good musical moments along the way, but there is also a *lot* of filler. I can't help think that with different lyrics and a serious edit, this could have been a killer six or seven minute song.

### **Night of the Corn People & Waiting for Maloney, 1991 2LP**

The Italian double-LP version adds a fourth side with six songs not on the CD. The two I like best are “The Chant” (though this song, which features improvised nonsense choruses in concert, loses something on record) and the southern-rock send-up “Mississippi Band”. The rest aren't notable enough for me to put up with the noisy colored vinyl very often.

## **Human Sexual Response**

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### **Fig. 15, 1980 CD**

Rich Gilbert's first band (that I know of, anyway) was Human Sexual Response, a noisily innovative post-punk ensemble with no less than four vocalists (at once, not taking turns). I got this CD reissue for its historical value, and also because I know Rich, and it's *interesting*, but I definitely say that word with the tone that people use when they can't think of what else to say about something you did, and don't want to say “like” or “dislike”, either. HSR's songs are jerky and angular, somewhere between Devo and the Human League. Don't let the four vocalists lure you into expecting ABBA-esque harmonies, either, as Larry Bangor's keening voice is the most prominent, and the others don't soften it any. The closest HSR get to accessible songs are “Jackie Onassis” and “What Does Sex Mean to Me?”, both of which rely largely on their lyrical gimmicks. The CD bonus track, “Butt Fuck”, is garish and inane. If this album's historical significance means nothing to you, I wouldn't recommend it.

## **The Zulus**

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### **Down on the Floor, 1989 CD**

Gilbert, Bangor and drummer Malcom Travis went on to form the Zulus, another key figure in Boston rock. HSR bassist Chris Maclachlan is credited as cowriter of

four Zulus songs, as well, but the musical similarities between the two bands are not nearly as close as that much personnel overlap might suggest.

The two defining features of the Zulus' style are Rich's intricate guitar playing, which can go from hammer-heavy rhythm to squalling harmonics, or into dizzying key changes worthy of Vernon Reid or Larry LaLoude, and Larry Bangor's distinctive voice, which sounds like a cross between Black Francis and Gertrude Stein. Or what I imagine Gertrude Stein would sound like singing, anyway. The voice is striking, and it's pretty likely that you will have a strong reaction to it, one way or another. When I first heard it, in the Zulus centerpiece, "Never Again", wailing "I think - I am - not going to fall for your - old tricks again", I thought it was the sound of a cast-out angel. When I later realized that he sings like that on *all* the songs, I didn't think I could take it. After some getting used to, though, I think it's a pretty remarkable instrument, and hiding behind its brash edge is a *lot* of technical ability. Bangor slides into and out of notes on a dime, and the gyrations his voice goes through complement Rich's similarly adroit guitar playing.

In a way, though, "Never Again" hurts the Zulus as much as it helps them. On the one hand, it is their most accessible song and my clear favorite. On the other, nothing else on this album really attempts to follow up on it, and as a result it is not representative of the character of the album, which is much more jarring than catchy. People who buy it for "Never Again", expecting more, are likely to be disappointed initially, and may not make the effort to come to terms with the excellent but challenging record that *Down on the Floor* is.

## Concussion Ensemble

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### *Stampede*, 1993 CD

After the Zulus, and concurrent with the United States, Rich Gilbert started yet another band with an apparent overstaffing problem at one position. This time, instead of four vocalists, there are *no* singers, and four drummers (well, three drummers and a percussionist). This is probably, to be fair, more impressive live than it is on record, where rock listeners are quite used to hearing single drummers' playing produced to sound like an army anyway. Still, you *can* tell that there's more than the usual amount of percussion on these songs, and it's a cool effect. A bass player and two guitarists round out the lineup, with some guest help on horns for one song, and samples for another.

Not being a big instrumental-rock fan, especially not of the sort of garage-surf I expected from this album, I bought the album mostly because I know Rich. I like it a lot more than I expected to. This isn't soundtrack music, these are *songs*, intended to be no less catchy and accessible than anything else in rock, and the fact that they don't have any singing on them is merely an arrangement detail that lets you concentrate better on the playing. Garage-surf is a pretty fair description of the music, though. The drums and the bass providing a roiling foundation, over which the two guitarists weave giddy solo lines and driving rhythm parts. The stomping "Bulldozer" and the quasi-Egyptian "Cleopatra 94" are probably my favorite pair, but the album really never flags. I recommend it. Even if you turn out not to like the music that much, you can make up some embarrassing fake lyrics and use it to sabotage karaoke.

## Flying Nuns

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### *Disco Dancing Queen*, 1992 7"

A trio called the Flying Nuns opened for one of the first United States shows, at the Causeway, a tiny club across the street from the Boston Garden. Crispin thought they were not only terrible, but *intentionally* terrible (which is even worse). I rather liked them. They owed a sizable debt of inspiration to Fugazi, I felt, but they were trying to do relatively original things with rhythms, discordant guitars, and interesting lyrics and vocals.

Maybe there are *two* Boston bands called the Flying Nuns, but this unappealing single sounds nothing at all like the band I saw.

## Mighty Mighty Bosstones

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### *Where'd You Go*, 1991 CD5

My segue out of Boston, the Mighty Mighty Bosstones are a band that combines punk, ska, reggae, plaid, carnivals and gleeful energy into a mixture that is probably best described as "PARTY!!!!!!!" Not being a ska or reggae fan, the band is not at all my sort. I made an exception for this single, though, because the title song is really good, and because I'm a sucker for covers. Aerosmith's "Sweet Emotion" is the b-side, and the CD-single also contains covers of Metallica's "Enter Sandman" and Van Halen's "Ain't Talking 'Bout Love" that aren't listed on the jacket. All three renditions are

killer, full-throttle invitations to slam-dancing ska-metal punk nirvana.

## Fishbone

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### *The Reality of My Surroundings, 1991 CD*

Fishbone is another band that mixes elements of fast punk with large doses of musical styles I don't do. There is no album I'm aware of that I have as widely mixed reactions to as this one. The first song, "Fight the Youth", I think is great, like a collaboration between Public Enemy and Living Colour. The second to last song, "These Days Are Gone", has a few good moments. The last song, "Sunless Saturday", was #3 on my top ten song list for 1991, and is one of my favorite songs ever. Living Colour meets Yes is the best description I can come up with, but that won't make sense to anybody but me, I suspect. If there were such a thing as punk/progressive, this would be it, but there isn't. Anyway, it's a monumentally great song.

The rest of the album I can't listen to for more than ten seconds.

## Bad Brains

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### *Rise, 1993 CD*

The Bad Brains have been around for a while without interesting me, but the title track sounded good enough when I heard it that I picked up the album in the store out of curiosity. The detail that cinched the sale was that the album was produced by Beau Hill, who I know for his production and songwriting work with Fiona. I would be disappointed if I were to find out that I am *not* the only person ever to buy a Bad Brains record because it was produced by the same person who did Fiona.

The thing to know about Bad Brains records (and I checked some of the older ones that Georgia has to be sure that they were like this too) is that they contain music in two drastically different styles. The bulk of any Bad Brains record is vicious rap/funk/punk/metal somewhere between Fishbone, Public Enemy and Living Colour. There will be two or three songs on every album, though, that are straight-ahead reggae, without the slightest hint of punk or metal. Not only are these latter sorts of songs pure reggae, they're pure *terrible* reggae, reggae so painfully cheesy and clichéd that you'd expect a computer to be able to churn out similar stuff ad infinitum if equipped with a Casio set to "Reggae 1" and a word generator primed with the

generic outbursts of stoned Rastafarians. I'm *floored* by how bad this reggae is. It's so laughable that I, who normally can't listen to reggae at all, can almost stand to listen to it for its sheer amusement value. The energy gap between the lame reggae grooves and the blistering majority of the album, in addition, could scarcely be wider. You owe yourself a Bad Brains album just to hear this phenomenon for yourself.

And if you're going to buy one of their albums, this seems like a pretty good one. The advent of bands like Living Colour, Rage Against the Machine and 311, and the recent spurt of rap/metal collaborations, have made the Bad Brains' fusion of these styles less remarkable for its own sake than it once was, but *Rise* shows that whatever company they've accumulated along the way, they can still play with the best of it.

## Gang of Four

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### *Mall, 1991 CD*

Having finished with Boston, I conclude Underground with a handful of bands that to me define what I think of as "post-punk". These are groups whose primary appeal to me is that they carry punk's ragged aesthetics and philosophy with them into less violent musical territory.

Gang of Four was a intensely political minimalist punk band from 1979-1983, best known for the songs "Anthrax" and "I Love a Man in Uniform". They never particularly appealed to me, but the reconstituted second incarnation with original members Andy Gill and Jon King caught my attention with the catchy first song, "Cadillac", one of the only songs whose video has ever increased my opinion of the tune itself. This album fleshes out the original Gang of Four sound with technology (nice mixed metaphor, huh?), very much to my liking.

"F.M.U.S.A.", a harrowing tale of racism and ambivalence in Vietnam, combines chattering samples, a guttural voice-over and seductive harmony vocals for the strangest danceable incisive anti-war song you'll find. "Satellite" champions another oft-ignored perspective, saying "Lost in space, the robot writes: / Don't wanna be a satellite". "Money Talks" sounds like a combination of the Teardrop Explodes, George Michael and Timbuk 3. "Colour from the Tube", using a dance beat and female backing chorus to contrast sarcastic nasal sung/spoken verses, reminds me strongly of late PIL.

The whole album is heavily electronic, with robotic drum-machine rhythms, carefully blended synthetic noises, and plentiful samples and effects. This

manages, among other things, to drain so much of the reggae out of Bob Marley's "Soul Rebel" that I only discovered it wasn't an original song by looking at the credits to find out why its lyrics weren't listed. "Impossible" and "Hiromi and Stan Talk" are entirely noises, though they're both under a minute long. Cool stuff, but not at all what I would have expected from this band.

I actually got to see Gang of Four on tour for this album. The conditions were not quite ideal, however. They were the second act on a Warrior Soul / Gang of Four / Young Black Teenagers / Public Enemy / Sisters of Mercy bill at Great Woods, which meant that they went on at about 7:00 on a summer evening, with it still daylight and virtually all the attendees either still in their cars on the way to Mansfield, Mass., or out in the concession area eating awful cardboard-and-catsup pizza and near-toxic "nachos". They did their best, but aside from one person dancing madly in the twelfth row (to the mental strains of something completely unrelated to what the band was playing, I feel sure), they didn't make much of an impression on anybody, me included.

## Talking Heads

### *Remain in Light*, 1980 LP

The Talking Heads were, for a while, perhaps the quintessential post-punk band. They take conceptual quirkiness to logical extremes, here abetted by Adrian Belew, Brian Eno, Nona Hendryx, Jon Hassel and Robert Palmer. Singer David Byrne's inhuman trans-Dennis Hopper alienness may appeal to you, and it may drive you crazy. I'm afraid that due to overexposure (my freshman year at college there was some unwritten rule that in order to have a dance party at least every fourth song had to be by the Talking Heads) and not liking Byrne's subsequent solo career, it's come to drive me crazy. This is a significant record—it has "Once in a Lifetime", "Houses in Motion" and "Crosseyed and Painless", three especially notable Talking Heads songs, and the contorted knots of percussion, vocals and rhythms that Eno and the band construct are virtually unprecedented—but like King Crimson, I find that it *only* appeals to me on an intellectual level, and listening to it really isn't as much *fun* as one might hope. Not a record that I keep on heavy rotation.

## Siouxsie & the Banshees

### *Cities in Dust*, 1985 12"

I have to admit that I don't actually like Siouxsie and the Banshees very much. They remind me too much of the Cure, who I also don't like. There's a good reason for this, as Robert Smith played with Siouxsie at various times. Like Throwing Muses, however, the Banshees come up with a song every once in a while that I really like. "Cities in Dust" is one of these. Siouxsie's chorus vocal flips up an octave right at the end of the title phrase, and it makes the song for me. This 12" has extended and edited versions of the song, and two forgettable b-sides.

### *Through the Looking Glass*, 1987 LP

They came up with another song I like, "This Wheel's On Fire", on this album. It's indicative of how uninteresting I found the rest of the album that I didn't realize until just now, writing it up, that all the songs here are *covers*. They do Sparks' "This Town Isn't Big Enough for Both of Us", Kraftwerk's "Hall of Mirrors", The Doors' "You're Lost Little Girl", Iggy Pop's "The Passenger", John Cale's "Gun", Roxy Music's "Sea Breezes", Television's "Little Johnny Jewel", Billie Holliday's "Strange Fruit" and "Trust in Me", which is apparently from *The Jungle Book*. "This Wheel's On Fire" is a Dylan/Danko composition.

As with "Cities in Dust", "This Wheel's On Fire" gets me with vocal twists on the chorus. The rest of the album, I'm afraid, is irritating caterwauling to me.

### *Peep Show*, 1988 LP

I gave Siouxsie and the Banshees one last chance after they managed another intriguing song, "Peek-a-Boo". This is probably the only song of theirs that I find interesting *all* the way through, not just on the chorus. It uses fascinating reverse-envelope reverbs, and the whole feel of the song seems backwards. Siouxsie's vocals seem intentionally phrased to match the patterns you'd get from playing normal singing in the opposite direction, and it makes for a very unusual song.

The second song, the blatant Echo and the Bunnymen rip-off "The Killing Jar", is actually pretty nice, too, and I like the This Mortal Coil imitation, "The Last Beat of my Heart". For a moment I thought that the band and I had finally come into sync after all, albeit by it sounding like *other* bands I like better. The rest of the album undermines this theory, but rather than irritating me, *Peep Show* merely bores me, which is *something* of an improvement. This album is sparer



and moodier than the other Siouxsie and the Banshees stuff I have, at times making me imagine Magazine doing Cocteau Twins covers, or This Mortal Coil without quite the atmosphere or power. It strikes *me* as lacking direction and energy, but it's the sort of album that I imagine many others will really like.

## Divinyls

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### *Desperate*, 1983 CD

Christina Amphlett can, at the outset, be described as nothing but a punk vocalist. Her voice is harsh, raspy and breaking, her delivery tense and shaky. Still, she has the range to shift from harsh to falsetto in the blink of an eye, and could probably hold her own in a weird-vocal-off with Debby Harry and Dale Bozio.

Unfortunately, the rest of this Australian band doesn't live up to Amphlett's quirkiness, and her voice is the only thing that carries an otherwise competent but rather mundane record. "Boys In Town", "Elsie" and "Ring Me Up" are the most notable, and the others are of a kind, but if you don't really take to Amphlett I can't see what you'd find to like here.

### *What a Life!*, 1985 CD

The back cover of the band's second album (or of the CD liner) shows Amphlett and guitarist Mark McEntee hamming for the camera, with the rest of the band barely visible in the background peeking through the bars of their jail cell. The music reflects this balance, with the bass, drums and keyboards even more homogenous on this album than on the first one. That might seem like a bad thing, but it actually turns out to be a big improvement in my opinion, as it places more emphasis on Christina's vocals. Where on the first album I strain to hear her, here it sounds like they are *trying* to base the band on her voice, rather than it just happening despite efforts to the contrary. Her growls, squeaks and choppy phrasing are allowed to find their own level, and it gives the music a raw, sexual texture.

"Pleasure and Pain", "Good Die Young" and "In My Life" seem to me to be the best settings for Christina's voice. On "In My Life", in particular, McEntee roughs up his guitar playing a little, and it sounds good. The rest of time, though, it just sounds like the band is half-heartedly treading water, relying on Christina's physical desire to keep them afloat. To be fair, it mostly works.

### *Temperamental*, 1988 CD

From mediocre and good, the Divinyls take a sudden giant leap to amazing. This album was #3 on my top ten list for 1988, beating out entries from both Big Country and Game Theory, and both "Back to the Wall" and "Temperamental" were on my top ten song list. My reaction to the next album, and to media overexposure to the Divinyls, has tempered my enjoyment of this one since, and it definitely now seems insane to have ranked this above *Vivid*, *Peace in Our Time*, *Two Steps from the Middle Ages*, and *Blind*, but I can still hear the things that made it so affecting at the time.

Mainly, of course, it's Christina Amphlett. She is actually singing a bit more mellowly on this album than on *What a Life!*, but producer Mike Chapman must be miking her closer or something, because every detail of inflection, from breath to click to strangled vibrato, is sharp and clear here—not overemphasized, like Sinéad O'Connor, but as an integral part of her delivery, like Tori Amos.

The music supports her solidly, building up more momentum than on the first two albums, despite the fact that Christina and Mark seem to have canned the rest of the band and replaced them with session players. There is heavy guitar multi-tracking at work, and this gives the record a chunky fullness that holds my interest without going out of its way to draw attention. Although the overall effect is smoother and more produced than before, the songs are peppered with moments of impromptu energy on both players' parts that on the other two records would probably have been redone or masked out.

The whole album is superb, but there are several standouts. "Temperamental" is the most dramatic and energetic track. "Dance of Love", with its warbling guitar hook, is one of the hardest rocking. "Better Days", whose underpinnings feel ever so slightly CCR-ish at times, marries one of the band's strongest compositions to a great croaked chorus by Amphlett.

I do have two lingering questions about this album, and both revolve around the front cover photo. First, what is she wearing over her dress? A vest made out of those spiral telephone cords? That's what it looks like. It's easy to see how that leads to the mesh dress on the next album. Secondly, what is he doing with that lizard?! Or is it a frog?

### *Divinyls*, 1990 CD

After pouring all that life into *Temperamental*, there evidently wasn't any left for this album. That didn't stop it from becoming the band's commercial breakthrough, nor prevent "I Touch Myself" from getting played 50 zillion times until people became so

inured to the song that absently singing it aloud in public places no longer struck anybody as at all odd. They also played the song enough that I lost all desire to listen to the album, and my enthusiasm for their older albums got all damp and sticky as well.

The album isn't awful. "If Love Was a Gun" is slow and moving, as is "I'm on Your Side", and "I Touch Myself" is actually a pretty clever song, but after *Temperamental* this record is a huge disappointment. The music is even more featureless than on *Desperate*, with monotonous 4/4 drum beats stomping on the delicate contours of Amphlett's voice, and mostly drowning out McEntee's thin, overly precious guitar. Gone is the powerful wash of sound from *Temperamental*, and even the relatively bland rockisms of the first two albums would be vastly preferable to this clunky set of weak clichés.

Obviously, not everybody feels like I do about this album, as it sold lots and lots of copies, but this is *my* book, and *I* say this one is a big letdown. Easily the best things about it are a) the "I Touch Myself" video, and b) the intense rope-net dress Christina is wearing on the cover. In fact, the dress will be the subject of a whole chapter in my next book, called *Dolphin-Safe, But Dead of Frostbite: The Deadly Eco-Terrorist Fashion Conspiracy*.

## Romeo Void

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### *Benefactor*, 1982 LP

Deborah Iyall, another woman with a distinctive voice, fronts Romeo Void, best known for the song "Never Say Never", whose callous refrain "I might like you better if we slept together" got it played a lot on alternative radio. Iyall's harsh voice and lyrics are all that qualifies this band as Underground, as the music is even more-standard rock and roll than the Divinyls. Romeo Void add a saxophonist as a regular player, but aren't too notable otherwise.

I actually *detest* "Never Say Never", and don't think very much of this album as a whole, but it contains the song "Flashflood", which I like a lot. I think it reminds me somewhat of the Psychedelic Furs. Iyall's singing, which tends elsewhere to grating repetition, softens for a song to duet with a slow saxophone part, and the effect is a smooth, mellow, haunting melody.

### *Instincts*, 1984 LP

Here, too, there is one song I like a lot, and nothing else that affects me the same way. This time the song is "A Girl in Trouble (Is a Temporary Thing)",

a seductive pop song that burbles pleasingly along like a gutsier Quarterflash. I think this album is stronger than *Benefactor*, but it's hard for me to judge it without liking it.

## X

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### *4th of July*, 1987 7"

X is an incredibly significant LA punk band whose singer, Exene Cervenka, probably has more personality than Iyall and Amphlett together. As with all striking voices, hers (especially in combination with John Doe) can either enthrall you or turn you off completely, and in this case I have the latter reaction. This one single is my only concession, as I liked both "4th of July" and "See How We Are" from the album *See How We Are*, but didn't like the rest of the record. Both songs feature dramatic, plaintive, soaring choruses, and draw me in despite my general aversion to Cervenka's voice. The two songs are completely interchangeable to me, though, so this single seemed like about all the X I'd ever need, a guess that at least up until now appears to have been accurate.

## Liz Phair

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### *Exile in Guyville*, 1993 CD

Liz Phair has been the beneficiary of a shocking amount of critical attention. I bought this album, myself, because I read a fascinating article about it somewhere (*Rolling Stone*?), and I suspect a lot of people first encountered Liz's name through descriptions, not airplay. The reason for this is simple, and might as well be admitted straight out: she's sings explicitly sexual things in a cheerful girlish voice. That's it, that's why she's gotten so much attention. She sings "I want to be your blow-job queen", "I'm a little cunt in sprint, you can rent me by the hour", "Fuck and run", and some other related things, and she *doesn't* do it while naked, or caked in blood, or spitting at the audience, or under a name like Cycle Sluts from Hell or The Slits, or with any sort of "Kill All Men" agenda. This, circa 1993, makes her completely unique. It says something very sad about the state of open expression in our society that a woman singer writing frankly and non-confrontationally about sex is *so unusual*. It shouldn't be this novel.

This leads to two interesting ironies. The first is that, of course, virtually no public forum can play the very songs that make Liz initially interesting.

Newspapers can't quote them, MTV can't show them, radio stations can't play them. So the people trying to promote Liz (in both the commercial and critical senses) have to allude to her subject matter, and then play one of the songs that *doesn't* display it. The second irony, though, is that, at least from my perspective, the thing that actually most makes *Exile in Guyville* a notable debut record, and not just a lyrical novelty, isn't Liz's lyrics at all, but her musical songwriting.

There are basically two kinds of songs on *Exile*. The more accessible set are charming, snappy pop songs of the sort that you wouldn't have been surprised to find Mitch Easter producing. "6'1\"", "Never Said", "Fuck and Run" and "Divorce Song" are my favorites of these, with "Help Me, Mary", "Soap Star Joe", "Mesmerizing" and "Strange Loop" the others. Liz' singing and guitar playing are guileless, producer Brad Wood's drumming crisp and uncluttered, and the occasional other instruments understated and supportive. "Fuck and Run" is probably the album's most engaging moment and most obvious single were it not for its title and words.

The other kind of song here is quiet, minimal, haunting and often disturbing. These ("Glory", "Dance of the Seven Veils", "Explain it to Me", "Canary", "Girls! Girls! Girls!", "Shatter", "Flower" and "Gunshy", and "Johnny Sunshine" as well, though it's noisier than the others) are mostly performed solo by Liz on guitar (or piano, on "Canary"), and show a degree of precise emotional, dynamic and atmospheric control (or instinct) that makes me think of early Sinéad O'Connor, Tori Amos, P.J. Harvey or even, in some specific moments, Talk Talk. This half of the album's personality is even more impressive and unusual than the pop half, and the fact that the two coexist here, their songs intermingling unselfconsciously, is what really makes the album an exciting announcement of a new talent.

The synthesis of these two styles, and to me the album's high point, is "Stratford-on-Guy", an edgy, driving rock song about flying into Chicago. It brings the noise and the pop and the charm and the intensity together, musically, and combines that with fascinating lyrics (these having nothing to do with sex), and ends up with a song I could listen to for hours, and the thing that, I think, finally clinched Liz' "Best New Artist" spot on my 1993 year-end report.

And, to return to the subject of words, it's worth pointing out that Liz's lyrics *are* quite interesting. The fact that the sexual material is shocking has more to do with society than with Liz, and if you can stop tittering nervously at the realization that she's talking about arousal and lust and apathy and relationships as if they all go together (which shouldn't be news), I think you'll agree that she has some interesting things to say about it all. "Divorce Song", for example: "And when I asked

for a separate room / It was late at night, and we'd been driving since noon. / But if I'd known how that would sound to you, / I would have stayed in your bed for the rest of my life / Just to prove I was right, that it's harder to be friends than lovers, / And you shouldn't try to mix the two, 'cause if you do it and you're still unhappy, / Then you know that the problem is you." "Fuck and Run": "I woke up alarmed. / I didn't know where I was at first, / Just that I woke up in your arms, / And almost immediately I felt sorry. ... Whatever happened to a boyfriend? / The kind of guy who makes love 'cause he's *in* it?" "Soap Star Joe": "He's just a hero in a long line of heroes, / Looking for some lonely billboard to grace. / They say he sprung from the skull of Athena; / Think of your own head and the headache he gave." There's no poetic distance, as there would be with Suzanne Vega (whose voice Liz' resembles at more than one point here) or Joni Mitchell, but there's intelligence and insight to spare.

I think the liner art, though, might have been better left to somebody else.

## The Psychedelic Furs

In my world, the Psychedelic Furs are the single band that most clearly manifests both the decline of punk and its evolution. There are other bands, or combinations of them, that show a similar progression, such as the Sex Pistols/PIL, the Buzzcocks/Magazine, and in a way the Pixies, but for various reasons, the Furs are the ones that *define* the progression in my mind.

### *The Psychedelic Furs, 1980 CD*

The Furs emerge about half-formed on their debut. You can see that they aren't the typical punk band just by looking at the back cover, where you see that they have six members; that one plays saxophone is further evidence. And in fact, both the music and the lyrics on this record strike out away from the core of punk, while clearly staying in walkie-talkie contact.

Booming drums and heavy bass hold up the bottom, while heavily distorted and reverberated guitars fill in the middle. The sax kicks in on an off, to fill in what few gaps it can find in the mid-range. And Richard Butler's dramatic, hoarse, nasal voice sails over it all like a cheese grater over the rind of a cantaloupe. The result is a thick, swirling, atmospheric roar, as if the album was recorded on a boat during a heavy storm.

Butler's caustic lyrics get lost in the crashing surf lots of the time, especially without a lyric sheet, but

when they come through, as in "Soap Commercial" and "Imitation of Christ", they ooze vitriol.

The overall effect, though, is still more murky than anything else. The band doesn't sound like they've quite figured out what to *do* with all the sound they can produce, and the dense textures feel somewhat directionless. Changing dynamics is done by cutting out everything but the drums and Richard, every once in a while, but I don't get the feeling that each individual player has much more control than play/don't play. On the other hand, this album does show a band taking punk's attitudes in a *new* musical direction, as opposed to blending punk into mainstream rock or other existing forms. If this were the only record the Furs ever did, though, I think they would have been forgotten quickly.

### *Talk Talk Talk, 1981 CD*

The band doesn't squander a second chance. The follow-up album is a bona fide classic that learns all the right lessons from the previous effort. The production, first of all, is vastly improved. Steve Lillywhite clears out the ambient wash of the first album and in its place tweaks each instrument to both stand out clearly and fit in perfectly. The drums thump and smack without sounding like they were recorded in a cathedral. Tim Butler's bass is winched down to a less prominent position, but it performs its supporting duty just as well from there. The guitars, sax and keyboards fill in the rest of the space without drowning in reverb or feedback. And Richard Butler's voice is both improved and more prominent in the mix.

Secondly, these are *much* better songs. They've got strong melodies, structures that sound like they were written, not like they accreted, and they have focus, whether on Butler's voice or on a guitar or sax solo.

Thirdly, and the inclusion of lyrics on the liner may be half of the reason for this perceived improvement, the texts of the songs are more pointed, incisive and delightfully bitter.

"Mr. Jones" lashes out at the mundanity of life that the media and convention encourage. "Movie stars and ads / And radio define romance; / Don't turn it on, / I don't wanna dance". This perspective is similar to that of the Jam, but where Weller's songs mostly criticized implicitly by telling observation, Butler paints his subjects with quicker, sketchier strokes, and then spends the time he saves actually *saying* what he thinks about them. "No Tears" equates demonstrations, conversation and weather reports, and concludes, bleakly, "they're not saying anything". Butler sees "no tears, no colours", and even sadness is preferable to no emotion at all.

Personal relationships are no salvation in Butler's world, either. In "She is Mine", the woman is "making me a pair of shoes / So I can run away", ruining what she has by trying to strengthen it. "I didn't want to put you on / Or tape you down at all, / Or leave you here / So all alone, / Or put you in this room", Butler sighs, starting a trilogy of songs here that despair of strong relationships doing anything other than further strangling people who have a hard enough time already. "Into You Like a Train" and "I Wanna Sleep with You" continue this line of thought, and where thousands of rock songs have gone over this territory before, the Furs visit it without a trace of machismo, treating sex as not at all an expression of powerful love or even just power, but as a somewhat regrettable weakness that has to be dealt with somehow, but which should be satisfied in a way that causes as little damage as possible.

"Dumb Waiters", "It Goes On" and "So Run Down" pencil in more details of Butler's gray lyrical world. As he says about the protagonist of "It Goes On", "He has to have / A lie to live, / Or something to believe". For most of the characters on this album, the lie is a version of romance created by the hopeless and the advertisers. "All of This and Nothing" breaks the rest of the album's veneer of detachment with a list of things left behind after a severed relationship. In the numb recitation of such surreal and sinister detritus as a "painting of the wall" and a "visit from your doctor", Butler finally lets pain crack through for an instant, crying "You didn't leave me anything / That I can understand. / Hey I never meant that stuff, / I want to turn you round".

The song that defines both this album and the Furs subsequent decline in my eyes is the first one, "Pretty in Pink". A song that has the rare distinction of standing on its own as a powerful piece of poetry, "Pretty in Pink" is a sad elegy for a departed (dead?) woman named Caroline, and simultaneously a searing indictment of all the men that trampled through her life taking advantage of her kindness and giving her nothing in return. The chorus, "Isn't she pretty in pink", is a bitter joke, as that is all these oblivious lovers have to say about Caroline, and all they remember of her after she is gone, or they are.

Five years later, John Hughes made *Pretty in Pink*, the movie, with the song as its centerpiece. The movie misses the point of the song completely, and in place of a pretty girl who gets trampled he casts Molly Ringwald as a strongly independent girl who *wants* to get trampled, and the climax of the film comes when she arrives at the prom wearing a pink dress, and *because* she is "pretty in pink", wins the heart of the lifeless rich kid on whom she has a mysterious crush. This perversion of the message of the song was an

artistic felony on its own. To make matters horribly worse, the Furs agreed to re-record the song in a more upbeat, danceable arrangement. To me the second version of "Pretty in Pink" is the most pathetic sell-out in artistic history. I am quite sure the band didn't get enough money to justify it.

Half of my senior film project at Harvard was a study of the song and the movie. My analysis took the form of a song I wrote as an address to Caroline herself, along with a video that juxtaposed images from the film with photographs of Caroline watching me play the song, annotated with yet another running text addressed to Richard Butler. The work packed in a dizzying array of brilliant insights, and it was completely impossible to understand any of it. The song production was terrible, so you couldn't really make out the words, and at the same time you were expected to read the onscreen text, figure out what the pictures were of, and integrate it all on the fly, and even then it made no sense unless you knew both the song and the film intimately. It might have worked even so, but the song was too long and too boring for anyone to want to listen to it more than once. I learned at least one valuable lesson from the experience that I have tried to apply to this book: if you're going to be opinionated, arbitrary, long-winded and boring, you should at least try to be *clear* about it.

#### *Forever Now, 1982 CD*

My "Pretty in Pink" epiphany didn't come until 1988, however, so in the meantime the Furs seemed like a decent bunch, and I kept buying their records.

The band's sonic and lyrical landscape broadens spectacularly for this third album. Gone are second guitarist Roger Morris and sax player Duncan Kilburn, replaced by assorted studio players, and Todd Rundgren replaces Steve Lillywhite behind the console. *Talk Talk Talk's* sharply focused approach is expanded into this album's breathtakingly *open* sound, in which the Furs' punk roots start to become increasingly hard to locate. Backing vocals and more keyboards than before, *horns* (as opposed to just sax), as well as slower, and *less-angry* songs, metamorphose a punk band exploring new territory into a band with a great big "New Wave" stamped right on their collective forehead.

The subsequent albums color my impression of this one, causing me to hear it less as the culmination of the growth begun on the first two, and more as the beginning of the long decline that begins with the fourth one. On its own terms, though, this is a brilliant album. "Forever Now", "Love My Way" and "No Easy Street" are three of the band's best songs, and the slow ballad "Sleep Comes Down" one of its prettiest. You

can't help but notice that Butler is softening, and that this album replaces *Talk Talk Talk's* pervasive cynicism with actual *love songs*, but you can't expect people to stay angry forever, right?

#### *Mirror Moves, 1984 CD*

My vinyl copy of this album proudly bears the paint-marker inscription "We Love You - Richard Butler" on the front, and Tim and John's signatures on the back. They are actually three of only five autographs I have. (The other two are writers William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, who signed my copy of *The Difference Engine* on my 25th birthday. They were nice enough to write "Happy Birthday", but Bruce wrote the previous day's date on his message, somewhat marring the effect. I had one other autograph when I was a kid: Dallas Cowboys quarterback Roger Staubach lived around the corner from us when I was about four, and when he had that dislocated shoulder I drew him a picture of his injured joint to cheer him up, and he gave me a signed action photo in return. I don't know what happened to that picture, though. Also, my mom accidentally sat on his Heisman trophy once, but now I'm getting way off the subject.)

Judged by the standards of the first two albums, this record is painfully commercial and discouragingly passionless. Ashton and the Butlers are the only remaining members, and the studio help that fill in around them is competent but very unremarkable. Producer Keith Forsey does the drumming himself, and although he seems to understand the hi-hat, the best I can say about the rest of the drum work is that it is "in time". Nobody is willing to take responsibility for the omnipresent synthesizers on the album credits, which I can understand, as they appear to lull the rest of the players nearly to sleep. Ashton and Tim Butler might as well not be here, as Richard Butler's voice is the only thing on the album that I recognized or remember distinctly.

In retrospect this is clearly the final transition album between the angry early Furs and the danceable later Furs. There are several excellent songs here, notably "The Ghost in You", "Heaven" and "Alice's House", and if you got into the Psychedelic Furs through later albums you'll probably love this one. For fans of the first two albums you will either hate this album or learn to think of it as being by a different band that happens to share the same name, and three members. A pretty good light New Wave dance-pop band, at that.

#### *Midnight to Midnight, 1987 CD*

This is the Psychedelic Furs' attempt to become sex gods. From the intricately coifed and posed, contrasty,

black and white fashion photos on the cover to the insipid lyrics and irrepressibly catchy music, the Furs have sold out wholeheartedly here, and their transition is complete. The music falls somewhere between Love and Rockets and Duran Duran, two bands that you will notice are not listed in this book. It is still possible to tell that these songs are written by some people who were once in the Psychedelic Furs, not some random LA jingle-hacks, but only just. When the Furs released an extended dance-mix of "Heartbreak Beat", I knew that as far as I was concerned, the Psychedelic Furs were no more.

### *All that Money Wants, 1988 12"*

Like a frog's legs will continue to twitch for a few minutes after you kill it, the Furs managed to cough up one last good song before sinking out of my attention completely. "All that Money Wants", which was included on the compilation *All of This and Nothing*, is strong throwback to the neighborhood of *Talk Talk Talk* and *Forever Now*, and a good argument for beginning with the compilation if you are just getting into the Furs. The back of the 12" has an unremarkable song called "Birdland", and an excellent 1982 live performance of "No Easy Street", which is ironic because when I saw the band in concert on the *Mirror Moves* tour I thought they were pretty atrocious live.

## various

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### *Pretty in Pink (soundtrack), 1986 LP*

I had to actually buy a copy of *Pretty in Pink* when I was doing the song-film about it. The crime-against-humanity of the redone title track excluded, it's actually a pretty decent snapshot of the real-life soundtrack of the world the film portrays. Orchestral Manœuvres in the Dark's "If You Leave" and New Order's "Shell Shock" are synth-pop standards, and at the other end of the spectrum, Suzanne Vega's folky "Left of Center" (with Joe Jackson playing piano) is as good as anything on her first album. Echo and the Bunnymen's "Bring on the Dancing Horses", the Smiths' "Please Please Please Let Me Get What I Want" (which you probably didn't notice in the film, as it was playing almost inaudibly on the radio in Molly's bedroom during one scene) and INXS's "Do Wot You Do" add some additional hit power, and Belouis Some's "Round, Round" (not that dance hit that goes "You spin me right round baby right round, like a record player right round round round", which is by Dead or Alive) and a plausible cover by the Danny Hutton Hitters of Nik

Kershaw's "Wouldn't It Be Good" come along for the ride.

And, of course, you'll also need this album in order to fully understand my rant about "Pretty in Pink" itself. You may not *want* to understand it, and that's your privilege certainly, but if you do, you at least have the consolation of knowing that the *rest* of this album is a good era-sampler. Also, "Left of Center" and "Bring on the Dancing Horses" do not appear on their artists' studio albums (though "Left of Center" shows up on Vega's UK best-of, and "Bring on the Dancing Horses" is on Echo's compilation *Songs to Learn and Sing*), so that might be extra incentive.

## Immaculate Fools

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### *Dumb Poet, 1987 LP*

Immaculate Fools *want* to be the Psychedelic Furs, that much seems plain. This is more interesting than it might seem, though, as they seem to want to be the later Furs musically, but the early Furs vocally. "Tragic Comedy" is the song I bought this album for. It is steady and crisp, like "The Ghost in You" without horns. "Never Give Less Than Everything" is faster, darker. "Dumb Poet" sounds like "India" run through one of those sampler modes that cuts the tempo in half without lowering the pitch. "So Much Here" sounds like the Furs performing acoustic on an ailing merry-go-round. "Wish You Were Here" sounds like the Furs covering the Payola\$.

It doesn't all add up to much for me, though, and my copy of this album mostly collects dust. I heard a song from a new Immaculate Fools album sometime in 1992, and it didn't sound like this, but it didn't sound like anything I was interested in more, either, so I can't tell you anything about it.

## Manic Street Preachers

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At a time when punk's legacy is mostly apparent as thrash metal, or Seattle grunge, the Manic Street Preachers rekindle its original fire as raw enthusiastic defiance of, well, whatever is available. I gather that the band is the subject of much heated debate in Britain as to whether they are the Second Coming of the Sex Pistols, or a hateful quartet of glam pretenders, but I can't tell what the difference between the two is, so as far as I'm concerned they're just great. They're Welsh, like the Alarm, and in some ways I'm coming to think that the Manic Street Preachers are the band I always wanted the Alarm to *become*.

### *New Art Riot*, 1990 CD5

Rescued from an import clearance bin, this four-song EP is from long before I'd ever heard of the band. The songs, "New Art Riot", "Strip It Down", "Last Exit on Yesterday" and "Teenage 20/20", are all good, but don't live up to the standard of *Generation Terrorists*, so it's no wonder to me that none of them re-emerge there. The liner quotes, one from Marx and one unattributed one about how everybody drinks Coke (and, more importantly, that everyone drinks the *same* Coke), go as far towards establishing the band's neo-anti-establishment stance as the songs, which are a little hard to follow.

### *Stay Beautiful* (US), 1991 CD5

The only reason "Manic Street Preachers" meant anything to me was that when you check the Magnum and Marillion sections you tend to go past Manic quite reliably. I thought it was a cool name, since it could mean "evangelists who preach on a street called Manic", or "very-energetic outdoor proselytizers", sort of like "Swimming Pool Q's". Not knowing anything more about them, I figured from cover art that they were another loathsome Manchester drone-rave band like the Charlatans. Switching the radio on one evening, though, I heard the last ten or fifteen seconds of a cool-sounding song. The DJ came on and rattled off a number of artists he'd just played, but in a random-sounding order that left me uncertain which, if any, was the one I'd just heard. One of the names, though, was Manic Street Preachers, which piqued my interest. The next day I ran across this CD-single in the "It's virtually inconceivable to us that anyone would want these" bin at Looney Tunes, and figured it was worth \$.99 to find out what the band sounded like.

I was completely blown away. It was readily obvious that the song fragment I'd heard was *not* by this band, but this was way better. "Stay Beautiful" has huge guitars and drums and *rocks*. The lyrics say things like "This is a culture of destruction" that were good to hear again. The music was amazing. And did I mention how cool the song is? The other four songs weren't as amazing, but were easily good enough to convince me that "Stay Beautiful" wasn't a fluke. "Motown Junk", "Sorrow 16" and "Star Lover" all approach it in intensity, while the mellower "R.P. McMurphy" is less affecting but still interesting.

### *Generation Terrorists*, 1992 CD

Luckily, I was far enough behind in coming across "Stay Beautiful" that I only had to wait a week-and-a-half before the release of the Manic Street Preachers' first full album. It was everything I hoped it would be.

When I first got it I was convinced it would be #1 on my 1992 album list, and though a very-strong rest of the year ended up demoting the album to a tie for tenth, "Stay Beautiful" managed to hold onto #6 on the song list.

"Slash 'n' Burn" starts the album out in explosive style. Georgia says it sounds like Bon Jovi, and while I don't agree, I can sort of see what makes her say that. The drum and guitar *sounds* are very heavy-metal-like, and the emotive singing isn't entirely unlike Bon Jovi moments like the chorus of "Living on a Prayer". But where Bon Jovi's carefully-styled energy seems directed at the suburban teenage girls in the front row of the Meadowlands, the Manic Street Preachers' crackles and sparks in the service of lyrics that should make Johnny Rotten proud. "Slash 'n' Burn" reprises the *New Art Riot* EP's fascination with Coke, pointing out that "Madonna drinks Coke and so you do too".

I don't really know what "Nat West-Barclay's-Midlands-Lloyds" is about, but with references to Pol Pot, *Mein Kampf*, and "death sanitised through credit", I'm pretty sure it's *scathing*. "Love's Sweet Exile"'s triumphant roar is so great I don't even *care* what it's about. "Little Baby Nothing", besides being a terrifically melodic song, is a biting attack on the sexual exploitation of women. The gorgeous hooks and sailing vocals disguise a blistering text, with the intensely cool and subversive effect that the song gets you singing along cheerily without knowing exactly what the words are, and then when you go to look them up hits you with its real message. "Another Invented Disease" employs a similar approach, luring you into verses that you discover say things like "Left alone in corporate slums / Where germs are free not Amex fun / Healthy bodies in empty minds / Only exist in advert time".

"Repeat", which begins with the straightforward exhortation "Repeat after me / Fuck Queen and country", is the Manic Street Preachers' "God Save the Queen", that odd breed of British rock song written to be banned. The first version of it is labeled "(UK)", with a later, heavily sampled remix labeled "(Stars and Stripes)", but the second version doesn't change the lyrics to attack the US, like I expected it to.

"You Love Us" is a sarcastic exercise in self-aggrandization ("You love us like a holocaust"), in a similar musical vein to "Stay Beautiful". "Democracy Coma" turns the guns back on the Queen. Songs about the British royal family are always particularly amusing to Americans, as I don't think any of us really believe that the Queen and Princess Di and the rest are anything more than a popular weekly soap opera, no matter how many times we're told how much money they have and that the Queen theoretically has the power to form and dissolve governments.

Lest organized religion get away without its due invective, "Crucifix Kiss" provides a predictably dim view of the effect Christianity has on its devotees. "Motorcycle Emptiness" then extends the condemnation to the rest of society in the costume of the album's slowest, prettiest song. "Tennessee" tosses in a cryptic dig at the US and the PMRC, just to be global about things, and leads into the "(Stars and Stripes)" version of "Repeat". "Condemned to Rock 'n' Roll" adds one last irony to the album, by putting lyrics which cast rock as the last refuge of the hopeless, their only remaining joy, over the album's hardest rock song, sounding as much like Mötley Crüe as "Slash and Burn" sounded like Bon Jovi.

One mark of a truly great album is that it can be appreciated on more than one level, and *Generation Terrorists* is one of the most remarkable examples of an album that seems *designed* to be appreciated on two levels. On casual listening, and even on relatively close listening without the lyric sheet, this is a fabulous album of hyperkinetic, punk-influenced pop music, representing a sort of ultimate musical synthesis of punk energy and pop melody. Once you read the words, the album unfolds its second, true nature, as a bruising resuscitation of the social and political fury that fueled punk's first coming.

Pretty intense. Writing this makes me wonder what the hell I was thinking to rank this album only tenth in 1992. No doubt I'll remember when I get to review numbers 1-9.



# Steeltown

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from the Big Country album *Steeltown*

## Soundtrack

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Big Country: "Where the Rose is Sown"

Big Country: "Song of the South"

Runrig: "Dance Called 'America'"

U2: "Sunday Bloody Sunday"

The Alarm: "Deeside"

The Waterboys: "Church Not Made with Hands"

Cactus World News: "Years Later"

Billy Bragg: "A New England"

Midnight Oil: "Dreamworld (live)"

Juluka: "December African Rain"

## Introduction

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My areas Mega Therion and Underground corresponded closely to the "accepted" rock subgenres of heavy metal and punk. Steeltown doesn't have any such analog. Perhaps more than any other chapter, Steeltown is a collection of artists related much more strongly to each other than they are independently related to the chapter itself. Put another way, my definition of this area explains its core members, and the core members bring along associated bands that fill up the rest of the area.

This, then, is my collection of music that brings to American rock strong other-national identities, and uses those identities to foster global awareness.

That's a grandiose description, and might lead you to expect this chapter to be a cavalcade of nations and eclectic multicultural musical styles. If it does, you'll be disappointed. As I said up front, my appreciation of music is very strongly tied to voices and lyrics, and there is thus very little in my collection that is not from English-speaking countries. Additionally, I am basically a Western rock fan, and though I'm well aware that this rules out thousands of years of rich musical tradition in places like China, India, Tuvalu and Kiribati, not to mention such other minor *Western* phenomena like "Jazz" and "Classical", it's frankly all I can do to try to keep up with this one style, and so I've chosen for the time being to let the others wend their merry way without me.

What you'll find here is music from such exotic foreign locales as Scotland, Ireland, Wales, England and Australia (as well as token representation from South

Africa). The core players are Big Country, U2, the Alarm, Billy Bragg and Midnight Oil. Each of these bring along several artists who are associated in my mind, some but not all of which make sense in Steeltown on their own. As the associations are themselves the key to the organization of this book, much more so than the chapter divisions in and of themselves, I'm satisfied to treat this chapter the way it falls.

You should also be aware, if you're reading this book in order like I'm writing it, that the first artist in this chapter, Big Country, is my favorite band, and is the first of my four favorite artists (Big Country, Kate Bush, Game Theory and Marillion, in case you've forgotten or are skipping around) to be discussed. They're also the band for whom I have the most entries, by a wide margin, so I hope you're prepared to read about them at great length.

## Big Country

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I have my sister, Melissa, to thank for Big Country (and for the bulk of this chapter, come to think of it). In 1983 I was just starting to broaden my musical tastes from a strong focus on Rush, Black Sabbath and Boston, and in the beginning Big Country to me was a funny video in which the band rode around on little three-wheeled ATVs. The more I heard their record seeping out of her room, though, the more I realized, with the horrible reluctance that characterizes any grudging acquiescence by a 16-year-old boy that his 14-year-old sister was actually right about something, that I liked it.

The point when casual appreciation began to turn to deeper devotion, however, came one day when, browsing through the racks at VVV Records, I came across the 12" single for "Chance", with "Tracks of My Tears" on the back side. 12"s were a complete novelty to me at that point, and "Tracks of My Tears" was a song I'd hear on late-night TV ads for mail-order compilation records. The two together, somehow, were very appealing to me, and I bought the disk.

Over the next few years, thanks entirely to four good record stores (VVV and Metamorphosis in Dallas, and then Newbury Comics and Second Coming in Cambridge), Big Country continued to be a band that richly rewarded attention. Dozens of non-album b-sides of astounding quality gave the experience of being a Big Country fan a particular richness that was quite different from the experience of liking a band that simply put out albums every once in a while: this was clearly a band both with inspiration to spare, and who seemed to care about their record-buying fans. So while Big Country would certainly be *one* of my favorite bands solely on the strength of their albums,

the ongoing process of watching for and collecting their many singles has had a big hand in keeping the band constantly in my mind for the past ten years, and the span of their output has thus played a part in making them such an incredibly important part of my life.

Here, then, is my favorite band in the world.

### *The Crossing*, 1983 CD

Grace. Big Country's debut album is an understated masterpiece that I think has and will continue to withstand the test of time better than just about anything rock music has produced. (Well, I *told* you they're my favorite band.) To get them out of the way, I'll just go through a list of things that make this album wonderful:

Grace. From the simple white logo on a blue cover to the clear, unobtrusive production by Steve Lillywhite, to the absolutely gimmick-free songs and arrangements, this is an album of perfect proportions.

Emotion. Sadness and hope, in equal parts, saturate the lyrics and moods of these songs. The whole band plays not like they think they are clever, "original" or "great", but like they actually *care* about what they are doing and what they are saying—like they are *involved*.

Talent. I'll be among the first to point out that you can make a great band with almost no technical skills, if the participants are willing to work with what they have. At the other end of the spectrum, it is not at all hard for a band with technical virtuosos to let instrumental skill and pyrotechnics destroy the *music* it is supposed to enhance. Somewhere in the middle there is a delicate equilibrium where the musicians play well enough that the band's compositions are not limited by their technical abilities, but where the compositions aren't *driven* by technical skills, either. Big Country found it early, and has never lost it. Mark Brzezicki is an awesome drummer, remarkable both for the complex syncopated nuances of his percussions parts, and for the way he fits them *into* the textures of the band's songs, rather than letting them poke out like a heavy-metal "drum solo". Tony Butler is both a great bass-player and a great backing vocalist, and he and Mark together make a tight rhythm section honed through many studio gigs before Big Country (most notably Pete Townshend's album *Empty Glass*). And while Stuart Adamson and Bruce Watson don't set themselves up as guitar heroes, nor does Stuart try to dazzle anyone with his vocal range, the band makes amazing use of all three abilities, and each one individually rewards careful scrutiny better than a casual recollection of the music's overall impact might lead you to guess.

Tradition. What some people misunderstood as a gimmick, the guitars that sound a little like bagpipes, I see as an attempt to incorporate the cadences and timbres of Scottish folk music into rock music, to build on the whole of the band's musical heritage, not just the contemporary aspects. In fact, using bagpipes themselves would be more of a gimmick, and using samples of bagpipe playing would be the most gimmicky. The band is not tried to *simulate* bagpipes, but rather to learn from them.

Originality. Though at no point does it sound like the band has *tried* to be different, or chosen some musical alternative on the grounds that "nobody's done *that* before", the overall result is not like any other band before them. Even on just this first album, Big Country has already established a distinct and exclusive style that goes far deeper than E-bows.

"In a Big Country" begins the album, as it effectively begins both the band's career and my involvement with them. The chances are pretty good that most of you have heard this song, but that you never listened to it all that closely. For instance, you might not have noticed that drummer Mark Brzezicki creates a subtle and intricate hi-hat and splash-cymbal interplay throughout the song without ever letting it take away from the song's irresistible loping backbeat. You also might not have followed the determined lyrics about the overriding importance of always having hope, or the way the song seems to always be building in energy, without ever actually speeding up, or the way that Stuart and Bruce work together to mesh the hard, churning chords that support the song with the delicate single-note melodies that direct it, or how Tony Butler's bass-playing makes the song seem like it just *has* a low end, without any human intervention, or the way the line "pull up your head off the floor and come up screaming" conveys the passion it describes more clearly than any attempt to actually render it in screams could have.

Or maybe you noticed all of those things.

"Inwards" offers, as counterpoint to the rousing opener, a more introspective composition, both lyrically and musically. In place of "In a Big Country"'s unrelenting, extremely danceable beat, "Inwards" works for contrasts. Stuart's slow, legato singing plays against the fast, choppy, up-and-down midrange guitar riff, and the shifting drum patterns hang tenaciously to the wailing high-guitar part. And in place of the catchy phrases that fly out of "In a Big Country", like "But I can live and breathe / And see the sun in wintertime", "Inwards" offers the more private image, "the scouts in the stairwell will kiss again / And talk about justice and freedom and pain".

Using "Inwards"'s introspection as a transition from "In a Big Country"'s enthusiasm, "Chance" slows the

mood down even further, for perhaps Big Country's saddest, most haunting song. Using sketchy lyrics about a loveless marriage to set the scene, "Chance" achieves transcendence in the repetition of the chorus: "Oh Lord where did the feeling go? / Oh Lord I never felt so low". On every repeat it coils more securely around my heart, both painful in its sadness and joyous in the tiny but blinding ray of hope that is implied in the determination audible behind the anguish. The music builds in such close parallel to the feeling of the lyrics that towards the end the guitar seems to me to be saying as much as the voice, and though I don't know what its words are, I know what they mean.

"1000 Stars" takes the tense energy built up by the end of "Chance" and spends it in a song that seems more upbeat on first listen, but which is actually even darker and heavier. The pace of the music represents, this time, not future hope but past luck, and luck that is running out, at that. Although there is fear audible in the lyrics, the dominant emotions are courage and acceptance. The narrator (and in Big Country songs the whole band portrays the narrator's attitude, not just the singer his words or thoughts) seems to recognize how far fortune has got him, and that it won't be getting him any farther, and sees neither injustice nor malevolence in this.

From this partial stop, "The Storm" seems to rise from the ground like fog. A longer song than the first four (on vinyl, both sides end with long songs), "The Storm" plays like a new beginning—not a sparkling, clear new day, filled with auspice, but a wet, muddy, realistic and difficult new start, where hardship and struggle cannot be avoided, but doesn't necessarily lead to peace or happiness, either. Christine Beveridge's ethereal backing vocals are especially effective here, and the acoustic guitar, soft martial drums and almost-orchestral E-bowed guitar parts combine for a song whose music you can simply immerse yourself in, even without trying to follow the story explicitly.

One misses, I feel, the precisely correct effect of the transition from "The Storm" to "Harvest Home" when listening to this album on CD. The first side should end, and you should sit in silence for a few moments, the last echoes of the previous side dying away in your mind. Then you should get up, slightly drained from the strong emotions, but with a good amount of pent-up energy from the sheer brilliance of the songs as art, held in check by the sobering mood. You flip over the album, start the turntable, watch the needle move out over the disk, and start to walk back to your seat. Halfway there, the song kicks in with a surprising level-change, and gets you moving again, though it holds back just a few beats-per-minute short of outright danceability that at this stage you would be completely

swept up in, thus missing the thread of the emotional narrative.

On CD, though, you get a couple seconds and before you know it the next song is begun. It takes away from the impact of "The Storm", but I guess that's life.

Anyway, "Harvest Home" feels the most like an old folk-song to me of any of these, with its symmetrical verses, starting each line within a verse with the same word, which would make the song easier to remember and pass down through the generations verbally; the openness that comes with the verses being mostly bass and drums, with little guitar; and the insistent hopefulness of the chorus ("Just as you sow you shall reap"), despite the pessimistic verses. The song is fast, energetic and regularly-structured enough to release some of the energy built up so far, but controlled enough not to let release break the mood.

In another example of an ordering that made excellent use of the limitations of LPs but gets a little lost on CD, "Lost Patrol" acts as a structural parallel to "Inwards". Together, "Harvest Home" and "Lost Patrol" feel to me like they produce the same composite effect as "In a Big Country" and "Inwards". In fact, the two vinyl sides work in *close* parallel, the contrast of each pair feeling absolutely intentional to me, though it's entirely possible that the tracks were ordered at random and I'm simply imposing meaning onto them on my own.

"Lost Patrol", then, though it seems no more outward-looking than "Inwards" at first, has actually made a great stride forward, for where "Inwards" is a single person drawing in upon himself, "Lost Patrol" is a *group* drawing in on *themselves*. Hidden behind a pronoun-switch is a huge philosophical and personal shift.

As if the band realizes this change only as it happens, "Close Action" grabs on to it and turns the simple sharing of fates that "Lost Patrol" discovered into a song of dedication as determined in its intent not to let go of this simple contact as "Chance" was wracked in the lonely wife's pain. "Close Action" reflects this new hope in its *music*, too, with a pace more similar to "Harvest Home" than "Chance". This is important, because rather than leading into a song like "1000 Stars" that feels to me like a partial conclusion, "Close Action" is followed by "Fields of Fire".

"Fields of Fire" was the other single to make some impression in the US, so you might have heard it. As invigorating in its own way as "In a Big Country", "Fields of Fire" takes its drive from a battle-hardened deliberateness, rather than a naïve enthusiasm. Where "In a Big Country"'s drums gallop, "Fields of Fire"'s crash like an army of giants marching in unison. It occupies the same emotional plane as "In a Big

Country", but in the context of the album "In a Big Country" passes through this plane on the way down, and "Fields of Fire" goes through it on the way up.

"Fields of Fire" then fades out decisively at its end, and to me the main body of the album actually ends there.

There's one more song, though, and here I'm *really* sure I'm interpreting in things that weren't intended, but I read "Porrohman" as a separate composition that, by way of an epilogue to the rest of the album, either begins a new tale and cycle, or retells the whole emotional narrative from a different perspective entirely. Musically, "Porrohman" is the longest and most wide-ranging song on the record, and as such it almost seems to recapitulate many of the other songs' themes and dynamics within itself. In a universe where MTV viewers had longer attention spans, this could have been the single and an epic video, and in coloring the start of Big Country's career differently, might have changed the common perception of the band drastically.

Now, after such a harrowing tour of this album, it bears repeating that, musically, every single song on this album is terrific. The songs, *as songs*, were what made me a Big Country fan to begin with, and the involved emotional storyline that I've either mined out of the album or plastered on top of it, depending on your viewpoint, has developed slowly over the years. So if you run out and buy this album, listen to it, and don't hear what I describe, I wouldn't be at all surprised. It wouldn't even shock me to find that after ten years of *you* listening to this album, you develop an entirely different theory about what it all means. What makes me feel so strongly that this album is truly great is that it possesses the ability to support such strong associations and complex personal experiences *at all*, because there are so tragically few albums that this many listens enrich rather than diminish. Actually, I'm alternately sad that such albums are so rare, and astonished at how *many* of them I've actually found. Either way, this is one of the truest.

### ***Harvest Home, 1982 12"***

As the date indicates, this single actually preceded the album, and the version of "Harvest Home" here is *not* the one on *The Crossing*. It's faster, for one thing, but mainly it's just odder. Although the sleeve doesn't credit a keyboard player, there are plenty of noises on these three songs that don't *sound* like guitars. In a sense, then, this single is actually proto-Big Country. The difference between the two versions of "Harvest Home" shows the band finding their identity, stripping out the layer of beeping sounds that may have been

partially a holdover from the Skids, and concentrating on the solid guitar/bass/drums core.

The two b-sides are even more uncharacteristic. "Balcony", with strangely processed vocals from Stuart, Tony Butler's bass pushed way forward in the mix, and some synth-toms from Mark Brzezicki, has an almost Magazine-like quality to it. For some reason I think this song appeared on the soundtrack of the movie *Against All Odds*, although as I write I can't remember why I think this, so perhaps it didn't.

The last song, the instrumental "Flag of Nations (Swimming)", is the only Big Country song I've ever heard that I'm pretty sure I couldn't have identified as being theirs in a blind listening test. Part of this is that they've done so few instrumentals, but more of it is that the music really doesn't sound like them much at all.

All that makes this 12" an essential historical document for Big Country fans.

### ***Chance, 1983 12"***

The extended single version of "Chance" is, like many of Big Country's extended remixes, more *rhythmic* than the album version. Unaccompanied drums actually begin the song, and there are a couple of interludes of just voice and drums inserted along the way, with heavy echoes on the vocals boosting the rhythm yet further. The bulk of the song has the same feeling as the album version, but the treatments of the bits where it isn't give the song a distinctly different spirit that is delightful on its own, but which would not have fit into the flow of *The Crossing* near as well.

The second song (actually sharing the a-side with "Chance", due to the length of the third song) is a live cover of Smokey Robinson's "The Tracks of My Tears". I like this rendition a lot, and it is pretty faithful to the spirit of the original. There are a number of cover songs in Big Country's canon, and as you'll see, they tend to be far more reverent than revisionist.

The other side is the song "The Crossing". I've never bothered actually timing this song, but it *feels* long. Like "Porrohman", or the later songs "The Red Fox" and "The Sailor", it has several sections, and evolves as if telling chapters of a story.

The title prompts natural questions as to why this song wasn't on the album of the same name, and I have no idea. I think it *could* have been used on the album, perhaps in place of "Lost Patrol" or replacing "Porrohman" as the album's coda, but it doesn't immediately occur to me how I could fit it in without removing something else or disrupting the *flow* of the album. Of course, for all I know the song was written *after* the album was completed. At any rate, it's a fine song, and an important part of the *The Crossing* era for more reasons than just its name.

As I mentioned in the intro to *Big Country*, this was the first 12" single I ever bought, and it set my expectations for 12" singles very high: an interestingly different version of an album track, a strong cover song, and another original absolutely up to the quality of the band's album tracks. And all for \$4.99, which admittedly seemed like more to me in 1983 than it does here in the CD age. It has been my experience in the subsequent years that very few other bands make 12"s (or, later, CD5s) anywhere's near as worthwhile as *Big Country's*.

### *In a Big Country, 1983 7"*

The single version of "In a Big Country" uses a slightly edited version of the album track, removing several seconds of drums from the beginning, but otherwise leaving the song unchanged. The flip side, "All of Us", shows signs of the "Harvest Home" single's sound still peeking through, making me suspect that this song was conceived early on. For this reason it is not, in retrospect, the song I would have chosen for the b-side. One US version of the 7" used "Inwards", which made more sense stylistically, but who needs a single that just contains album tracks?

### *In a Big Country, 1983 12"*

The extended remix of "In a Big Country" (labeled the "Pure Mix"), compensates for the omission of the lead-in drums on the single edit by adding several more, both at the start and sprinkled throughout the song. The treatment is similar to that of "Chance" on its 12", and I find the tactic even more effective on this song, since it was more upbeat to begin with. Several interesting moments are also created by isolating parts of the original, letting you focus on guitar, or backing vocals. I wouldn't give up the album versions of any of *Big Country's* songs for their extended versions, but the extended versions do a fascinating job of building on the appeal of the album version, and adapting it for a different context, without feeling like they are trying to change the song's nature or "correct" some perceived "error".

The second track, "Heart and Soul", is the last song to strike me as "Harvest Home"-era, and the fact that it is produced by Chris Thomas, not Steve Lillywhite, makes me pretty sure that I am historically correct. This particular song I think sounds *very* much like the *Skids* came to just before Stuart's departure.

The 12" also reprises both tracks from the 7".

### *Fields of Fire, 1983 7"*

My record-buying budget being extremely limited in 1983, I chose at the time that I would buy the cheaper

7" versions whenever the only thing the 12" added was a remix. In the case of "Fields of Fire", the only 12" I saw at the time didn't even have "Angle Park", the 7"'s b-side. Additionally, the 7" came wrapped not in the usual 7" sleeve, but in a cleverly folded poster that served the same purpose.

"Angle Park" is one of my favorite *Big Country* songs, a driving, darkly intense composition with great lines like "the evil genius beats his wife". It evokes a weird German expressionist landscape populated by pawns of a deranged god.

The poster is a bit blurry, and after displaying it for a little while I refolded it into sleeve form.

### *Wonderland, 1984 7"*

We now move out of *The Crossing* era, into a short interregnum between albums. Filling this gap is the only song I've ever thought I could say was my favorite song ever. There have been times, mind you, when I wasn't sure "Wonderland" was *really* my *very* favorite, but I've never been convinced that any *other* song was. It is a wistful love song with crashing drums, rumbling bass and guitars that both blaze and chirp. Coming out between albums, it is now rather conclusively forgotten in the US, but in the UK it was the band's second most-successful chart single, hitting #8.

The flip-side is an instrumental called "Giant". Unlike "Flag of Nations (Swimming)", this one definitely feels like a *Big Country* song. It struck me as mystifying at the time why there weren't vocals, as the music seems to be leaving room for them. An explanation would be forthcoming shortly.

The double-pack single I have includes a second disk with a long live version of "Lost Patrol". It's a good performance, and a good recording, but it's split in half, with one half on each side of the disk, which makes it annoying to listen to.

The single also has an insert with several good concert photos of the band. This insert, sadly, was the one serious casualty of The Flood of '89, when the water heater in my first apartment exploded one day when I was at work, submerging my bedroom in three inches of water, and reminding me of one of the many reasons why basements aren't the best possible places to live.

### *Wonderland (clear vinyl), 1984 12"*

The 12" version came in at least two configurations, the one I have being a clear-vinyl edition with the extended version of "Wonderland" on the front, and "Giant" and the live "Lost Patrol" on the back. Not having to flip the disk in the middle of "Lost Patrol" is definitely a plus.

The "Wonderland" remix is a pretty substantial reworking of the song. There is a lot of looping towards

the beginning, middle and end of it, and while a great deal of the *structure* of the original is left intact in between the extensions, the instrument balances are frequently altered, giving increased prominence to either Tony's bass or Mark's drumming. I love the song far too much to have anything particularly objective to say about the remix. The idea of hearing a different version of the song is inherently appealing to me, and you'd have to work *very* hard to construct a mix of it that I didn't like, at least using raw material produced by Big Country.

### ***Wonderland, 1984 EP***

This four-song EP was the only concerted attempt PolyGram ever made to compile Big Country b-sides into a more compact form. Besides "Wonderland" itself, this EP contains both "Angle Park" (from the 12" of "Fields of Fire") and "The Crossing" (from the back of "Chance"). The fourth song, "All Fall Together", is actually "Giant" with vocals added! Hearing the vocals, I think I understand why the song got released originally as an instrumental. It's not that the vocals are bad, just that they don't quite fit the music. I wonder, however, whether this perception is just a result of my having heard the instrumental several times before hearing the version with vocals.

When CDs came along, Mercury or PolyGram could have used this EP as the starting point for a comprehensive CD collection of early b-sides, something that Big Country's prolific output could really have used, but instead they chose not to bother releasing the EP on CD at all, thus largely canceling the small credit I gave them for putting it out in the first place. Ah well, when I own a record company...

### ***Steeltown, 1984 CD***

Though my rhapsody on the subject of *The Crossing* might lead you to guess otherwise, *Steeltown* is my favorite Big Country album, and a frequent contender for my favorite album, period. This is not intended to diminish any of the other albums, as Big Country's whole oeuvre would monopolize a complete ranking of my collection. For various reasons, however, this album has a more exalted place in my mind than the others.

The simplest explanation has two parts. First, I've lived with this album longer than the ones that came after, and the critical years of 1984-1986, before the release of *The Seer*, were still in a time when I didn't buy records at near the rate I do now, so the mindshare that any one album got was statistically larger. I was also still broadening my awareness at that point, so I tended to be much more focused on what I *did* know.

(In fact, writing this book is partly an attempt to *re-establish* my focus.)

Secondly, where the first album is somewhat well-known, and certainly "In a Big Country" is a song most people of my generation were aware of, *Steeltown* is the first Big Country record that you basically didn't hear unless you cared about them. So the feeling of proprietariness no doubt influences my choice of *Steeltown* over *The Crossing*.

On the other hand, there's really no *need* to refer to outside factors, as the album more than justifies my highest accolades.

The most obvious change from *The Crossing* is that this is a more muscular, harder rocking album. Where the first album's mood was in turns sad, wistful, melancholy and determined, this album mixes in fury, defiance and what borders dangerously on optimism. The production is even better than on *The Crossing*, and the playing is also, amazingly, improved. Although it didn't feel restrained at the time, *The Crossing* begins to sound that way by comparison, as the band, maturing both individually and together, comes to understand their style well enough to expand on it. Stuart's singing is notably more ambitious, and though he occasionally strains to make his voice do what he wants, his limits are not reached quickly. He also sings more *clearly*, a matter of some ongoing amusement to me given how indecipherably thick his Scottish accent is in his *speaking* voice.

I also don't experience this album as much as a single composition as I did *The Crossing*. That's not to say it isn't as cohesive and coherent as an album as the first one was, but more that I find every single song so overwhelmingly wonderful that it completely holds my attention during it, making it harder for me to step back and filter the songs out for the whole. Imagine a forest of Rodin statues, and you may get a feeling for the way I wander, agape, from figure to figure, completely ignoring your suggestion that we hike over to a nearby hill from which we'd have a "better view".

The forest's first tree is "Flame of the West". There are Big Country songs before this that are as fast, but this is the first one that seems designed not just to get you up and moving, but to actually *shake* you. I read somewhere that this song was about a visit to Britain by Ronald Reagan, and that certainly might have been the *inspiration*, but the resulting song is not that literal. Instead it is cast as a fable about the power of personality, and the way a people in need are vulnerable to a well-woven spell, no matter how sinister. The lines "There will be dollars in his hand / He has all hell to pay", and the "West" in the title are the only concrete American allusions, and they make sense on their own, especially remembering the Skids' "Working for the Yankee Dollar".

The juxtaposition of the next song, “East of Eden”, with “Flame of the West” suggests an interpretation of “East of Eden” that wouldn’t have otherwise occurred to me. The song by itself is, I think, a sketchy character study about being happy with what you have, and as such makes an optimistic contrast to *The Crossing*’s anguished songs about the loss of hope. If you believe that the “West” is the US, though, then the US could be “Eden”, and the UK is east of it. This seems like a fortuitous coincidence, and perhaps intentional at that, but not the song’s primary intent.

“Flame of the West” and “East of Eden” make an interesting pair to compare with “In a Big Country” and “Inwards”. “East of Eden” is more restrained than “Flame of the West”, like “Inwards” was to “In a Big Country”. Both of the newer songs are more energetic than their counterparts, and less introspective. *The Crossing* was very much an album about personal struggles and trials, and *Steeltown*, with its title, cover, and opening, sets out to look beyond the personal to the interpersonal, and beyond that to the political.

Thus, for the third song, where *The Crossing* had “Chance”, its saddest character study, *Steeltown* offers its title track. In less than five minutes, “Steeltown” offers an emotional history of Scotland’s industrial rise and fall, capturing how the mines promised, even more than just employment, *purpose*, and how, as bleak as the mines were, they were something the people *made themselves*, and thus in a way beautiful. Unfortunately, the industry didn’t last, and the people’s sense that they had poured their lives into the mines made their closing all the more crushing.

As if reminded of it by the subject of manufactured destinies, *Steeltown* then shifts its gaze to another hollow offer of direction, war. “Where the Rose is Sown” has made occasional runs at “Wonderland” as my favorite Big Country, and I chose it for this chapter’s soundtrack over “Wonderland”, because it better captures the political and social awareness that links all the bands in Steeltown, the chapter. As well as thoughtful lyrics about how young men are wooed by the glories of fighting, and then numbed by its reality, the song has some of the band’s best soaring vocal harmonies and E-bow melodies, and a rock-solid beat.

“Where the Rose is Sown” trails off into soft martial drum rolls that blend directly into “Come Back to Me”, which flips viewpoints from the young soldier to the woman he left behind. A haunting song that actually brings tears to my eyes when I think about it very much, this is a woman’s thoughts as, from her window, she watches the jubilant welcome parade for a hero returning from the war that killed her lover. The roses showered on him for his victory become the roses that mark the graves of those who died, and will one day mark her grave, too, as she follows the part of her that

has died already. Between the two songs, it’s hard to tell what is sadder, the soldier dying, or the lover living on.

Thus ended the first side on vinyl, and the break between sides is even more significant on this album than on the first one. “Harvest Home” was a change of mood from “The Storm”, but the side-change was a dramatic pause, not a break. Here it is a break, and the two halves of *Steeltown* are distinct. The five political songs of the first side give way to five much more personal songs on the second.

“Tall Ships Go” is the first. It is a beautiful piece of poetry, all the more so because I’m not entirely sure I understand it. It begins as if it is about how dreams of losing a loved one affect your relationship with them, but there are some bits about “the enemy” that I can’t quite integrate. The choppy music seems to reinforce the song’s images of both the sea, and of the disconnectedness of dreams. Perhaps it also applies to the edginess of relationships based on tension, and the narrator yearns for the more peaceful kind. Perhaps not. An awesome song, anyway.

“Girl with Grey Eyes” is next, a ballad of partially-unrequited love. The narrator seems to desperately want more from the relationship, yet he fears almost subconsciously that in trying to make something more they will lose the close friendship that they have. It is a slow, beautiful song that makes excellent use of high, quavering guitar and a subtle bass part to surround the vocals.

“Rain Dance” turns “Girl with Grey Eyes” around, both musically and lyrically. Singing “When you put your arms on me / Are they meant to set me free / Or hold me like his master’s voice”, this narrator is *mainly* afraid. Though it’s actually a mid-tempo song, “Rain Dance” derives more energy than just its pace would indicate. Implied for me in the “Rain Dance” and the winter “crashing down” is a sort of exterior-weather-as-reflection-of-inner-turmoil catharsis that gives the song unexpected power. It’s perhaps best if sung *in* the rain.

“The Great Divide” is even more energized, riding a powerful guitar sound, pounding drums and fiery vocals into what may be the first *gleeful* Big Country song so far. I’m probably misinterpreting the lyrics, but my reading is that it is about the indomitability of free will, and how no amount of wearying mundanity can weigh down a light heart. It reminds me of Daniel Keys Moran’s intoxicating novel *The Long Run*, which, of course, hadn’t been written at the time.

This song also has one of the only glimmers of nascent humor in a repertoire otherwise characterized almost entirely by intensity and seriousness. The way Stuart sings “I never lisped / I’m sure it was a

downfall", it sounds like the narrator's wicked laughter at danger defied.

The album's finale, then, is "Just a Shadow". Beginning slow and building to a roar, "Just a Shadow" is about human potential, and how, through both their own failings and circumstances beyond their control, people fail to live up to it. A wrenchingly emotional song, I don't think I would have ever thought to make it a single (it was the third and least successful single from *Steeltown*), but then again I suggested making "Porrohman" a single, and it is a similarly ambitious song.

"Just a Shadow" offers an interesting perspective on the whole album, and in a way recasts the whole thing, even the political first side, as a personal struggle after all, reinforcing the idea that the worths of things are determined by their effect on individuals. The tragedies of mine closings, war, and reactionary politics, then, are not the numbers of recession, casualty statistics and votes, but the blows they both land and fail to avert that land on already battered people who are simply struggling to live their lives.

I have, I realize, by focusing on the subjects of these songs, painted a somewhat gloomy picture of the mood of this record. And, to be sure, the proximity of Big Country to the B-52s on record-store shelves is about as deceiving as such pairings get, but at no time do I find Big Country *depressing*. The music is irrepressibly invigorating, and the overall feeling is one of strength, not of weakness or defeat. You won't get the kind of shallow good feeling that comes from, for example, a jelly donut, but *Steeltown* has the kind of *substantial* power that characterizes truly great art.

Plus, it sounds fantastic loud.

### ***East of Eden, 1984 12"***

The first single off *Steeltown* was "East of Eden", which surprised me, as it isn't nearly as dynamic a song as "In a Big Country" or "Wonderland", nor as quietly beautiful as "Chance". The extended version, however, adds quite a bit of drama, inserting more drums and emphasizing Tony's bass part, and brings the song up to about the energy level of "Fields of Fire".

The b-side is a completely cool cover of Roxy Music's song "Prairie Rose" (from, interestingly, their album *Country Life* - I wonder if Big Country ever performed it at the Town and Country club...). I'd never heard the original until quite recently, but from the feel of this cover I had a strong sense of what it probably sounded like, and my guess was that this version was pretty faithful, except for the insertion of the line "I hear your voice and it keeps me from sleeping", from "Tall Ships Go". I remember including

this song on a mushily romantic tape I sent to my then girlfriend Hilary, who was away at boarding school (a factor that, as you might imagine, colored our relationship), because the lyrics seemed like a nice sentiment. She, however, was a Roxy Music fan and preferred the original, so the song didn't have quite the effect I'd hoped for. Writing the first draft of this chapter was what finally spurred me to get *Country Life* and hear the original. I wouldn't have been so reluctant, but it's from 1974! Yech.

The phrase "the big country" does actually appear in this song, but I have no idea whether this is the source of the band's name or just a coincidence.

### ***Where the Rose is Sown, 1984 12"***

The remix of "Where the Rose is Sown" follows the same principle as the other remixes. This one happens to be my favorite, as the song seems to lend itself better to intensified rhythm than any other single.

This 12" has two b-sides. The first, "Bass Dance", is a short instrumental that, as you might expect from the title, is mostly bass. I like it, but it's too short to be really overwhelming. The second track, though, "Belief in the Small Man", is another great Big Country song that is as good as anything on *Steeltown*. With another song to complement it, it could have replaced the two war songs "Where the Rose is Sown" and "Come Back to Me", and kept the whole first side more focused on the effects of industry. I'm not sure that topical shift would have *improved* the album overall, mind you, but the song-by-song tradeoff wouldn't have been hurt by the switch. Musically, I think of it as a more deliberate version of "The Great Divide". Lyrically, well, the title captures the essence.

Between the great remix and the two non-album tracks, this was another 12" I heartily approved of.

### ***Just a Shadow, 1985 12"***

I wouldn't want the extended version of "Just a Shadow" to be anybody's only experience of the song. I've said before that these remixes augment the impact of the originals, rather than replacing them, but this case may be the most severe. The original version is so complex, and builds so well, that adding more drums at the ends and in a few places in the middle really colors the effect. I find the remix interesting to listen to, but only with the album version firmly in mind, and even so I do find myself wondering what the point is, something that hadn't troubled me with the previous remixes. If it hadn't been convention at that stage in history that 12" singles were to contain an extended remix of the title song, I don't know that this version would ever had been done. "Just a Shadow" isn't a dance-club rave-up, and the remix can't make it one.



What's stranger, it doesn't really seem to *try* to make it one. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I don't know *what* it's trying to do.

The b-side here is "Winter Sky", a pretty, understated song centered around a nice picked acoustic guitar line. Especially in contrast to the ambitious song it backs, this one is startling in its uncharacteristic simplicity, and it shows a side of the band that no other song so far really featured. To an extent I wonder if its simplicity is a result of it being done quickly, but it holds up so well to repeated listening that I prefer to think the band just realized that it was best left in its raw state. Partly because it is short and lives on a single, I find that I almost never listen to "Winter Sky" just once.

### *The Seer*, 1986 CD

On the one hand, *The Seer's* luster will always be dimmed in my eyes by the comparison to *Steeltown*, which was firmly dug into my heart by the time *The Seer* came out. The stylistic progression from album two to three is mostly incremental, which pretty much ensures in general that a) I'll have a stronger fondness for the former album, and b) the latter album is probably actually better.

On the other hand, I frequently find myself singing songs from this album and forgetting whether they are from here or *Steeltown*, which must mean that my visceral responses are more comparable than my conscious ones.

The biggest change on *The Seer* is that producer Steve Lillywhite has moved on to other pursuits, and in his place is Robin Millar. The band's sound is even more powerful here than on *Steeltown*, but the way Millar is credited with "original production", not just plain "production", makes me wonder if there was some behind-the-scenes tension. If there was, it doesn't show through in the resulting music.

The album begins with "Look Away", which turned out to be Big Country's highest mark on the UK singles charts, at #7. It is an intriguing, bittersweet story that I interpret as being sung by a wrongly accused fugitive to the woman who has accompanied him into hiding or exile. The music varies from the somewhat easy-going verse structure to the incendiary chorus. Massive drums and a thundering accented bass line give the song a solid kick that it doesn't squander.

The title song, which comes second, I consider a personal gift from the band to me (I doubt *they* see it that way...), for in a turn of fate that I wouldn't have dreamed of hoping for, Kate Bush herself shows up to sing a duet with Stuart on "The Seer". Having two of my four favorite artists actually performing together is a windfall of epic proportions, and just served to fuel my

admiration for both artists even further. Kate turns in a great performance, and it is to the band's great credit that they really kept the song as a duet, rather than burying Kate or letting her carry it. They also did not succumb to the understandable temptation to make Kate's presence into a gimmick like Midge Ure did on his song "Sister and Brother" (which I like, by the way). Instead, she and Stuart sing together like there were *supposed* to be the two of them the whole time. I don't know for a fact what the personal character of the collaboration was, but I like to imagine Kate and the whole band staying up late, rehearsing, Kate teasing a shy Bruce Watson, Tony improvising a bass-only version of "Don't Push Your Foot on the Heartbreak". The truth was probably closer to Kate getting a tape in the mail and adding her part all by herself with nothing but a Fairlight for company, but truth can be so unromantic, don't you think? As an aside, it is a real tribute to Stuart Adamson's still-improving vocal skills that at places in the song *Kate* takes the low part and *he* takes the high one!

"The Teacher", the second single, takes some of the basic appeal of "In a Big Country" and adds an eerie guitar riff and whiplash drum sound that together sound like bleed-through from some alternate dimension's spaghetti-western soundtrack. I don't find the lyrics of this one quite as good as most of Stuart's, and this somewhat tarnishes my enjoyment of the song.

The album *really* gets moving after that, with "I Walk the Hill". It is at this point that I suddenly realize that these songs are actually *all not pessimistic*! "Look Away" is an outlaw love story, "The Seer" and "The Teacher" relatively neutral narratives, and "I Walk the Hill" is a heartening statement of a person's ability to affect their own destiny. This is a fascinating evolution from the stark mood of *The Crossing* and the sobering chronicle of industrialism's decay on *Steeltown*. It makes this album center on the songs, *as songs*, rather on a mood or a sociological investigation like the first two. Perhaps this is why the record doesn't seem as good in my mind as it does in my ears; it is meant more as music than thought. This is all relative, though, for as I commented earlier, you could appreciate *all* the Big Country albums without even speaking the language. What you would be doing reading this *book* is, frankly, beyond me, but many people have done more futile things with their life, and most of them paid more for the privilege than you did for your remaindered copy of this tome.

Evidently Kate could only fit one song into her busy schedule of finishing *The Sensual World* in only four years, so June Miles-Kingston steps in as backing vocalist on "Eiledon", a beautiful soaring ode to some mysterious place (time? person? novel?). The lyrics have the rustic feel of fable or legend, reminiscent of

much of *The Crossing*. The backing vocals here are definitely backing, not an equal partner as Kate's singing on "The Seer", but the effect is intoxicating in its own way, and makes me wonder what songs like "Chance", "Close Action", "Great Divide" or "Tall Ships Go" might have sounded like with female backing vocals. I guess I'm exposing a weakness here, for the female voice, that you probably haven't encountered much of in the first two chapters. Just wait until we get to Donnette Thayer.

From looking back to looking forward, the album switches gears for what is probably the hardest rock song in Big Country's catalog, "One Great Thing". Throwing together the biggest sounds they could find for every instrument, and mixing in martial drum-rolls and a guitar part that doubles the voice (as well as the rest of the band quadrupling the voice), and even a flashy guitar solo on the fade out, "One Great Thing" comes out as very nearly larger than life, a song that you initially can't believe anyone managed to get on record, and then, once that settles in, one that you may not believe came from "that band with the guitars that sound like bagpipes". Both in its powerful sound (which could be phrased negatively as "commercial"), and in its lyrical fascination with the dream of peace, this song foreshadows the next album rather neatly. Ah, hindsight.

Lest *Steeltown* feel out of place in the parade of echoes, "Hold the Heart" feels a lot like it could have been the alter ego of "Girl with Grey Eyes", or "Come Back to Me". This one is a mellower setting of the thoughts, not of an aspirant lover either fearing or yearning for closeness, but of a lover who drove his beloved away by taking her for granted, and who is now desperately penitent. Yet this one, too, is ultimately hopeful. "Time will wear a mountain down / And make a lover of the clown / Who laughed too long / And coloured you wrong".

Cranking the amps up to 11 again after that interlude, the band slams into "Remembrance Day", the other song graced with Ms. Miles-Kingston's presence. Powered by another charged guitar line, "Remembrance Day" is an exuberant evocation of the renewed enthusiasm for life that comes with knowing that there is someone *else* who cares for you. Or it might be about campfire safety; I'm just guessing.

What really gets me thinking, though, is the couplet "Like a flower in some forest / That the world will never see", which is very close to "Just a Shadow"'s "Like a garden in the forest / That the world will never see". With this prompting it occurs to me that "Remembrance Day" is the exact *opposite* of, not "Just a Shadow", but another *Steeltown* slow song, "Come Back to Me". Where "Come Back to Me" is a woman's tearful lament at the sadness of a life without her lover,

killed in a war, "Remembrance Day" is that soldier singing how her love keeps him alive. A fascinating reversal!

*The Seer* concludes with two songs that somehow make a four part epic whose plot I feel eternally on the brink of deciphering. Both "The Red Fox" and "The Sailor" have two distinct sections. The first part of "The Red Fox" is narrated by a person who I think is a rebel spy sent by night to capture a significant member of the King's army. Despite some trepidation and close calls, he succeeds in his mission.

The second half of "The Red Fox" flips sides and is told by the kidnapped royalist, although *he* in turn seems like a rebel, so perhaps this is the first person still, and the mission wasn't successful after all. Or maybe the first one was a King's man, and his prey is the rebel. Whatever the case, the kidnapped one doesn't seem to be responsible (for whatever it is), but they think he is, and he is protecting a friend ("John": the English monarch? My history isn't up to the task of assessing that wild guess.), and he suffers imprisonment and exile rather than betray his friend.

The first half of "The Sailor", then, seems to change the subject entirely, and portrays not a literal sailor, but someone who has lived an always changing life, *as though* life were a sea on which one sails aimlessly, and is now willing to choose a spot of land and stand on it. What this has to do with the other I don't know.

The detail that binds the two songs together (aside from the parallel musical structures) is the line "The only thing I wanted to be / Was the perfect one who killed for free". I can't figure out *what* that means in the context of "The Sailor" by itself, but next to "The Red Fox" is suddenly gets me thinking. Is this the kidnapped, exiled rebel, learning to come to terms with his exile? Nah, that doesn't explain the part about "now we are together", nor the romantic musing on "the wind in your hair". Is "The Red Fox" a dream, and "The Sailor" the dreamer's realization that he has lived too long in dreams? Is the lover I'm imagining really the monarchy itself, and "The Sailor" is a song of political compromise?

I'm afraid all these explanations fail to incorporate the "world fair" reference. I'm convinced there is a deeply profound unifying thread behind the two songs, though, in spite of my near-complete failure to find any concrete sign of one. Maybe a few hundred more listenings will reveal a detail I have so far overlooked. "Please," pleaded Br'er Rabbit to Br'er Fox, "don't make me listen to *The Seer* again!"

### ***Look Away, 1986 12"***

The extended version of "Look Away" is one of the most interesting and radical of Big Country's remixes. In addition to adding more drums, this version takes a manic razor to the original, and feeds the shredded pieces back in sped up, slowed down, repeated, reverbed, flanged and generally warped, all the while keeping up the beat. The song lends itself well to this energized treatment, and the result is pretty cool, though as always somewhat inexplicable on its own.

And in fact, it *is* on its own on the 12", because the entire b-side is given over to the first half of Big Country's soundtrack for the movie "Restless Natives". I haven't seen this movie, but a sketchy version of the plot comes out in snatches of dialog through the soundtrack: two Scots take up robbing tourist busses while disguised as a clown and a wolfman, and meet a girl along the way. The video guide I have *does* list the film, but I've never seen a copy in a video store, on TV, or in a US theater.

The soundtrack, as distilled into the form of two long b-sides, is a gorgeous instrumental peppered with bits of movie dialog, flowing from theme to theme in grand style. The first half, here, starts with a section that hearkens back to "Lost Patrol", and then slips into a nice acoustic section. After a piece of newscast announcing the first crime, the acoustic theme grows more electric, leading into the girl recognizing one of the robbers, and then breaking into a two part anthemic section ("Margo's Theme"). The robber denies having met the girl, and there's an acoustic reprise before the drums come crashing back in for a hard rock section, which is then repeated in somewhat mellower form ("Highland Scenery") to end the first disk.

### ***The Teacher, 1986 12"***

The second half of the soundtrack opens with a delightful half-rapped monologue constructed from bits of what sounds like one of the robbers' calls home to his mother, explaining that he's quite taken to robbing, but that he'll try to stay out of trouble. A long atmospheric section follows, with a nice bass melody and some mysterious echoes, before another amped chase scene intervenes.

Shortly the robber is captured, and this triggers Big Country's closest approach to heavy metal, a pounding downward scale over which a blistering guitar solo sails. This eventually gives way to a slow, sad section that trails into the robbers' reluctant admission that the end has come. The rousing "Restless Native" theme follows, the first of two conventional *songs* on the soundtrack (with vocals and everything). The final news story writes the robbers epitaph, and

then the other song, "Home Come the Angels", provides a slow, stately backdrop for, I presume, the credits.

All in all, it's one of the coolest soundtracks I know of, and it's a pathetic shame that it wasn't released as an album in its own right (at least, not that I'm aware of). I wish I'd seen the film.

With the soundtrack on the back, the *front* side of this 12" can go easily unnoticed, but is quite worthy in its own right. The remix of "The Teacher" is an interesting counterpoint to the remix of "Look Away". While it manipulates the song quite a bit, the effect here is much less obtrusive than on "Look Away", and this may be the only of Big Country's extended remixes that I think *could* replace the original song - that doesn't *sound* like a shorter song that has been "extended". Highly recommended.

### ***Look Away, 1986 7"***

The double-pack 7" single for "Look Away" contains the short version of it, and the "Restless Natives", "Margo's Theme" and "Highland Scenery" sections excerpted from the soundtrack. I bought it because I couldn't be sure from just the titles that the three soundtrack excerpts were really that, but this single is definitely non-essential, as the soundtrack is much better appreciated in its entirety.

### ***The Teacher, 1986 7"***

The same applies to this 7", which has the "Home Come the Angels" excerpt.

### ***One Great Thing, 1986 7"***

This double-pack single, on the other hand, is absolutely essential, as it contains what is probably my second-favorite Big Country song, "Song of the South", which I included on the soundtrack for this chapter. An anguished outcry against apartheid and racial discrimination in general, this is also an intensely kinetic song that, when I put it on, makes me feel compelled to jump up and down, spinning wildly. This isn't all Big Country does, but it is one of the best examples of part of their persona, and makes an excellent companion to "One Great Thing".

The second disk contains live versions of "Porrohman" and "Chance", recorded in Texas in March, 1984. The recording of "Porrohman" doesn't quite do the song justice. It's hard to tell how much of this is the performance and how much is the mix, but I tend towards blaming the latter. "Chance", on the other hand, sounds great. Why Big Country has never put out a live album is beyond me, but the occasional

b-side goes a long way towards making up for this deficiency.

### ***Hold the Heart, 1986 12"***

The version of "Hold the Heart" here is the album's, making this the first 12" that doesn't have a remix on it. As it turns out, the subsequent ones don't, either, so "The Teacher" was the last remix, if not forever, at least for a while.

To ease the transition, this double-pack 12" chips in Big Country's terrific cover of the Rolling Stones' "Honky Tonk Woman", and a second interview disk. The cover is pretty faithful, but retains enough of Big Country's identity that I like this version, in spite of hating the original. As foreshadowing for the next album's first single, "King of Emotion", it is doubly interesting.

The interview is not, frankly, many of the finest moments in rock journalism. The nameless interviewer basically walks down the track list for *The Seer* and asks "What about this one?" for each entry, which doesn't elicit particularly inspiring responses.

### ***Peace In Our Time, 1988 CD***

From the first steady cowbells of "King of Emotion", it is clear that Big Country's fourth album represents a different direction from the first three. "American mainstream production gloss" is the phrase that seems to come up over and over again in reviews, as if the entire band is obscured behind a large, greasy man waving an American flag and yelling "more chorus reverbs!" The record was commercially their least successful yet in both the US and the UK, and it became the last one to be released in the US for a while. From Stuart's comments in the liner notes to *No Place Like Home*, it was also artistically something of a failure in the band's own estimation, and he describes it as "at a tangent to the plot".

Fortunately, even an album's creator doesn't get to legislate how much you can like it, and I take advantage of this loop hole to think that this album is simply a masterpiece of a slightly different *sort* than their first three wonderful records.

In spite of the "gloss" comment, this is a *less* flashy album than the others, not that hubris was ever a large component of Big Country's sound. Empty space is used to much wider effect here, giving each instrument space not to break free but rather to stand out *without* any histrionics. The drum patterns are notably simpler on many of the songs than in the past, and I find this restraint very effective. Keyboards from producer Peter Wolf also add to the apparent space, instead of filling it. And all this works together to edge the focus over from the bagpipe-guitars that the narrow-minded might

concentrate on to 10 of Stuart and the band's most captivating songs.

"King of Emotion" begins the album in a fearless fashion, refusing to shy away from the biggest departure from the band's earlier sound. The paced, snapping drums and the keyboards that provide most of the instrumentation of the verse are far from the hyperactive drums and machine-gun guitars of "In a Big Country", and the soulful backing vocals are very different from those on "Eiledon" or "The Seer". The song is, intentionally, reminiscent of "Honky Tonk Woman", with its relatively simple structure, but in Big Country's hands the basic musical premise turns from sleazy to quietly grand and portent-laden. Stuart's voice sounds better than ever.

"Broken Heart (Thirteen Valleys)", perhaps feeling the potential of this album's sound, reaches back and applies it to a sad, mostly slow song in the mold of "Come Back to Me" or "Close Action", with lines like "But her lover is long gone / With the money she sent on". The longest song on the record, it builds and subsides like ocean waves, again making very good use of subtle keyboards, especially at the end.

"Thousand Yard Stare" puts a more sinister face on a touching, Vietnam-inspired song that can be heard as the quiet, personal side of "Where the Rose is Sown". Rather than rage at the futility of war, the pain of separation, or all the anguish produced by every death, this song is a simple statement of personal involvement, the narrator saying only that he will never forget his slain comrade.

The airy synthetic flutes that open "From Here to Eternity" provide an aural divider between the mid-tempo "Broken Heart" and the rest of *this* mid-tempo song, making the similarity in pace between the two into a unifying factor, not a repetitive one. The insistent, choppy guitar on the chorus contrasts with the delicate echoes when Stuart sings "But I carry on", and the soaring hook feels to me like the synthesis of the two. This is a song whose lyrics rarely pop into my mind unbidden, but whose instrumental melody drifts through my mind frequently on some mysterious errand of its own devising.

Starting slow again, "Everything I Need" builds in intensity, not speed. The verses combine a precisely picked acoustic string sound (which could be sitar, mandolin or acoustic guitar) with a distant, mournful, echoing E-bow part, and the chorus adds a normal electric guitar part. Tony's bass, unobtrusively effective throughout the album, is particularly tasteful on this song, working its way out of the mix only for effect at the close of the track.

The title song, which comes next, is about what a combination of "One Great Thing" and "King of Emotion" might come out sounding like. The hard,

defiant attack of "One Great Thing", both in words and music, shines through in the chorus, but gives way in the verses to a more wistful, knowing mood that seems to me to be describing someone else's hope, destined to come true, not pleading for itself. This song was my favorite from the record for a long time, and was #4 on my 1988 song Top Ten (the album was #5 on *its* list), and though many of the *other* songs have grown on me, I can still hear why.

"Time for Leaving" is Big Country's "Emigrant Song". A very unusual sentiment in the band's usually stoic nationalist front, it is a character study of a laborer who leaves Britain rather than accept his mean fate. Of course, the two places he talks about going are Canada and Australia, staying carefully within the Commonwealth, so it isn't like he was going to *America*.

"River of Hope" picks the pace up a bit, with rumbling drums biting half-chanted verses and a heady, swirling chorus. This is at the same time the song I see having the most potential to be the "old" Big Country, and yet a song that sounds as uncharacteristic of the band as any, thanks to a guitar arrangement that substitutes hard-rock energy for any possible trace of Celtic cadence. If this had been the first single of a new band, I think it would have well received, albeit by a different audience subset than those who "In a Big Country" drew in.

"In This Place" is a straight, pretty ballad. "Oh Angel, it's coming down stone by stone". A *sad*, straight, pretty ballad.

The LP concludes with the tenth song, "I Could Be Happy Here". I know I keep saying things like this about the last songs on Big Country albums, but again this song feels like a microcosm of the band's state of existence. The soft verses go through lists of small joys, concluding "I could be happy here". The harsh chorus, however, breaks in with a renegade patriotic swell, crying "But I see what is done in my homeland, / I see what is done in my name", and the drums that escort the song out sound like they have come storming up out of the past, set to avenge Big Country's old sound on the new. This tension between the old and expected and the new and refreshing can't help but underlie the *experience* of the whole album, as absent as it is from its *mood*.

The CD adds one final track, the modern jig instrumental "The Travelers". This was a much appreciated inclusion to me, as it gave me one of the two songs that formed the b-side of the "King of Emotion" 12", which at the time it came out, I literally could not afford to buy, a fact that made me sadder than I would have liked. (The other song, "Starred and Crossed", I wouldn't hear for years.)

Looking over *Peace in Our Time*, then, I am again struck both by how entrancing the songs are, and how

consistent the album is. What incongruity it has is *only* imposed by juxtaposition with the first three albums, and holding *that* against it seems arbitrary and pointless. No matter what Stuart says, I say this is another perfectly glorious stage in Big Country's evolution.

So there.

### ***King of Emotion*, 1988 CD5**

I wasn't buying CDs, or even paying attention to them, in 1988, and by the time I got around to trying to find *old* Big Country CD5s, in 1993, the trail was *very* cold. None of them appear to have ever made the journey across the Atlantic of their own volition, and my scouring of record stores in Amsterdam that spring produced only this one.

It was a significant find, though, as after "King of Emotion" and "The Travelers" this single has two more songs I didn't otherwise own. The first is "Starred and Crossed", the other b-side from the 12". This is a shuffling country-ish song with mournful, honking harmonica, lonesome guitar notes and some very strange-sounding drums. I like it, but it's one of the least-characteristic Big Country tracks since "Flag of Nations".

The other new song, "Not Waving But Drowning", is unique to this single. Parts of it are very reminiscent of moments from the band's earliest days (I keep thinking this is "The Crossing" being played backwards), but the reliance on, and immediacy of, Stuart's voice here is very unusual for Big Country. For most of the verses everybody gets out of his way, and you can hear him breathing in between phrases, his slight vocal unsteadiness fitting the uncertain lyrics perfectly. If you don't like the glossiness of *Peace in Our Time*, this song is a powerful antidote that will remind you just how much the band could accomplish with only enough production to get the music onto tape.

### ***Broken Heart*, 1988 12"**

Besides the album version of the title track, the *Broken Heart* 12" contains three new songs, one apiece by Bruce, Stuart and Tony. Bruce's is the instrumental "Soapy Soutar Strikes Back", a title that refers to I don't know what. It's a very cool track, with a synthesized flute taking the place of a voice as the melodic focal point. I don't know why it is Bruce writes so few of Big Country's songs.

Stuart's song is "When a Drum Beats", which sounds like it comes from an entirely different age than *Peace in Our Time*. Raw, rough, noisy and fierce, it shows that the polished, controlled facade of the album is intentional, not something that the band cannot help but be. A record filled with songs like these would be

just fine with me. As strong as both of the instrumentals here are, "When a Drum Beats" eclipses them almost completely. An essential b-side.

Tony's song is "On the Shore", another instrumental much more in keeping with the feel of *Peace in Our Time*. Not too surprisingly, it has some nice lead bass playing, as well as a slow, elegant, Celtic-sounding guitar line.

The CD5 version of this single (well, *one* of the versions of the CD5—there seem to have been several) has another otherwise-unavailable track, "Made in Heaven". I'm still in search of the single itself, but I've heard the song and like it a lot. It begins quietly, with picked electric guitar and harpsichord-like acoustic, and eventually kicks into electric gear with smashing drums, a sawing violin-like E-bow part, and a driving chorus reminiscent of "One Great Thing". The line "Even the bad things are made in Heaven" would be echoed more than once later on, in songs like "Beautiful People".

#### *Peace in Our Time*, 1988 12"

Following *Broken Heart's* example, this 12" too contains an album version and three new songs. These three come from "The R.E.L. Tapes", R.E.L. being a recording studio in Edinburgh. All three songs sound like they came out of the same capsule as "When a Drum Beats". Guitars and voices are untreated and powerful, and the production (by the band themselves) is simple and lets the jagged edges of the music show through undulled.

"Promised Land" is fast and forceful, touching on questions about the nature of paradise, similar to "East of Eden", "Steeltown" and several others. Moving from Eden to Denver, "Over the Border" is slower, but no less intense. "The Longest Day" is either a remake of "Broken Heart" with new lyrics, or vice versa. Wailing guitars, mostly transparent production, and much-changed verse structure make this version *very* different from the album version of "Broken Heart", and thus fascinating to me.

What is the meaning of the wildly different style of these four b-sides (three here and "When a Drum Beats")? If they came from before *Peace in Our Time*, what does that say about the style-shift the band chose for the album? And what does *releasing* them say about what the band thought of the results? If they came after, then what does *that* mean? Are Big Country just showing another side, finding an outlet for a type of song that simply didn't *fit in* with the intent of the album, or are these songs a deliberate reaction to the album? Without knowing the history behind their recording, it's utterly impossible for me to judge.

I can guess, though! I think these are the band's other side, and that their appearance here says nothing more about *Peace in Our Time* than that they wanted to make it a coherent, focused album of the sort that these tracks would have been out of place on. It is tempting, certainly, to let the initial high of blazing guitars and crashing drums suck you into regretting the more-sedate, measured approach of *Peace in Our Time*, but I think having these songs be b-sides to the album works much better than it would have to have tried to put the album's beautiful, meticulously produced songs on the back of singles from an album built around the roar of "Promised Land" and "When a Drum Beats". And I'm *very* sure that sacrificing *Peace in Our Time* completely for such an album would have been a sad trade. (And in fact, in a way, with *The Buffalo Skinners* we eventually *got* that hypothetical other album anyway.)

#### *Save Me*, 1990 12"

Well, no matter how much I like Big Country, *something* had to be my least favorite, and "Save Me" is it. Mind you, I still really like the song, but it contains one crucial element that demotes it to the bottom of my Big Country list: the chorus sounds too much like the Eagles. Aside from that, though, the song is a return to the form of *The Crossing* or *Steeltown*, and as the new/advance track for *Through a Big Country*, it makes some sense. The UK singles chart, unfortunately, was unimpressed, but greatest hits albums do notoriously well in Britain these days, due to the exorbitant price of CDs, so it probably didn't matter much.

"Pass Me By", the first b-side, would have been a better *a-side*, in my opinion. Its strong resemblance to "River of Hope" can be seen as a drawback, or an advantage, with me leaning, predictably, towards the latter. "Dead on Arrival", the other b-side, is a killer instrumental that wouldn't be out of place on a good heavy metal album (though you'd probably want to throw in a few more kick-drum hits per measure). Big Country's passionate energy has always had a level of forcefulness not unlike heavy metal, but this is one of the rare occasions where the music actually sounds *like* heavy metal.

#### *Save Me*, 1990 CD5

The CD5, just to confuse collectors, trades "Dead on Arrival" for "World on Fire". Tony Butler wrote this one, though it sure sounds like a trippy Sixties cover. Either something strange was happening with Stuart's voice when they recorded it, or that's Tony or Bruce singing lead. Fascinating, but bizarre.

### *Heart of the World, 1990 12"*

While "Save Me" was intended as an extra draw for the greatest-hits collection, "Heart of the World" appears, like "Wonderland", to be a product of nothing more than Big Country's inability to sit still for very long. Released on the heels of *Through a Big Country*, I got a hold of it long before I ever saw a copy of the compilation, and so in my mind it and "Save Me" are a pair. They *sound* like a pair, too, sharing the same producer and aesthetic wavelength. Both songs are unmistakably products of the band that made *The Crossing*, but at the same time I can hear signs of years of experience in between these songs and that album. Of course, it's possible that I'm just projecting, and the band dropped these in a safety deposit box in 1983 and pulled them out seven years later, and Tim Palmer is actually the security guard at the bank who escorted them into the vault.

Then again, if *they* don't write a book, who'll know?

The first b-side is easily the strangest Big Country track since "Balcony", a cover of Eddie Grant's "Black-Skinned Blue-Eyed Boys", performed just as faithfully as "Honky Tonk Woman". Not being a soul, blues or reggae fan, I approached this with trepidation, but just as with "Honky Tonk Woman", Big Country's take on the song has so much of their personality, despite their obvious reverence, that things turn out okay.

The other b-side is Stuart's "Troubled Man", which adds a countryish slide guitar to a song that otherwise has much of the feel of "Come Back to Me", or "Girl with Grey Eyes". Although their juxtaposition here makes for a pretty schizophrenic single, all three songs are eminently worth having.

### *Heart of the World (limited), 1990 12"*

I found this single in the clearance bin of London's Virgin Megastore, on my 1992 visit to Britain, for the agreeable sum of 99p. It was the only piece of vinyl I brought back, and one of only two pieces of previously-unknown-to-me Big Country material that I found in either Edinburgh or London that trip.

The two songs that *this* version of the 12" adds to "Heart of the World" are acoustic versions of "Peace in Our Time" and "Thirteen Valleys", performed with just Stuart and a single guitar. Both songs positively *sparkle* in this setting, reaffirming what I said about the quality of the material on *Peace in Our Time*. Acoustic versions go with live versions onto the list of things that Big Country should do more of.

As if the music wasn't enough, this gatefold package includes a 2x2 poster of the *other* "Heart of the World"'s cover painting.

### *Through a Big Country, 1990 CD*

The *last* thing I needed was a Big Country greatest hits collection, but I shelled out for this one without hesitation in order to get "Wonderland" on CD.

The 17 tracks here cover the first four albums plus some, as follows: "In a Big Country", "Fields of Fire", "Chance" and "Harvest Home" from *The Crossing*; "Wonderland"; "Where the Rose is Sown", "Just a Shadow" and "East of Eden" from *Steeltown*; "Look Away", "One Great Thing", "The Teacher", "Eiledon" and "The Seer" from *The Seer*; "King of Emotion", "Broken Heart" and "Peace in Our Time" from *Peace in Our Time*; and "Save Me".

"Eiledon", "The Seer" and "Harvest Home" are bonus tracks on the CD version, so in effect this selection is taken straight from Big Country's entry in *British Hit Singles*, omitting only "Hold the Heart" from a list of the band's chart entries starting with "Fields of Fire" in February of 1983, and going through "Save Me" in May of '90. Adding "Harvest Home" makes sense, since it was *released* as a single even if it didn't chart (the version here is the album version, not the single version, however). "The Seer" is a natural choice, with Kate's guest appearance, but why "Eiledon" was used instead of filling in the missing single, "Hold the Heart", I have no idea.

I have a hard time evaluating a Big Country compilation, since it seems patently absurd to me that anyone would be satisfied with less than a complete collection, but I'll try to judge it as both an introduction to the band and a representative selection. Its function as the former, at least for Americans, was clouded from the start by the fact that it was not released in this country, with the result that you'd pay twice as much for it as for any of the individual albums. At the time of this entry, both *Steeltown* and *The Seer* are out of print in the US, so you'll have to pay import prices for those anyway, but the subsequent release in the US of *The Best of Big Country* effectively eliminates this nearly-identical UK collection from contention for the attention of any but the most fanatic US Big Country completists. For UK fans, this is an introduction via singles, with the usual pros and cons that that implies.

As a sampling of the band's repertoire, this collection does work pretty well, thanks to the band's varied choice of singles. "In a Big Country", "Where the Rose is Sown", "One Great Thing" and "Peace in Our Time" hit the highest-energy points of the four albums, and "Chance", "Just a Shadow" and "Broken Heart" hit the saddest parts. Each album has enough coverage to give you a feel for its approximate scope, and "Save Me" and "Wonderland" provide a couple interesting points of non-album reference. Having only UK-single a-sides, however, means that this collection

gives British buyers almost nothing they couldn't have already heard.

As for this collection serving as a replacement for the albums themselves, forget it. Every album has essential songs that were not singles, like "Porrohman", "Rain Dance", "Remembrance Day" and "River of Hope", just to mention one from each record. So don't even think of stopping here.

Another grave flaw if you are hoping this collection will serve as a definitive career overview, is that there are no liner notes worth mentioning, and you have to read the fine print of the copyrights just to figure out which songs came from which album (unless, as in my case, you already have the band's discography tattooed directly on your brain).

### *The Collection 1982-1988, 1993 CD*

This second compilation I find much more interesting in its own right. To begin with, the liner features a good short history of the band. Secondly, the tracks are in chronological order (*Through a Big Country's* are not), and the track listing notes the year each track was released, its highest UK chart position if it was a single (and what number single it was), and what album each album track is from. Thirdly, the inclusion of two b-sides make the selection a little more unique, and will keep the disc from feeling quite so irrelevant once you've fallen in love with the band and bought all the other albums.

The 17 songs on this one, then: "Harvest Home", "In a Big Country", "Close Action" and "The Storm" from *The Crossing*; "Wonderland"; "Belief in the Small Man" from the back of the "Where the Rose is Sown" 12"; "Girl with Grey Eyes", "Tall Ships Go", "Steeltown" and "Just a Shadow", from *Steeltown*; "One Great Thing", "The Seer", "Remembrance Day" and "The Sailor", from *The Seer*; and "King of Emotion", "The Travelers" and "Thousand Yard Stare" from *Peace in Our Time*.

Counting "The Travelers" as a b-side (though it appears on *Peace in Our Time* as a CD bonus track), that means that this compilation contains 6 singles, 9 album tracks and 2 b-sides. I would have picked different b-sides, I'm pretty sure (perhaps "Winter Sky" and "Song of the South"), and I might have tried to include "Restless Natives", but the album selections are very nicely chosen, in each case showing both some of the feel of the missing singles, and some of the feel of the rest of each album. As an introduction to the band, I definitely prefer this collection to *Through a Big Country*.

Buying *both* collections, given the amount of overlap and the fact that both are only available as imports here in the US, is definitely only for the compulsive.

### *No Place Like Home, 1991 CD*

And then, one day in 1991, I was browsing through HMV records, and flipped casually through the Big Country section looking, at that time, for a CD version of *The Seer*, which I ended up having to go to London to find. No sign of *The Seer*, but to my annoyance someone had shoved a non-Big Country disc into the band's section. This always aggravates me because it causes a momentary reflexive excitement that a *new* Big Country record has snuck up on me without my expecting it. Growling, I plucked the offending title out of the stack and held it up to figure out where to replace it. I read the title a few times before it registered that, in fact, it *was* a new Big Country album that I wasn't expecting!

If you see the cover of this album, though, you'll understand my initial confusion. It is the first Big Country record *not* to bear their distinctive logo. Also, the band photo on the back of the booklet features only three people, and I didn't recognize Stuart from the photo at all. The psychedelic artwork looks out of character compared with the first three albums, but it's from the same designer that did the cover of the *Heart of the World 12"* poster.

The liner notes (and there actually *are* real liner notes, a rarity these days) explain the mysteries quickly. Although Mark Brzezicki plays drums on this record, he is present as a session player, not a band member. In the wake of his official departure, Stuart, Bruce and Tony have "moved on". Stuart sums up the senses both of sadness at the close of an era in the band's history, and of determination not to see this as a blow, saying "There's no master plan. This is what we do now."

The resulting album is intensely courageous and to me the most *personal* Big Country album. I have no idea what you would think of this record without knowing the band's history. Seen in the context of their career, however, I find it almost overwhelmingly affecting. The album was #2 on my 1991 top ten list, and the opening track, "We're Not In Kansas", was #5 on my top ten song list.

"We're Not In Kansas" sets the tone of the album, combining the instrumentation of *Peace in Our Time* (high-string and acoustic guitars, steady drums) with less-glossy production and a melancholy song that sweeps along with an easy motion a bit like "Winter Sky". The lyrics, however, are anything but easy-going. The song is an indictment of the hypocrisy that has come to replace genuine happiness. "What did you learn in your job today / Did you learn to sleep while the boss was away?". "They took up all the yellow bricks and sold them to Japan / And still the advertisers tell you there's no place like home." In



place of the anti-American sentiment of “Flame of the West”, the desperate hope of “Peace in Our Time”, or the defiant political optimism of “One Great Thing”, “We’re Not In Kansas” steps back and recognizes that the most important struggles have become personal ones, and that the problems people face are of their own making, not that of some distant external enemy. It isn’t that we’ve lost some fight we could have won, but rather all this time that we were concentrating on external struggles like the cold war, we’ve allowed our own society to become dangerously twisted.

“Republican Party Reptile” portrays one such symptom. A powerful, extremely American-sounding song with bluesy slide guitar, horns and close-formation background vocals from Katie Kissoon and Carole Kenyan, it is about as far from Big Country’s “usual” style in one direction as “Flag of Nations (Swimming)” was in the other. And while the text is mostly a condemnation of the PJ O’Roarke school of indulgent conservatism, the portrayal isn’t entirely unsympathetic. He “knows who to stand on and he knows how to thank”, and for all its hollowness, his recklessness shows energy and a certain style.

“The Dynamite Lady” cuts to the opposite end of the social spectrum, and gives us a few of the thoughts of a circus performer, set in a more-characteristic musical frame. While the narrator of this tale spends her life actually being blown up, I don’t think I’m stretching the intent of the lyrics too much to say that in a sense *many* people spend their lives at the center of explosion after explosion, surviving only by some grace they have no control over. The numbing force of omnipresent danger prevents any real connection to the world around them, or to other people, from taking hold, and so the life that looks the most gay and free is actually the loneliest.

“Keep On Dreaming” is the most like early Big Country work of anything on this album, even if you’d never mistake it as having come from any other album than this one. The message in the title is the response to the problems stated in the first three songs. As the band has said elsewhere, “Mine can never be the hand that makes the dream come true”, but what they *can* do is exhort you *to dream*, for dreaming hard enough has a way of fueling self-fulfillment. The trick, as in “We’re Not In Kansas”, is *realizing* that you don’t have to be content with what you have, something which I think people have a tendency to forget. “People all sing Hallelujah / When they mean heaven help us instead”.

The mellow musical companion and flip-side of “Republican Party Reptile”, “Beautiful People”’s version of the blues is a sort of barroom piano and what sounds like a bluegrass banjo. The lyrics, as if a musing prompted by “Keep on Dreaming”, are a catalog of human failings that don’t make people any

less human, and this song reminds me of Happy Rhodes’ “Wretches Gone Awry”. It combines a defiant tolerance with the reminder that “Things were never what they used to be”, to reaffirm *potential*. I’m making it sound like EST, I’m sure, which doesn’t do justice to a gentle, lilting song.

“Beautiful People” also serves as a partial conclusion to the series of songs that start the album. As with *Steeltown*, the first five songs of this album feel like a cohesive unit on a common theme, while the rest of the album explores other topics not as directly related.

“The Hostage Speaks” starts this exploration with a disgusted meditation on the ways in which religious-fanatic terrorism and media coverage feed on each other. The hostage here is not any of the people who play the roles of captives and captors, extremists and journalists and politicians, but rather everybody *else*, whose televisions and worlds are held by timeless and endless conflicts that the participants don’t seem to *want* to stop. The chorus cries “I’ve had enough of holy men and holy wars / I wish that I was far away from here”, but of course, thanks to CNN, there’s no longer such a place as “far away”.

As a respite from the intensity of “The Hostage Speaks”, “Beat the Devil” aspires to be nothing more than just another great Big Country song. Crashing cymbals and blaring guitars, just like in the old days, provide a foundation, on top of which simple lyrics and some good solo work build a small, good thing, about which I have nothing else to say.

“Leap of Faith” takes another pass at the thoughts of “Keep On Dreaming”, from another angle. Where “Keep On Dreaming”’s prescription was that continued determination will sustain you, “Leap of Faith” takes the case where circumstances have beaten you down to the point where there are *no* options remaining, and the only way out is drastic action, the result of which you cannot predict. This is, because of its blindness, an almost religious level of courage, and accordingly, the gospel-sounding background vocals eventually take over the song.

The righteous fervor of “Leap of Faith” gives way to the sad, organ-laced ballad, “You, Me and the Truth”. As I write this entry, two people very close to me are in the process of breaking up, not because they don’t love each other, but because their relationship, as beautiful as it is, isn’t giving them the kind of support that they need, and so this song strikes me as all the more tragic, that the ways of life are so chaotic and demanding that true love, which is already way too hard to find, sometimes isn’t even good enough. This song hits too close.

“Comes a Time” kicks the rock engine back into gear, offering catharsis in a song that merges the

chanted verses and southern guitar of “Republican Party Reptile” with the soaring choruses of “River of Hope”. Returning to the train of thought of “The Hostage Speaks”, “Comes a Time” offers more observations on how “civilisation” has spread the flaws of Western society to all corners of the world, under the guise of spreading its virtues. This song links commercialism and religion, not so much, I think, as criticism of the actual actions of churches, as of the missionary zeal with which Western corporations and media have tried to destroy or assimilate other cultures, which they can see only as new markets for whatever they “need” to become just like the rest of us.

“Ships” is a beautiful ballad, Stuart’s singing accompanied only by piano and strings. I can’t quite figure out what it means, but I’m content to just let it flow soothingly over me, imagining that the rest of the band is taking a break, getting a drink of water and regrouping for the last song.

The album ends, then, with “Into the Fire”, a long and sophisticated song that lives up to the standard set by “Porrohman”, “Just a Shadow”, “The Sailor” and “I Could Be Happy Here”. A fascinating relationship story that, if I squint, I can make bear on the same one that “You, Me and the Truth” seems to depict, I read it as a lover’s realization that it is important not to let the excitement and uncertainty of youth give way completely to the calculated aspirations of adulthood, and that dreams of “settling down” can always be pushed a little further into the future so that the present can be used to enjoy other, more naïve pleasures, before their necessary naïveté is gone completely. As “The Great Divide” put it, “And suddenly I find the truth, / And all it is is sighs and youth”. More youth and fewer sighs is the prescription.

This is not an easy album for me to listen to, and I don’t play it anywhere near as often as the others. In a way, though, its existence means more to me than any one of the first four. You could take away one of *The Crossing*, *Steeltown*, *The Seer* or *Peace in Our Time*, and while the world would be an album poorer, the three records you left behind would tell the same sort of story as all four together. *No Place Like Home*, however, is irreplaceable, and taking it out of the story removes a whole dimension without which I think your understanding of Big Country would be much different. My impression of this album may change as the band’s career continues, other albums changing its context and its place, but I don’t think my feelings for it will go away. Get it last, but get it.

#### ***Republican Party Reptile*, 1991 CD5**

The *No Place Like Home* era was singularly single-deficient, and the only non-album releases I’m aware of

are the two singles that are meant to go in the box this one came in. The packaging here is *very* weird: this single is labeled “Part One of a Double CD Set”, but nowhere on the gatefold digipack does it give any song names. The CD itself is lavishly illustrated, but offers no additional information. From other sources I had the theory that the songs contained herein would be “Republican Party Reptile”, “Freedom Song”, “Kiss the Girl Good-bye” and “I’m Only Waiting”, and indeed my CD player confirms the existence of four tracks, and they each contain the corresponding hypothesized titles somewhere in their lyrics, so we’ll take this track listing as official.

“Republican Party Reptile” is the album version. “Freedom Song” is a gentle, folky track that reminds me of “Beautiful People” and “You, Me and the Truth”. “Kiss the Girl Good-bye” is a churning rock song more in keeping with “Republican Party Reptile”, with jittery syncopated drums, overdriven guitar and an overall feel not entirely unlike *Spectres*-era BÖC. “I’m Only Waiting” is a howling blues-guitar anthem, and together these four songs make a remarkable set. This is Big Country’s roots-rock EP, I think, and anyone who was to be introduced to the band by this single would have a *very* warped idea of the band’s true personality. In the context of everything else, though, this is a blazing digression.

#### ***Beautiful People*, 1991 CD5**

Usually the second CD of a UK single “set” has the same title song as the first one, which allows the two parts’ combined sales to count toward the title song’s chart position. It’s probably inaccurate to hold Big Country’s divergence from this tradition responsible for their relative lack of commercial success during this period, but the second disc is actually the single for “Beautiful People”, the only other one released from *No Place Like Home*. I found this in London in the summer of 1992, and I didn’t get the first part until much later, and no doubt my understanding of *No Place Like Home* is strongly influenced by the fact that it is the first Big Country album I’ve really experienced in isolation.

The three additional songs on this single actually seem so different from the album, and from the three on the “Republican Party Reptile” single, that it is easier for me to think of them as a continuation of the b-sides from *Peace in Our Time* than as part of the chapter they actually belong to.

“Return to the Two-Headed King”, the title of which is a complete mystery to me, sounds completely like an excerpt from *Steeltown*. You can probably guess, given what I said about *Steeltown*, how much this means I like it. You’re right: lots.

Bruce Watson's "Fly Like an Eagle" (*not* a Steve Miller cover) has same sort of timbre, but the song is closer in spirit to "King of Emotion", and if you'd told me that *this* was a cover of some classic, gritty rock song, I'd have believed you at least momentarily. It's definitely nothing like Watson's last b-side contribution, "Soapy Soutar Strikes Back". I can't be completely sure, but I think Bruce is singing lead here. The voice doesn't sound like Stuart's usual one, and it sounds the same as the singing on "World on Fire", which would seem to rule out the one-time-anomaly theory. Without specific performance credits, though, I'm merely guessing.

And from a song that sounds like it *could* be a cover to one that is, the last song on this CD5 is a live recording of Big Country's rendition of Neil Young's "Rockin' in the Free World". This seemed like an odd selection to me, mostly because the Alarm also covered the song on *Raw*, but it's hard for me to tell whether the two things actually had anything to do with each other. On the other hand, I really like the song, but don't particularly like Neil Young, so the covers give me a way to get the song without actually buying the album it appeared on, which I didn't want. Big Country's version is tremendous, though I don't think it comes off as powerfully as it could in this somewhat dry live mix.

## Band Aid

### *Do They Know It's Christmas?, 1984 7"*

The presence of Big Country on this single made it inevitable that I would buy it, but I really love the song itself. Listening to the words of this song, and then listening to the words of "We Are the World" makes me acutely embarrassed to be American. This song is poetic, compassionate and honest. "We Are the World" is saccharine, misdirected and inane. Quincy Jones and his adherents made a commercially-successful, artistically overblown piece of music that doesn't touch me on any level, while Midge Ure and Bob Geldof wrote a simple, direct song that I hold as a valued moment in my life.

Big Country do not, that I can detect, participate in the song itself, but they appear for a brief "Feed the people, stay alive" on the flip side's sound-bite mix, "Feed the World", along with charmingly unrehearsed comments from just about everybody else in Britain at the time. I can't help compare Bob Geldof's exhausted sign-off at the end of "Feed the world" ("I think it's time we went home. Have a lovely Christmas. Bye.") with Michael Jackson's elaborately staged "Heal the World" promo during half-time of the 1993 Super Bowl

(Dallas 52, Buffalo 17, and it should have been 59-10), and having done so I am, once again, disgusted at what this country values.

## The Armoury Show

### *Waiting for the Floods, 1985 LP*

After Stuart Adamson's departure from the Skids, and the band's eventual dissolution, Richard Jobson made a bunch of appallingly awful albums of badly read, sparsely accompanied poetry. After the first three, however, he took a break just long enough to record this one album with the Armoury Show, which consisted of him, Skids bassist Russell Webb, drummer John Doyle and omnipresent guitarist John McGeoch, who was in Magazine with Howard Devoto previously, and PIL with Johnny Lydon subsequently.

The Armoury Show's sound is enough like Big Country's that between that and the historical connection, this chapter is where the album seems to fall in my experience of it, even though there isn't much either ethnic or political about it. I'm sorry the band didn't stick together and do more, because this album shows a great deal of potential.

The basic approach here is to take the Skids' energy, smooth it out with keyboards, fretless bass, synthetic drums and a higher production budget, and to avoid the conceptual pretensions that mired Jobson's solo work and the last Skids album in, in my opinion, unlistenability. The result is insanely catchy, and though I admit that I wouldn't have thought to compare the Armoury Show to Mister Mister if it weren't for the fact that this album has a song called "Kyrie", the comparison isn't entirely inaccurate.

Anthemic energy is everywhere on this album, and the quality of the songs is extremely consistent. "Castles in Spain", "Kyrie", "We Can Be Brave Again", "The Glory of Love" and "Waiting for the Floods" are my favorites, but the other five all have things to recommend them. It's a mystery to me why this album wasn't a huge commercial success.

## Roxy Music

### *Country Life, 1974 CD*

David Bowie always reminds me of Roxy Music. Brian Ferry's voice gets on my nerves, so I'm not really a Roxy Music fan, but I finally broke down and got this album because the Big Country entry where I discuss their cover of "Prairie Rose" seemed really lame the

first time I wrote it, admitting I hadn't heard the original.

Now, I have. My guesses were reasonably accurate, though I had underestimated just how *strange* Roxy Music's version would seem after hearing Big Country's so many times. Ferry's quavering voice and the band's noisy eclecticism feel hopelessly bizarre, like a thicket through which I can just glimpse the familiar outlines of the song. Aside from that, though, Big Country's version is pretty faithful.

I didn't expect to like the album for any other reason, but it's got at least two things to recommend it. For one, the cover is a rock album-art classic, two over-made-up women in sheer underwear lit as if by flash or headlights against some spiky shrubs. The juxtaposition is jarring, with the stark lighting and the women's frank stances largely offsetting the potential eroticism of their undress, at least for me. The title's pun is far less interesting than the idea that life in the country really does involve, somehow, women like this standing around without clothes on with little apparent sign of self-consciousness.

The other surprising detail is that a few of these songs I really like. To be sure, the bulk of them have a campy thinness that isn't my thing, but "The Thrill of It All" has a reckless energy that I like, and "Triptych" has a satyr-like mystical flavor that reminds me of the Skids' "Iona", many years later. I even like "A Really Good Time"'s strangely haphazard timing and tentative strings, and it strikes me as a mix of later Roxy Music like "Avalon" and several of the songs on Kate Bush' first album.

### *Avalon*, 1982 CD

*Avalon* was the first Roxy Music album I bought, and the one that convinced me, though it contains a couple great songs, that I didn't, at the time, need to pursue Roxy Music any further. "More Than This" and "Avalon" are stately classics, atmospheric, haunting and beautiful, and Brian Ferry's trembling voice is perfect for them, frail and weak in a carefully cultivated way, shored up by the music at every turn where you think it may simply collapse.

The rest of the album, though, has entirely too much "Let's Dance" or "Love is the Drug" for my tastes. I am, as I frequently find myself, seeing things backwards when I say that songs like "The Space Between" sound like over-engineered Raise the Dragon covers, but that *is* what it sounds like to me. And when the band gets slinky and Ferry starts his sickly love-crooning, like on "To Turn You On", I tune out completely, though not without a shudder while I wait for the needle to pick up.

## Runrig

The Isle of Skye, in Scotland, is home to the Clan Donald Centre, the official capitol of the worldwide McDonald family, and was thus the centerpiece of Georgia and my whirlwind driving tour of Scotland in June, 1992. And there in the gift shop of the Centre, amidst the plaid letter-openers, overpriced sweaters and Walker's shortbread, I found a small selection of CDs. Flipping through them, curiously, I discovered a rock band from the Isle itself, with two actual McDonalds in it (well, *MacDonalds*, but close enough). This was entirely too fortuitous to pass up, so I bought one of the CDs. When we got to London and I began record-shopping in earnest, I discovered that the band, Runrig, was actually the biggest Scottish band *ever*, and I bought another of their albums, even though I hadn't heard the first one yet (didn't have a CD player with me, you see...). When I got back to Boston and listened to the two records, I realized that I should have bought the whole bin, because I liked the band a *lot*. To my surprise, though, I was able to find two more CDs and two singles in Boston, and mail-order eventually enabled me to fill out the rest of the catalog. These records, then, serve as the retroactive soundtrack of our Scottish journey. Except for the time I drove the car into a ditch; for that part Georgia's hysterical laughter drowns out the music.

### *Play Gaelic*, 1978 CD

Runrig's first album, reissued on CD in 1990, is at best a prelude to the rest of their career. This isn't a strictly traditional Gaelic record, and I imagine in 1978 it might have caused quite a stir in the more isolated portions of Skye and the Highlands, but coming to it from the direction of the rest of Runrig's work, it seems to only barely hint at the fusion of rock and Celtic styles that would be so powerful even a year later. All songs are sung in Gaelic, and the instrumentation is heavily acoustic guitars and accordion, with only the presence of bass and drums as nominal rock influences. Most of the songs are original music and lyrics, but if you don't actually speak Gaelic you'll have to take the liner notes' word for this. Historical interest and completeness demanded that I get this album and, now that I have it, that I keep it, but listening to it just makes me impatient to put on some *other* Runrig album.

### *The Highland Connection*, 1979 CD

For their second album, Runrig underwent a striking metamorphosis. They formed their own record label (Ridge), ditched accordionist Robert MacDonald in exchange for guitarist Malcolm Jones, moved Rory

MacDonald from guitar to bass, and relaxed their Gaelic-centricity enough to include three songs here sung in English.

Jones' arrival is the most significant change, as his raw, squalling guitar is the critical ingredient in Runrig's sudden rock ascendancy. The other players, particularly drummer Calum MacDonald, rise to the challenge of matching his intensity, but Jones is the force that drives *The Highland Connection*.

The material on this album introduces three general styles that would serve Runrig in good stead for a number of years. "Gamhina Gealla", "Na H-uain A's T-earrach" and "Morning Tide" are pounding electric anthems, arena-razing rock that's not punk but that does show signs that strains of the Skids may have drifted out to Kyleakin over the circling ferries from Kyle of Lochalsh (just some rhetorical name dropping to remind you that I've *been* to Skye—though frankly if the Skids had been playing at full volume in the parking lot by the Kyle of Lochalsh ferry, you probably *could* have heard them all the way across the narrow channel in Kyleakin).

The second sort of song is mid-tempo, and largely acoustic, with "Fichead Bliadhna", "Loch Lomond" and "Going Home" being the representatives here. These songs are the most like what I think *Play Gaelic* was meant to be, translations of traditional Gaelic musical styles into modern rock idioms. This time, though, the experiment *works*, and the songs come out sounding like the band actually understands rock music, as opposed to simply owning instruments that a rock band might also use.

The third sort of song is the slow ballad, with "Mairi", "Foghar Nan Eilean '78" and "Cearcal A Chuain" being this album's examples. On these, Rory MacDonald's soaring harmonies take center stage, and the band comes closest to the musical territory of the more ethereal Clannad and Capercaille.

The last sort (and those of you less vocal-centric might not consider these a separate sort at all) are instrumentals, of which there are three here, called "What Time", "Na Luing Air Seoladh" and "The Twenty-Five Pounder", all composed by Malcolm Jones. These intrigue me for two reasons. First, two of them have English titles, which makes it seem, from the track list on the back of the album (which doesn't flag instrumentals as such), like nearly half of the album is in English, which seems like an intentional move to make the record more accessible to non-Gaelic record-store browsers. Second, for all that Jones seems to be the band's rock champion, all three of his instrumentals are strongly traditional in structure, if not instrumentation, which makes it more clear how he was able to fit into the band so well, despite what would otherwise seem like very different stylistic tastes.

## Recovery, 1981 CD

*Recovery* finds Runrig still experimenting with its personnel assignments. Calum MacDonald is the primary songwriter here, with four songs credited solely to him, and four more co-written by him and Rory, but his participation in the actual performance is limited to a couple of vocal appearances. Ian Bayne takes over on drums. Blair Douglas contributes organ and harmonium to a few songs.

The range of songs here is very similar to that on *The Highland Connection*, but the balance is skewed somewhat back towards the band's origins. The only full-fledged rock song with the drive of the three such tracks on *The Highland Connection* is "S Tu Mo Leannan". The bulk of this album are mid-tempo tracks ("Tir An Airm", "Rubh Nan Cudaigean", "Ic Iain 'Ic Sheumais" and "Fuaime A Bhlair"), with three slow ones ("Recovery", "The Old Boys", "Dust"), two instrumentals ("Instrumental", "Breaking the Chains") and the odd voice-and-percussion opener "An Toll Dubh". This distribution makes this album feel less invigorating to me than *The Highland Connection*. It's well-played and appealing, but not nearly as energetic. I don't know quite what to make of the fact that all three of the songs sung in English are slow ballads, but I'm sure it's significant.

## Heartland, 1985 CD

A long delay ensues next, for reasons that nobody has thought to explain to me. When *Heartland*, the fourth Runrig album, finally appears, it finds the band enormously improved and matured. Personnel-wise, the addition of keyboardist Richard Cherns brings the band's roster to six. This is the first album whose liner lists the players' roles in general, rather than on a song-by-song basis, and Calum MacDonald is now credited with "percussion, backing vocals". Songwriting responsibility has by this point been taken almost completely as the joint province of Calum and Rory.

Nearly every element of the band's sound shows substantial development. Cherns' keyboards and the improved overall production give *Heartland* a sonic richness that the first three albums simply didn't have. Jones' guitar-playing no longer draws such a sharp distinction between the abrasive electric and delicate acoustic sides of his style, with his playing on most of these songs falling somewhere in between his former extremes. Perhaps most notably, Ian Bayne's drumming here is substantially more powerful than on *Recovery*. This seems both due to stronger playing and to a much bigger drum sound, courtesy, presumably, of new producer Chris Harley. The rhythms have rock's solidity, but in structure tend much more to the buoyant stomp of traditional jigs and reels than to the

usual grooves and backbeats of conventional rock and roll, or the intricate syncopation of the most obvious comparison point, Big Country. There are also several bagpipe sounds on this album that do not, it appears, actually *come* from bagpipes, which makes for another Big Country comparison.

In fact, this is the first Runrig album that reaches enough of a comfort point with their rock leanings for a comparison with Big Country to make sense. Where Big Country are discernibly a rock band with some Celtic influences, though, Runrig really is a full-fledged *Celtic rock band*. There are more songs in English on this album than ever before (seven), but there are still four sung entirely in Gaelic. The Scottish accents of Donnie Munro and the MacDonalds are distinctly audible in their singing voices, which isn't the case with Stuart Adamson. There are also a great deal more Scottish references in Runrig's lyrics than in Big Country's, with "This Darkest Winter" set on a Uist moor, "Skye" set *there*, and both "The Wire" and "The Ferry" having Gaelic significance that at least partially escapes me.

The biggest difference, though, is that at the core Runrig is a mystical band, while Big Country are grimly realistic activists. Runrig have their causes, to be sure (the main one being the survival and health of the Gaelic language itself), but they essay to convert the masses through infectious reverence, not angry passion. Big Country is out to save the world; Runrig defends a much smaller region. This difference of attitude is most evident in the two bands' lyrics, of course, but it also affects the music profoundly. You're just not going to find Runrig blazing through anything like "One Great Thing" or "Song of the South", any more than you're likely to find Big Country drifting majestically through such an atmospheric and traditional-sounding ballad as "The Everlasting Gun".

In terms of the song types from *The Highland Connection*, and *Recovery*, here we find *lots* of upbeat rock songs ("O Cho Meallt", "This Darkest Winter", "Lifeline", "Dance Called America", "Skye" and "The Ferry"), a couple slower rock songs in the mold of *Recovery* ("Air A Chuan" and "Cnoc Na Feille"), three densely atmospheric slower songs ("The Everlasting Gun", "The Wire" and "An Atraireachd Ard"), and one instrumental ("Tuireadh Iain Ruaidh"). The balance has shifted as squarely toward high-energy here as it did toward contemplative calm on *Recovery*, but the calm side is better represented here, I think, than the rock drive is on *Recovery*. Given the difficulty currently of getting *any* of the Ridge albums in the US (I've *only* seen them offered mail-order, and only then from Celtic specialists), however, you're probably best-advised to put them off until last, and then if you going to get any to go ahead and get all three. They're different enough

from each other that you won't be wasting money, and as a trio they make for almost a coherent whole career in and of themselves.

### *The Cutter and the Clan*, 1987 CD

On the strength of *Heartland*, I assume, Runrig got signed to Chrysalis, and this, their first major-label album, was even released in the US briefly, if lingering references to it in catalogs and databases are to be believed. It did nothing, was deleted, and no Runrig record since has had an American issue.

The band's lineup finally reaches its permanent (so far) equilibrium here: Donnie Munro on vocals; Rory MacDonald singing, and playing bass and the occasional acoustic guitar and accordion; Malcom Jones on guitar, bagpipes and mandolin; Iain Bayne drumming; Calum MacDonald singing and playing percussion; and newly arrived keyboardist Peter Wishart contributing backing vocals as well as operating synthesizers. With the exception of a pair of Calum's solo compositions, all the songs here are Calum and Rory's.

There are many things you might expect a major-label album to do to Runrig, and I think that most of them *do* happen, but also that they're almost uniformly positive effects. First of all, the song list on the back cover has to look like it's not in a foreign language. There are actually only *two* Gaelic tracks on this album, and one, "Alba", just looks like a place name (it is, in fact, Gaelic for Scotland). The only obtrusive Gaelic title, "An Ubhal as Airde", is the last song on the album, and having one such track makes it seem like an exotic quirk of the band, rather than a disturbing strangeness.

The band's lyrical concerns aren't tempered at all by the language balance. This album is *very* Scotland-centric, from the title on. "The Cutter" is an emigration-to-Canada song, a uniquely Scottish sub-genre. "Rocket to the Moon" explores how the success of Scottish emigrants reflects back on their homeland, even as industrial decline at home makes Scotland itself seem poorer. "Our Earth Was Once Green" is a bleak vision of how people destroy their world in the name of "progress", but offers a ray of hope still, as "mountains are holy places and beauty is free / We can still walk through the garden". "Protect and Survive", "Pride of Summer", "Hearts of Olden Glory" and "Worker for the Wind" are all essentially odes to the way of life the Celts pursued for centuries, a life close to the earth and as rich in emotion as jaded urbanites (like, I guess, me) might think it poor by their material standards. The liner provides a translation of the strongly nationalistic "Alba", and with such comments as "the empty house in Edinburgh / Without authority or voice", juxtaposed

with the violence of the ongoing political turmoil in Ireland, it's little wonder that they chose to sing this one in Gaelic.

Runrig's stylistic range gets streamlined for this album. These are songs meant for either getting up and dancing, or sitting down and resting from the dancing, and appropriately there are more of the former than the latter, with the slow songs ("Hearts of Olden Glory", "Worker for the Wind", "The Only Rose" and "An Ubhal as Airde") scattered throughout.

The dance songs are *enormous*. Chris Harley's production expands on the work he began on *Heartland*, and these songs are packed with crashing drums, ringing guitars, soaring keyboards, rumbling bass and breathtaking harmonies. This isn't dance music to blare in over-crowded self-conscious strobe-lit dance clubs, this is dance music for whole villages gathered around bonfires, celebrating the conclusion of a year, a season, or just a good day, or hoping to banish the gloom of a bad one. This is *life rock*. Rock, as a genre, usually can't manage these emotions, getting to "uplifting", if at all, through defiance, anger or embattled solidarity. Runrig gets to joyousness without going through *anything* negative, and as this tactic is normally only employed by bands with some unsettling religious agenda, you might find it disconcerting.

But don't complain, just dance.

### *Once In A Lifetime*, 1988 CD

This was the CD I bought at the Clan Donald Centre, and the first one I listened to when I got back to Boston (though not, as it turns out, the first Runrig song I'd heard), and it is also the one that has made the strongest impression on me. It is a live album, and Runrig live is clearly a unique experience. Scotland's greatest local heroes, playing naturally exuberant music to a delirious Scottish crowd, Runrig soars through this album on the edge of entering another plane of existence entirely. The fast songs are irresistible (when I taped this album to bring on Georgia and my yearly 14-hour drive to Virginia, they tended to interfere with my driving) and the slow songs are positively magical (I can practically feel the fog rolling into the arena, fog not produced by machines but elicited from the hills themselves by the grace of the music). This is square-dancing music for headbangers, or vice versa.

The ten songs here cover all five previous albums. They do "Chi Mi'n Geamhradh" from *Play Gaelic*; "Loch Lomond" and "Going Home" from *The Highland Connection*; "S Tu Mo Leanna" from *Recovery*; "Dance Called America", "Skye" and "Cnoc Na Feille" from *Heartland*; and "Hearts of Olden Glory", "Rocket to the Moon" and "Protect and Survive" from *The Cutter and*

*the Clan*. Without exception, these versions put the originals to shame, and that's not meant as a slur on the originals. The live energy here is simply irreproducible in any other context.

The version of "Loch Lomond" is probably the album's high point. The crowd, singing along (you know, "You'll take the high road and I'll take the low road, and I'll be in Scotland before you, where me and my true love will never be denied, on the bonny, bonny banks of Loch Lomond"-well, *they* certainly know it if you don't), sounds better than any other rock-concert crowd I've ever heard on record. This is not simply a Runrig anthem, you see, it's a *national* anthem, and the band and the crowd are singing it *together*, and the result is spectacular. Not only is this the best Runrig album to start with, this *is* Runrig.

### *Searchlight*, 1989 CD

After the catharsis of *Once in a Lifetime*, *Searchlight* is the album for waking up the next day, utterly at peace but totally sore. As sunlight and the sounds of the morning and the smells of breakfast drift through your open window, you stretch and assess whether any parts of you require more than simply time to recover their normal range of motion. You put on a soft robe and go downstairs to the kitchen, where there are fluffy blueberry scones waiting with earthenware jugs of cream and cold milk, fresh butter, thick jams, and then, because this is Scotland, cold toast, pale canned grapefruit, eggs, ham, bacon, cereals composed primarily of wheat nuggets, tea, coffee and mysterious flattened fishes that look as if one of the preparation steps involved in rendering them into their current form was fossilization.

As you ponder this groaning board, judiciously selecting a sample from it such that you will, on the one hand, be able to fit into your small rented car and will, on the other hand, not have to stop for lunch if today's swath of the Highlands proves as devoid of restaurants as yesterday's (and in the process discovering that the groaning is coming not from the board but from a dignified but unwell-looking dachshund hiding under it), you feel outwardly calm, but inside of you the previous night's emotions are still surging around on residual momentum (eat the wheat nuggets first, and I recommend eggs and some toast at least before you eat *any* grapefruit if, indeed, you feel you must).

*Searchlight* is like that. It's a pretty similar album to *The Cutter and the Clan*, really, but compared to the live album it's serenely restrained. *Once in a Lifetime* is clearly the place to begin with Runrig, but as far as I'm concerned it's a toss-up whether *Searchlight* or *The Cutter and the Clan* makes more sense as a studio companion. *Searchlight* doesn't repeat any of the songs from *Once in*

a *Lifetime*, so perhaps you see that as a factor one way or the other. They each have two songs in Gaelic, they both have slow and fast songs. *The Cutter and the Clan* may be slightly the more energetic of the two albums, objectively, but after hearing *Once in a Lifetime* the tracks from that on *The Cutter and the Clan* will never seem as good again, and so for me *Searchlight* ends up feeling more alive. Seen in retrospect, it also begins to foreshadow the musical evolution of the band towards *The Big Wheel* and *Amazing Things*.

Because *The Cutter and the Clan* and *Searchlight* remind me of each other, and *Once in a Lifetime* overshadows this entire decade of Runrig's existence, I tend to pay *Searchlight* less attention than the others. It deserves better, particularly for some of the band's best pro-Gaelic paeans. "Eirinn" is pan-Gaelic gesture, a song of sympathy from Scotland to Ireland. "Tir a' Mhurain" ("Land of the Maram Grass") is an ode to the Gaelic language, proclaiming that "Although the language / Has been wounded in its struggle, / In this land, she will live on". Tradition, I will attest, is strong on the Isle of Skye, even if they do have their own Audi dealership.

From the names of places I saw on Skye and learned about at the Clan Donald Centre, I recognize parts of "Siol Ghoraidh" ("The Genealogy of Goraith"), but not enough to really know what they're talking about. Aird of Sleat, which they allude to, is one of two beautiful dead ends we visited on the island (the other one, Elgol, we thought was more impressive, but evidently it doesn't have as much historical significance), where a single-track road winds treacherously over the hills along the coast, through a countryside that seems almost completely uninhabited, despite the fact that there are nothing but farms, down to the sea where you turn around and drive back in perfect silence, at about 10 miles per hour, concentrating intensely to avoid driving off the impossibly narrow road, feeling very impressed with yourself for doing so until a huge tourist bus (er, "coach") whizzes by you at about 55.

### ***Capture the Heart*, 1990 CD5**

From my reading between the lines of *British Hit Singles* and *British Hit Albums*, I surmise that this EP filled the two-year gap between *Searchlight* and *The Big Wheel*. Making four songs take the place of a whole Runrig album is a basically impossible task, but these four make a pretty credible attempt. With so little room to spare, Runrig forego Gaelic and ballads, and pack in four rousing anthems. "Stepping Down the Glory Road" is the most upbeat, and it and "Harvest Moon" have a feel very much in keeping with the two previous Chrysalis studio albums. The other two,

"Satellite Flood" and "The Apple Came Down", perhaps due to having different mixers, have a simpler, more-traditional sound, like unexpected glimpses of distant Runrig past. Although I like "Stepping Down the Glory Road" and "Harvest Moon" better, they're of the type amply represented elsewhere, and it's the other two that make this single of enduring interest to me.

An availability note: I found this one under an unmarked tab at Tower Records in the CD-single section, and even with it as evidence, Tower was unable to confirm that Runrig even existed, much less order me other albums by them.

### ***The Big Wheel*, 1991 CD**

The first Runrig song I ever heard was "Edge of the World", from *The Big Wheel*. We were at Castle Eileen Donan (Scotland's Most Photographed Castle), and it was playing in the gift shop. I bought the album in London, pretty sure that the "Edge of the World" listed was the song I'd heard, but I had to wait until we got home to find out for sure.

On first listen, I wasn't that taken with *The Big Wheel*. My Runrig collection at the time was this and *Once in a Lifetime*, remember, and this was such a quieter, more-restrained record than the wake-Nessie cavalry-charge of the live album, wandering away from Celtic dance music towards its more ethereal side, nearer much of the time to recent Clannad records than to Big Country, that I found it a comparative let down. Later, when I'd gathered *The Cutter and the Clan* and *Searchlight* to help assuage my longing for more of the kind of Runrig music they play on *Once in a Lifetime*, *The Big Wheel* began to take on its own identity in my mind. It wasn't until *Amazing Things* came out, though, that this album really made sense to me.

It is, you see, very much a transition record, and it finds Runrig in the midst of moving from the kinetic enthusiasm of *Heartland*, *The Cutter and the Clan*, *Once in a Lifetime* and *Searchlight* towards the ethereal epiphanies of wonder on *Amazing Things*, and like many transition records, the moment it captures isn't a wholly comfortable one. There are enough songs here that sound like they're trying to be the band's accustomed anthems ("Always the Winner", "Edge of the World", "Hearthhammer") to make you think that this isn't intended to be a different sort of album, and judged on the same criteria as the prior albums, *The Big Wheel* isn't nearly as successful. There are too many slow songs, too many songs that drift rather than surge, too many songs in which the guitars are buried and the vocals oddly distant, the drums too slow and not produced with Harley's old explosive flair (Chris



returns to produce this album, after being spelled on *Searchlight* by Richard Manwaring).

You might get a hint from the lyric booklet that things are changing. There are two songs in Gaelic, and plenty of meditations on the grace and beauty of Scotland, the strength of personal conviction ("Healer in Your Heart") and how the mind tends to wander on long, lonely Scottish roads ("Headlights"), "long" and "lonely" being adjectives which apply in Georgia and my experience to the *bulk* of the country's spidery automobile infrastructure, especially roads with ditches artfully concealed next to them waiting to ensnare errant gray Vauxhall Novas.

There are a few songs, however, that find Runrig awakening to things outside of their Gaelic enclave. "Hearthhammer" recasts Scottish childhood into the form that I imagine *mine* would have been like there, a wide-eyed boy glued to his radio, short-wave carrying him out into the wider world of astronauts, pop songs and politics. The travelogue at the end of "The Big Wheel" makes nine stops in Scotland, but then spirals off to London, Germany, Ireland and America. "Abhainn An t-Sluagigh" ("The Crowded River") is an anti-city song about London, but the fact that Runrig are *aware* of the draw of cities and are willing to confront it, rather than simply lionizing their rural alternative, is an intriguing change of perspective. "Edge of the World" sings of "the need to bare the soul at the edge of the world", but I have the sense that the band is slowly realizing that in the physical sense this is rapidly becoming no longer possible. The global village's borders have crept dangerously close to their secluded western islands, already (I mean, anywhere I've been loses all claim to rustic tranquillity), and they are going to have to deal with it.

### **Hearthhammer, 1991 CD5**

The single for "Hearthhammer", which I found in Amsterdam, is a significant historical document, as it contains two tracks from the band's legendary 1991 concert at Loch Lomond (NME once described Runrig as "the only band to ever sell out a loch"), *The Cutter and the Clan's* "Pride of Summer" and the site's namesake anthem "Loch Lomond". Just in terms of sound- and performance-quality, these are at least on par with *Once in a Lifetime*, and it's particularly interesting to hear the subtle differences in the two versions of "Loch Lomond", recorded four years or so apart. The earlier crowd has a much better sense of timing than this one, but I think the *band* is more impressive four years on, and it's great to hear fireworks exploding in the background at the end of the song as the band thanks the crowd for "the most amazing day of our career".

A Malcom Jones pipe-instrumental called "Solus Na Madainn (The Morning Light)" is the fourth single track, but while it's pleasant, the live tracks are the reason to hunt for this single.

### **Flower of the West, 1991 CD5**

Newbury Comics' best contribution to my Runrig collection was this single from *The Big Wheel*, which they also had as a vinyl EP in a big box with a poster and some stickers or something. Besides the title song, this four-song CD5 features a stately ballad called "Ravenscraig", which has some particularly graceful accordion playing (a non-trivial knack that, getting grace from an accordion), a new ultra-ethereal version of "Chi Mi'n Geamhradh" with duet vocals from Capercaillie's Karen Matheson (who also sung backing vocals on *Searchlight*, come to think of it), and another excellent track from the Loch Lomond concert, *Capture the Heart's* "Harvest Moon". Any of these three tracks would be enough to recommend a single, and together they make this disc an impressive footnote.

### **Amazing Things, 1993 CD**

Faced, when we left them at the end of *The Big Wheel*, with the dilemma of the modern world advancing upon their ill-defended geographical position, Runrig returns two years later with surprising answer: when looked at correctly, *everywhere* is beautiful! Unable to fight progress, they have snuck around and infiltrated it, and found inside the very development they were previously afraid of, the same sparks of inextinguishable human optimism that animated their firelit farming-village night dances. "The song that is deep in the soul of all people", goes one line in "Sraidean na Rionn-Eorpa (Streets of Europe)". Runrig has tapped into a universal vein, and *Amazing Things* is a tribute to *wonder*.

It may take you a number of listenings to understand what precisely it is that the band has achieved here. Wonder is an even rarer emotion in rock music than their earlier joy was, and the referents that are likely to occur to you, like "Where the Streets Have No Name" or some Clannad or Enya songs, are merely wistful or romantic or grandiose. There are some musical similarities to them here, particularly in the rich ambient texture of Chris Harley's production (and the fact that Maire Brennan sings backup on a couple of these songs), but the emotion that Runrig has captured is something U2, Clannad and Enya never really aimed for, the feeling in the heart of a child, not yet infected with cynicism, not yet familiar with defeat, seeing the whole magical world spread out in front of them, glittering kingdoms seeming to rise and fall solely for their entertainment; the feeling of an

astronaut, floating on the end of a tether, the globe shining below them; the moment of perfect Zen, when every event in existence is part of every other event, and the motion of an insect's wing is as perfect as a towering skyscraper is as perfect as the reddest sunset, and triply vice versa.

In my opinion, this is the single most life-affirming album ever recorded. More than that: it is the most life-affirming *art work* I know of. Now, that doesn't necessarily mean you'll like it right away, or indeed ever. If life depresses you, it's hard to imagine that music affirming it will do anything other than repulse you. Far from leading me to qualify my recommendation, though, that only makes me strengthen it: not only should you *get* this album, but if you don't love it you should *change your life* until you do, because you will become a better person. I doubt I will say anything more stupid sounding or more sincere in this entire book.

Runrig fans may actually have a *harder* time grokking this album than neophytes will. Musically, it initially seems like a continuation of the trends started on *The Big Wheel*, and your feelings about the previous album will factor into your initial reaction to this one. The first several times I listened to *Amazing Things*, my overriding feeling was one of disappointment that *The Big Wheel* hadn't turned out to be an isolated anomaly after all. There were some decent songs, I thought, like "Wonderful" and "Move a Mountain", but overall I found the album dull, and I longed for more "Dance Called America"s. The title stuck in my mind, though, and the title song's chorus, "As I draw my latest breath / Amazing things are done on earth", kept playing in my head. Its oblivious optimism seemed so incredible that I began to wonder if it might actually be sincere, if only because I couldn't imagine anyone feigning it with a straight face. With that thought in mind, I listened to the album again, and again, and gradually it began to unfold. Bit by bit, play by play, I absorbed it and was absorbed into it. I lose it sometimes, and re-find it, and the feeling of being refreshed in its glow is almost as intense as accepting it the first time was. Does it sound like I'm talking about a cult I've just joined, like I'm about to try to sell you something, like I'm about to make you intensely uncomfortable in some way? It *should*. Intensity is uncomfortable. But it's far too easy to avoid it, and you mustn't.

This album *demand*s that you be in the right receptive frame of mind, and you most likely are not. Ironically, most *music* puts me *out* of that exact frame of mind, and this is no doubt why *Amazing Things* is nowhere to be found on my 1993 year-end lists. Evaluating this as a rock album, and comparing it to others, misses the point. Forget context, this *is*. *The world is good. The world is good. The world is good.* It's a

hard thing to believe, I readily admit, but for 57:48 I believe it with all my heart.

## Capercaillie

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### *A Prince Among Islands*, 1992 CD5

Karen Matheson's Runrig connection was interesting enough to me that when I came across this Capercaillie single in the clearance bin I tossed it into my cart. (I don't actually go record shopping with a cart, to be honest, but I like the image.) Capercaillie are strong traditionalists, having more than just a few letters in common with Clannad. These four songs, one a single from the album *Delirium* and the other three from the soundtrack to a Scottish TV documentary, are very nice, but I've found that my urges for this sort of pure, ethereal music flare up pretty seldomly, don't seem to differentiate between Enya, Clannad or this, and are calmed long before I run out of the few records of this sort that I currently have. If I decide I want more, though, a Capercaillie album is the next one I'll get.

## Tonight at Noon

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### *Down to the Devils*, 1988 CD

A colleague of mine at Ziff who, through what circumstance I've forgotten, found out that I was into Celtic rock music, loaned me a small stack of CDs that he thought had crossover potential. A couple were more traditional than I like, a couple were nice but uninspiring, and this one I immediately ordered a copy of for myself.

Tonight at Noon is Pete Livingston, Gavin Livingston and Mike Doyle. All three sing, while Pete plays fiddle and some keyboards, Mike plays keyboards, and Gavin seems to handle most of rest, which consists of various guitars and associated stringed instruments, and lots of programming. The result is a charming blend of neo-Celtic traditionalism and synth-pop catchiness. There are enough authentic touches to land the band on Lismor, the otherwise-conservative Scottish label who reissued Runrig's *Play Gaelic*, but the buoyant synth-bass and drum programming give most of the songs here an unmistakably pop edge.

The material covers a reasonably wide range. At the traditional extreme there are the instrumentals "Wire the Loom" and "Harry Wigwams", followed closely by the boisterous drinking songs "Hell of a Man" and "Jack the Tanner". In the middle there are

mid-tempo half-pop dance anthems like “The John McLean March”, “The Traveling Song” and “The Banks of Marble”, and at the pop end there are the obvious hit-single aspirants “Run Run”, “Down to the Devils” and “Rolling Seas”. In between somewhere is the rattling, sinister South African solidarity song “Hawks and Eagles Fly Like Doves”, adding a touch of global awareness to a record otherwise rather firmly rooted in the British Isles.

The most affecting songs to me, musically, are the tense, quietly atmospheric “The People’s Will” and the haunting lament “The Mission Hall”. The latter builds beautifully from a near a cappella introduction to the throbbing synth-bass driven chorus, and the spare drum track could serve as an object lesson in tastefully understated rhythm programming. They are trying neither to storm the charts nor to prove their native credibility on these two, and that’s when their *own* personality seems to come through most genuinely. It’s definitely a shame that the band has no other albums that I’m aware of.

An art note: Eileen Donan, Scotland’s Most Photographed Castle, chalks up another dramatic backlit b&w appearance on the cover of this album.

## Tempest

### *Bootleg*, 1991 CD

Tempest is closer to pure Celtic. Their publishing company is called Celtodelic, and that’s a relatively apt description of their music. The cover of this album, featuring a wicked-looking double-necked electric mandolin, suggests something much more like Runrig than what Tempest actually produces. Where Runrig and Big Country mix large doses of rock’s power with their Celtic influences, Tempest stick closer to the traditional, playing jigs and reels (I think that’s what they are) with a light, impish touch.

This is a fun album, but it veers so close, so often, to rock energy that in the end I find it unsatisfying. Songs like “Captain Morgan” beg to have the guitar and drums turned up, even though I know that isn’t the point. On the other hand, it’s hard to fault an album with a song, an instrumental at that, called “Dance of the Third Leg”.

### *Serrated Edge*, 1992 CD

I’d heard a number of people raving about this album on CompuServe, so despite not really having connected with *Bootleg*, I decided to give Tempest another chance. And in fact, I like this one better. Ironically, the change that makes the most difference is

not turning up the guitar and drums, like I would have expected (though they do do that), but the addition of a full-time fiddler to the line-up. Michael Mullen’s presence fills in a gap in the band’s sound, and that, along with improved production, mostly corrects, in my ears, for the dryness of the sound on *Bootleg*.

So, while this album doesn’t cross over fully into rock territory, if these two albums form a trend, the next record *will*. At its moments of highest energy, like “Whiskey in Jar”, Lief Sorbye’s comic vocals and the substitution of violin for guitar solos are all that maintain Tempest’s toehold on folk status. At other points, like the whirligig instrumental “The Ballydesmond Set”, thoughts of the rock mainstream are put entirely aside, and the band careens single-mindedly through a whole-hearted Celtic romp.

The strangest detail is that where *Bootleg* was largely original compositions, this album is composed almost exclusively of traditional Celtic material. Why it should be that Tempest sounds more traditional with their original material than with traditional songs is, I must confess, a mystery to me. I will be interested to see what direction their next album takes them.

## The Tannahil Weavers

### *Land of Light*, 1986 LP

The Tannahil Weavers, on the other hand, are *real* traditionalists, as in bagpipes, flutes, whistles, bouzoukis, and such. There are some guitars and the occasional bass pedal, but to anyone but an original-instrument fanatic this is pure and unadulterated prehistoric Scottish dance music.

I only have this one album, but I got my parents a different one for some holiday once, and it was just as good, so I have no reason to assume that they aren’t all excellent. I’m not a sufficiently discriminating fan of this sort of thing to really tell the difference between one bagpipe jig and another, so one album suits my needs nicely. You never know when you might suddenly need to hear bagpipes, quickly, and this album has plenty of them. Even the one labeled “lament” cheers me up instantly, especially if I read the liner notes, which are hysterical. The explanation Lucy Cassidy gives her husband for how there happen to be 500 pounds and three golf balls in the bottom drawer of her dresser is worth the price of the album all by itself.

## U2

Melissa, my sister, was for several years a U2 fanatic of truly epic proportions. The very mention of

the band would make her breathless with excitement, and the cascade of library books, school reports and poetry about Ireland that they inspired in her were a wonder to behold, seeing as we were both born and raised in Texas.

At the outset, I did not find it difficult to take up the contrary stance expected of a big brother, and I thought the band was utterly miserable. *Boy* and *October* drove me crazy, and I would have voted for Larry Mullen as the worst drummer in rock without a moment's hesitation. It got to where the opening bars of "Gloria" would send me diving frantically for my stereo to crank up something—anything—loud enough to drown out that awful clamor.

When *The Unforgettable Fire* came out, though, I liked it much better, and *The Joshua Tree* blew me away. As the band slipped into their glam phase, though, even Melissa began to tire them, which would be a *really* bad sign for U2 if it weren't for the fact that they were too busy becoming ridiculously rich to notice.

#### **War, 1983 CD**

After *The Unforgettable Fire* and *The Joshua Tree* had warmed me up to U2, I was able to reach gingerly back this far (but no farther). *War* is not the warmest, cuddliest classic you'll find, but it is incredibly *vital*. Either Mullen's drumming is improving, my tastes are changing, or my judgment is improving (your pick), and Adam Clayton's bass playing augments the rhythm section solidly. The key components of U2's sound, however, are Bono and the Edge. Bono sings with as much plaintive emotion as Johnny Rotten had anger, and this early in the band's career his voice is still unpracticed enough that there is little in the way of technique or studio manipulation to detract from the raw nerve thus exposed. The pointed, but vague, lyrics of "Sunday Bloody Sunday" and "New Year's Day" are transformed into pro-Irish anthems solely through the strength of Bono's delivery.

The Edge's guitar playing is even more distinctive than Bono's voice. Stressing the inflection of rapid-fire pick-strokes and echoed arpeggios over sustained chords, the Edge sounds, on a note-for-note basis, like early Gang of Four, but once those notes are assembled into hooks, melodies and patterns, the resemblance mostly disappears, for the Edge's rendition of "unsettling guitar" *supports* the ragged but persistent rhythms of U2's music, rather than unseating it.

Occasional violin, trumpet and backing vocals add a bit of atmosphere to the album, but Steve Lillywhite's production aims for clarity rather than spatial expanse, and the result is a record of potentially punk abrasiveness whose genuine, appealing songs raise it into another plane. The well-known hits "Sunday

Bloody Sunday", "New Year's Day" and "Two Hearts Beat as One" are among the strongest songs, but "Seconds", "Like a Song..." and "Surrender" could as easily have been the singles.

The final song, "40", with its slow pace and angel-choir backing vocals, foreshadows the next album, or seems out of place, depending on how you look at it here.

#### ***The Unforgettable Fire*, 1984 CD**

At the hands of Brian Eno and Daniel Lanois, *The Unforgettable Fire* is a much different record. Dense and textural, this album is as different from *War* as are the two albums' cover art. *War*'s cover is a stark, black and white portrait of a young boy who looks *hurt*, both mentally and physically, and the music sounds like a reaction to that pain. The cover of *The Unforgettable Fire* features a sweeping infrared photograph of an ivy-shrouded castle ruin, the infrared film turning the ivy a glowing wool-like white against a dark, rich sky. The music is equally grand, expressing pain in the terms of kingdoms and epochs, not in the small cries of individual children.

The Edge's guitar is more heavily treated here than on *War*, with stunning use of reverb and delay leading the change in U2's sound. Plentiful incidental synthetic instrumentation from Eno and Lanois provide several layers of backdrop to replace the bare white wall that one hears (or rather, doesn't hear), behind the band before.

The first three songs on the album are perhaps its most memorable. "A Sort of Homecoming" is a soft, flowing song about (in a general sort of way) personal courage. "Pride (In the Name of Love)", about Martin Luther King, Jr., is a searing, soaring epic, Bono sounding like the song will rip every last note from his lungs. And "Wire" is somewhere in between, synthesizing the calm of "A Sort of Homecoming" and the wail of "Pride" into a song that, with entirely different production, might have been on *War*.

The title track is also something of a mixture, its steady insistent drumbeat preventing the lush orchestral music from bringing the song to a halt. "Promenade" retreats a ways, and is much quieter and less bombastic.

"4th of July" starts off what used to be the second side on a gentle instrumental. "Bad" then takes this mellow restfulness and builds it, gradually, into an awesome emotional avalanche not quite as throat-rending as "Pride", but to me more intense. Bono's cries of "I'm wide awake", urging the music out of its own sleepiness, affect me more than the "In the name of love" chorus of the requiem for Dr. King, as silly as that sounds.

The music subsides again for the undulating, enigmatic “Elvis Presley and America”, and then, on the way to fading out completely, pauses for the near-a cappella “MLK”, a breathtaking ballad that would also make a great reverb commercial.

I can see fans of both *War* and *The Joshua Tree* thinking this album is murky, lethargic and unappealing, and to the extent that they mean this album is less *accessible* than the others, I think they’re right. But if you have the patience to really listen to it, and *don’t* go into the album expecting it to be 10 “Pride”s, it can really grow on you.

### *The Unforgettable Fire, 1985 7"*

The double-pack single of “The Unforgettable Fire” offers a generous-sounding three outtakes from the album. I’m sorry to report that as far as I’m concerned, “Love Comes Tumbling”, “Sixty Seconds in Kingdom Come” and “The Three Sunrises” are the antithesis of *unforgettable*.

### *The Joshua Tree, 1987 CD*

U2’s gift to music would be complete with just this album. I am, I hope, *relatively* stingy about calling things “Masterpieces”, but *The Joshua Tree* is one of the albums I reserve that term for without any apology. The music/cover synchronicity is at work again here. *The Joshua Tree*’s cover photo finds its grandeur in a natural landscape, not in infrared photography, and its cinemascopic aspect ratio gives the photograph a more breathtaking feel without altering the details of the image.

Eno and Lanois pull off a similar trick with the music. Rather than immersing it in thick sonic jelly as they did with *The Unforgettable Fire*, here they apply production touches where they are most effective, and for the rest of the time they stay mostly out of the way. The Edge’s guitar gets more delays and less reverb, regaining some of the urgency of *War* days, and Bono sings with more energy. The overall product is an album that does more soaring than sighing, making me feel like some mythical mariner, sailing into an unexplored dawn, or back from one, the sea stretched out all around me, the spray of the sea smelled more than felt. (And *no albatrosses!*)

“Where the Streets Have No Name”, “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” and “With or Without You” stake out the album’s place in rock history, and after them the rest of the album almost doesn’t matter. Any of the three are sufficient in my mind to refute the claim that “there aren’t any really great rock songs any more”. Together, they make a suite that is almost impossible to live up to.

Sure enough, the rest of the album isn’t as overwhelming, but it doesn’t have to be. “Bullet the Blue Sky”, with its howling guitar and apocalyptic spoken refrain “Outside is America”, switches the musical setting from an imagined Irish countryside (imagined by me, not them) without street signs to the sere America desert of the cover pictures. “Running to Stand Still” follows with piano, a simple guitar and a lonely harmonica, a subtle, country-flavored song that reminds me of Robbie Robertson.

“Red Hill Mining Town” is U2’s contribution to the “the mines are closed now” mini-genre (along with Big Country’s “Steeltown” and the Alarm’s “Deeside”). Theirs is the most wistful of the three. “In God’s Country” and “Trip Through Your Wire”, next, return to the heavy American influence of “Bullet the Blue Sky”, setting the stage for *Rattle and Hum*, to come.

Switching gears, “One Tree Hill”, a song for the funeral of a friend, is like a smaller, less ambitious version of the first three songs, lulling the desert wolves to sleep instead of egging them on as “Bullet the Blue Sky” does. Except at the very end where Bono really begins shrieking, which would probably wake the wolves up again.

There are two more songs on the album, but I really don’t pay them much attention. As I’ve commented elsewhere, the album after a masterwork usually has very little chance of getting a fair listen from me, and ends up as background music with which to come down from the high of the previous one. In this case, however, U2 compresses the two-album effect into one, and I spend the last 8/11ths of this album largely coming down from the first three songs. If you took those three off, though, I think this album would still be about as good as *The Unforgettable Fire*. With them on, the rest could be dial tone and I’d still say it’s a must for any serious collection.

### *Where the Streets Have No Name, 1987 7"*

Of course, instead of buying the album, you could buy these three singles. This one switches to 33 1/3 on the b-side to fit both “Silver and Gold” and “Sweetest Thing”. Both songs are, I suppose, interesting, but let’s just say that from my perspective U2’s judgment in selecting *album* tracks is impeccable.

### *I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For, 1987 7"*

Another unassailable value in terms of minutes/dollar, with “Spanish Eyes” and “Deep in the Heart”. Some bands put out b-sides that sound like they just aren’t trying very hard, and U2 doesn’t do *that*. They don’t find songs I like much, though.

### *With or Without You, 1987 7"*

This one includes "Luminous Times (Hold on to Love)" and "Walk to the Water". I recommend taking the album route to these three songs, rather than their singles. At least you can listen to all three without changing disks (much less *sides*), so even if the rest bores you you can just switch it off after the amazing part is done. If you're a serious U2 fan (or think you are), then pick up *one* of these (this one, I think), live with it for a couple weeks, and if you find yourself listening to it more than, say, twice, go ahead and get the other two. For you, these six b-sides might be priceless treasures, and you can write a book like this of your own in which U2 gets page after page after page, and *Big Country* trails off unsatisfyingly.

## The Alarm

The Alarm was another of Melissa's discoveries, courtesy of their having opened for U2 on the War tour. She even has their debut EP, now impossible to find, and every time I see it sitting in her room at my parents' house I think about "borrowing" it indefinitely, but then I'd have to delete this section from the copy I send her, and while that might work for a manuscript, it would look a little suspicious in book form.

Unlike many other juxtapositions in this book, the Alarm is linked with U2 in more minds than just mine. In fact, this observation was routinely leveled at the Alarm as a criticism. As the ratio of Alarm albums in this book to U2 albums might lead you to believe, I think otherwise. I would never argue that U2 isn't more versatile, more innovative and better paid, but where U2's career has veered from albums I can't stand (*Boy, October*) to albums I adore (*The Unforgettable Fire*, *The Joshua Tree*) and back to albums I detest (*Rattle and Hum*, *Achtung Baby*), the Alarm did basically one thing, and did it *really* well. You could put lots of U2 fans in a room and find that they disagree widely on what's great about their band, but you'd be hard-pressed to find two Alarm fans who don't come to quick consensus on any substantive question about the band's canon or appeal.

### *Declaration, 1984 CD*

The Alarm's first full-length album both affirms and fleshes out the style displayed on their debut EP. Twist's thumping drums provide a martial basis, over which Eddie Macdonald adds solid bass and Dave Sharp and Mike Peters layer both acoustic and electric guitars—more of the former than you might expect. The focal point of the songs is Mike Peters' singing, backed

up in fine ragged-chorus style by the other three members. Peters' voice is rough but impassioned, and in its grasp almost every song becomes a rousing sing-along anthem at some point. Just reading the titles on the back cover tells you a lot: "Marching On", "Sixty-Eight Guns", "We Are the Light", "Shout to the Devil", "Blaze of Glory", "The Stand".

Several of these songs are, I think, positively glorious. "Marching On" may be the prototypical Alarm song, a positive punk anthem. It and "Blaze of Glory" were also on the first EP, if my memory serves me. "Where Were You Hiding When the Storm Broke?" is the ultimate anti-compromise song. "Selling out is a cardinal sin / Sinning with a safety net", sings Peters, making an interesting moral point: the worst sins are the ones that involve no risk, and thus no courage. The song also has one of my favorite mixed-metaphors, "Get back in your shelter / If you can't come down off the fence". I know what they mean (if you aren't going to *act*, get out of the way of those who *are* willing to), but the image of a Snoopy-like doghouse perched precariously on a rickety wooden fence with the hapless antagonist crouched pitifully inside still amuses me.

"Sixty-Eight Guns" and "Blaze of Glory" are anthems of similar character. The significance of the number 68 has wandered out of mental reach, but the song is comprehensible even without it as youth's cry of defiance that it *will not* grow old. "Tell Me", with the chorus "Take a look at the punks / On the run from all the ministers / Collecting for the criminals / Or the judges or the blame", explores the same theme. And looking at the band's pictures, you realize that, in fact, growing old is a distant worry for them in 1984.

"Blaze of Glory" takes a slightly more martyrish tack, opening with "It's funny how they shoot you down when your hands are held up high." Both it and "Sixty-Eight Guns" resolve to repeated choruses that you sing along with as loud and discordantly as you want, without bothering the song much at all. "Howling Wind" merges the sentiments of "Where Were You Hiding When the Storm Broke?" and "Blaze of Glory", and adds a captivating pulsing bass line, biting electric guitar and some of the album's best-sung vocals.

If you prefer moral ambiguity, neutral observation or concrete topicality in your lyrics, or aloofness, meticulous atmosphere or extreme subtlety in your music, then you probably won't like this album much. Conversely, if you can embrace the Alarm's enthusiasm you can have a really good time with it.

## Strength, 1985 CD

The second album is sharper and brighter than the first one, and is my favorite Alarm record. Part of this, inevitably, is that the band has gotten better. Lots of credit is probably due to producer Mike Howlett, though, as the sound makes better use of its component parts than *Declaration's* did. The guitars are louder, balancing Peters' voice better, the bass is stronger and clearer, and keyboards are used more effectively. (The keyboards, incidentally, are played by Rupert Black of the Pretenders, which is interesting to me because the first time I saw the Alarm was when they opened for the Pretenders on this tour.)

The songs are also stronger, both individually and as a whole. Part of this is that the band here discovers the tricky art of actually writing songs *about* something. So where "Sixty-Eight Guns" is a pretty generic anthem, however rousing, *Strength* has "Spirit of '76", which trades the unexplained "68" for the 1976 British punk revolution, and in doing so captures both the hopes that it engendered in that era's youth and the disappointment that followed its quick death. "And Susie she was seventeen, / And more beauty in this world / I swear you'll never see. / I was gonna be king / And she was gonna be queen, / But now all she does is hide behind the tears" could be from a Billy Bragg song, and the song shows some hints of the attention to detail of the Jam. Also, I think that the piano intro building to blaring guitar provides a better musical dynamic than the odd long intermission in the middle of "Sixty-Eight Guns".

"The Day the Ravens Left the Tower" builds on the legend (which you know if you've ever taken the Beefeater tour of the Tower of London) that England will fall the day that the ravens who inhabit the Tower decide to take their business elsewhere, and weaves a vision of what such an apocalyptic day might be like. I'd say that it is an English version of "Dancing with Tears in My Eyes", but since Ultravox was English too, that wouldn't make strict sense. (Or were they Scots? Actually, the Alarm are *Welsh*, too, so perhaps we'd best move along.)

My favorite Alarm song, and one of their most topical, is "Deeside", which makes a natural match with Big Country's "Steeltown" and U2's "Red Hill Mining Town", demonstrating that no corner of the UK is safe from industrial decline. Big Country's take emphasized the way in which the miners saw the mines as their way to build themselves a better life; the Alarm's takes a step further back and asks "Is a working man born to live and then die?", questioning whether there is *any* such thing as a better life that one can build with sheer determination. "To be dealt our cards, / To play our hand, / To win or else to lose", they summarize such a

life, emphasizing the painful truth that chance is a more powerful force than skill or effort. "Steeltown" thus comes out as more empathic than "Deeside", "Deeside" angrier and more cathartic.

Even the non-topical songs on *Strength* show more originality. "Strength"'s "I've been caged up for oh so long / I don't know if I'm living or dying" could have been taken from the U-Write-It Book of Rock Lyrics, but "Someone give me a telephone call / I need to hear a human sound" has the ring of an actual thought. The background keyboard riffs on "Knife Edge" and "Only the Thunder" give both songs a sparkle that raises them above mere shout-along status. "The Day the Ravens Left the Tower" and "Walk Forever By My Side" make slow parts work better than the few times the band attempted them on *Declaration*.

And lest you think that the Alarm have in any way lost sight of the sheer power of a full-out anthem, this album has the best one of all, "Absolute Reality". What's it about? Who cares. If you can shout "This - is - ab - so - lute" in four and a half beats, it's my firm belief that you should love this song. If you've never heard the Alarm, find someone to play you "Absolute Reality". Quickly.

## Eye of the Hurricane, 1987 CD

After *Strength*, this album was initially a big let-down for me. By Alarm standards, this is an extremely artificial album, using bass synth, keyboards, programmed drums and lots of reverb. The songs underneath the music, however, are not fundamentally different from on *Strength* or *Declaration*, and for a long time it just seemed *wrong* to me to be glossing over them like the band does here, and that by doing so all they had really accomplished was dulling their edge.

Now that I'm older and wiser, I've grown to like this album precisely *because* it shows the Alarm is a slightly different musical setting, yet still doing the kind of thing they are best at. At the time, I was afraid that the Alarm would end up making records like *this* for the rest of their career, and never make any more like *Strength*. Now that they are no more, and I no longer have to worry about what new albums will sound like, I find that the other side of the band's personality is quite adequately represented by the rest of their output, and that I don't resent this digression at all. This isn't the Alarm album for first exposure, but if you've absorbed *Standards*, *Strength* and *Declaration*, you're probably ready for it.

## Save It for Later, 1988 CD5

The Alarm put out a live EP (*Electric Folklore*) in 1988, which I didn't buy. The year's representative in my collection is this inscrutable CD single, which

features the original EP version of "The Stand", and 1983 live versions of "Lie of the Land" (which I think was on the debut EP) and the Who's "A Legal Matter".

"The Stand" sounds good, but the version on *Standards* is more complete. The two live songs are spirited, but basically sound terrible. The recording quality is borderline, and the band is mostly out of tune. It's sort of charming in its own way, and I'm something of a connoisseur both of bad live performances and of covers, but I'd resent it if I'd paid more than a few dollars for this.

### *Change*, 1989 CD

This is one of the last LPs I bought before getting a CD player, and it's a good physical thing to have. The plain white sleeve has "Alarm" stencil-cut out of the front, and "Change." cut out of the back, revealing glimpses of a bleak industrial scene on one side and lush countryside on the other. I don't know whether the CD booklet attempts to reproduce this effect, and I suspect it wouldn't be as impressive if it did.

While not a total musical repudiation of *Eye of the Hurricane*, *Change* covers a good deal of the distance back from it towards *Strength*. Some of the technological features have stuck, notably Twist's synthetic bass lines, and the mood is mellower and more thoughtful than in the early days, but this album doesn't attempt to drown the band in reverb and effects.

The lyrics here backslide a little too far, and with the exception of "A New South Wales" these songs are a little heavier on clichés and vagueness than I would like. "Devolution Working Man Blues" I find particularly embarrassing. On the other hand, these songs are almost all well-played and well-arranged, and "No Frontiers" is among my favorite Alarm songs.

"A New South Wales", the last track, is easily the most remarkable thing on the album. Listening to "Blaze of Glory" you'd have to reckon the Alarm to be one of the least likely bands to hire a big orchestra and choir to do a song with. Six years later it isn't as implausible, but it still comes as a substantial surprise. Knowing approximately no Welsh history, I'm not entirely clear on what this is about, but my guess is that it's a historical piece about the emigration from Wales to Australia that formed the province New South Wales there. It might also be about the need to rebuild the southern part of Wales itself, if that's where the bulk of Welsh industry is. I guess I don't know much Welsh *geography*, either.

Anyway, it's a beautiful song, and the picture of Mike Peters in a buttoned vest, rehearsing with a choir full of people that look like George Bush, is absolutely priceless. You could put it next to a still from the video

to "The Stand" and get a rather exaggerated view of the scope of the Alarm's career.

In conclusion, then, this is definitely an album I'd recommend if you like the others, but I'd get it after *Eye of the Hurricane*.

### *Standards*, 1990 CD

If you are interested in the Alarm, this is the place to start. Seldom does a compilation do as good a job of covering a band's repertoire (or perhaps seldom does a band's repertoire lend itself as readily to compiling), and it's quite possible that this collection is the only Alarm record you'll need, even if you *love* it.

It contains: "Sixty-Eight Guns", "Where Were You Hiding When the Storm Broke?" and, on the CD, "Marching On" and "Blaze of Glory", all from *Declaration*; "Absolute Reality", "Strength" and "Spirit of '76" from *Strength*; "Rain in the Summertime" and "Rescue Me" from *Eye of the Hurricane*; and "Sold Me Down the River" and "Devolution Working Man's Blues" from *Change*. It also adds a cover of "Happy Christmas (War Is Over)", the new song "The Road" and a remake of the excellent early single "Unsafe Building", and supplies what is, I think, the first recorded appearance of the full version of "The Stand".

It's not a perfect set. I would trade "Devolution Working Man's Blues" for "A New South Wales", and would have been willing to sacrifice "Happy Christmas" to squeeze "Deeside" on (not that sixty-five minutes is cramming a CD), but the fact that I have only two complaints is pretty remarkable.

What's most impressive about *Standards* is that while each individual album, with the possible exception of *Strength*, has its flaws and limitations, this collection sounds like one incredibly strong album by a more versatile band than the Alarm ever was at a single point in time. Like *The Princess Bride*, this is the "good parts" version of the Alarm. You might find yourself wanting to go back and explore the unexpurgated edition afterwards, but this compilation is *artistically complete* in a way very few other best-ofs are.

### *Raw*, 1991 CD

And then my advice is, pretend the Alarm didn't make any more albums. I love the band, and I saw them on tour for *Raw*, and can attest that their live show was as exhilarating as ever right up till the end, but this album is a vastly discouraging and spiritless retread. The internal divisions in the band are painfully obvious, as the three songs by Dave Sharp and Twist sound completely different than the Macdonald/Peters ones. They *all* sound like they're being performed on autopilot, and the charm of such mindlessly "uplifting" lyrics as those to "Hell or High



Water” and “Lead Me Through the Darkness” has worn straight through. The cover of Neil Young’s “Keep on Rockin’ in the Free World” is stylistically appropriate but not nearly as interesting as Big Country’s, and I can’t help think that its main reason for being here is that the album came up one anthem short without it.

The songs aren’t all bad, and if you’d never heard the Alarm before you’d probably like this album some, but in contrast with the rest of their work, especially with the strong taste of *Standards* fresh in your mind, *Raw* feels so *tired*. “Moments in Time” and “The Wind Blows Away My Words” are my favorites, but “Moments in Time”’s through-the-decades tour was done *much* better by Billy Joel in “We Didn’t Start the Fire”, and “The Wind Blows Away My Words” ends up on the losing end of a comparison with the Pixies’ “Blown Away”.

There’s plenty of Alarm material without *Raw* though, so why let this album taint your opinion of a fine band whose only crime was recognizing that it was time to quit just one album too late?

## The Waterboys

### *The Waterboys, 1983 CD*

The Waterboys opened for U2 on part of one of their tours, and the idea of U2’s devout “I Will Follow” being preceded by the Waterboys’ defiant “I Will Not Follow” has forever linked the two groups in my mind. As with the Alarm, I am actually more fond of the Waterboys than U2.

The band’s first release in the US was a five song EP, which must have done okay, as the full eight-song first album was eventually released here. The Waterboys combine expansive acoustic guitars, resonant piano, Anthony Thistlethwaite’s saxophone and Mike Scott’s dramatic voice to make a ringing Celtic folk/rock that sounds like it could have been the precursor to the early Alarm and U2 albums. Instead of building every song into an anthem, though, the Waterboys give their songs the space to be poetry, and in doing so often approach a subtler, more spiritual sort of transcendence.

Personal strength is Mike Scott’s lyrical obsession on this album. “December”, which opens it, welcomes in the winter as a representative hardship, saying “this year she’s mine”. Trouble is only feared by the weak or the unprepared. “The Three Day Man” extends this to relationships, saying “You know I want you / You know I love you / But I’ll never need you anyway”. “Savage Earth Heart” links strength to nature, a very appropriate connection given the organic feel of the band’s music. Perhaps the reason these songs don’t

turn into “Marching On”-type anthems is that Scott realizes the isolation that is the inevitable flip-side of invulnerability. Or maybe he just doesn’t like punk music.

Two of the songs touch on the experience of being *near* strong personalities. “A Girl Called Johnny” is a small-town story of a woman who refused to accept the small life offered her, sticking to her principles and then leaving the town. The narrator, who remains behind, finds that her passing changed him but left no lasting mark on the town itself. “It Should Have Been You” is the alternate-reality version of “A Girl Called Johnny”, in which the subject didn’t leave the town. Where Johnny changed the narrator but not the town, this version of the character changes the town but not the narrator. “Out of all of the people I ever knew / there had to be one I could believe in / And it should have been you”. It’s a sad no-win situation: leave and you betray your home; stay and your home betrays you.

“I Will Not Follow” is the album’s closest approach to Alarm-like anthemic intensity, with Thistlethwaite’s wailing saxophone standing in for the shouted backing vocals that the Alarm would have used. Compared to the understated and largely static drum-machine rhythms that underlie most of the other songs on the album, “I Will No Follow”’s beat is forceful and direct, but listeners hoping for the sledgehammer passion of the Alarm or U2 will still be disappointed.

### *A Pagan Place, 1984 CD*

In another parallelism with the Alarm, the Waterboys second full album is also my favorite of theirs. For this album, Scott and Thistlethwaite pick up keyboardist Karl Wallinger, full-time drummer Kevin Wilkinson, and the occasional trumpet, violin and backing choir. None of these additions change the *nature* of Waterboys songs, but they all contribute to giving this album more of an overall presence than the first one. The drums are a good example: Waterboys songs are not big on tempo-changes or percussive theatrics, and although much of the first album used drum machines, they were not obtrusive in their mechanicality. The increase in richness provided by a human drummer is thus subtle but substantial.

“Church Not Made with Hands”, the first song, is a dramatic beginning. It is something of a follow-up to “Savage Earth Heart”, both musically and lyrically. The “church” is, obviously, nature, a theme that “A Pagan Place” itself returns to. The traditional feel of the Waterboys’ music blends well with these hymns to nature, and in retrospect this foreshadows the band’s later musical directions.

"All the Things She Gave Me", "The Thrill Is Gone" and "Rags" form a time-reversed triad of affecting relationship songs. The first part wonders how the narrator can rid himself of everything in his life that came from his departed lover, and hints that her influences are so tied to what he has become that the two things are no longer separable. "The Thrill Is Gone" backs up to the realization that the relationship is over, claiming that the thrill, once gone, cannot be recovered. "Rags", the grand, sweeping conclusion to the triad, backs up yet another step, to before the realization, and captures a tortured lover trying to figure out how to extricate himself from the relationship without hurting the lover he still cares for desperately. All three songs are excellent, but "Rags" is the most dramatic, using the band's newly expanded palette to rise toward not anthem but epic.

"Somebody Might Wave Back", "The Big Music" and "Red Army Blues" form another sort-of triad. "Somebody Might Wave Back" is a Hallmark tear-jerker of a song, the singer a possessionless emigrant riding a train into some foreign country, waving out the window in the pathetically optimistic hope that somebody will wave back at him. "The Big Music", the ecstatic epiphany of a person who has just discovered the existence of some previously unknown wonderland, provides a bridge of sorts from "A Girl Called Johnny" to "Somebody Might Wave Back". I can imagine a movie that starts with Johnny's companions watching her train leave, then flashes back to the moment that inspired Johnny's dreams of escape, to this portrait of the sad reality of Johnny's arrival in that elsewhere. It would be a very sad movie, but the soundtrack would be excellent!

"Red Army Blues" finishes the "loneliness of displacement" triad with a true epic, an eight minute ballad about the life of a Russian soldier in Stalin's Red Army, from patriotic enlistment to victory in Berlin to post-war exile in Siberia. The raw grandeur of the song has been somewhat tainted by the fact that I now associate it with Tetris, due to the musical allusions in this song to the traditional Russian folk music that formed the soundtrack to the first Macintosh version of the shape game, which I played far too much of one year in college.

"A Pagan Place" rounds out the album with a soaring paean to the beast in man, making a neat bookend with "Church Not Made with Hands", enclosing the two triptychs within. With relatively simple musical ingredients, the Waterboys have produced an album as captivating as *Strength* or *The Joshua Tree*, and well worth an investigation by fans of either, or people who saw glimmers of something they might like in them, but found the Alarm too histrionic or U2 too atmospheric.

### *This is the Sea*, 1985 CD

For the next Waterboys album, Scott, Thistlethwaite and Wallinger are the only official band members, though they have as much help as on *A Pagan Place*. I find this session a wide notch less appealing. The reason, I believe, is that it feels like the band is trying much too hard. Where the debut and *A Pagan Place* sounded natural to me, *This is the Sea* sounds forced. Songs like "Medicine Bow" and "Be My Enemy" feel like they would be more comfortable at two-thirds their speed, and the frantic rock-a-billy energy the band crams into them seems to weigh them down; for all their frenetic dance-hall vigor they don't move me near as much as the more sedate-seeming compositions on *A Pagan Place*. Perhaps the most grating detail for me is that Mike Scott here seems to be trying to sound like Bob Dylan, and rather than weaving into the fabric of the tunes as it did on the first two records, his voice deliberately juts out of these songs, sharp and angular, and at times monotonous, a side of him that wasn't evident to me at all before this.

There are several songs I really like on this album: "The Whole of the Moon", "The Pan Within" and "This is the Sea" are particularly good. The closer I listen to them, however, the more I realize that each reminds me of an earlier song that I like better. "The Whole of the Moon" is like "Church Not Made with Hands", "The Pan Within" reminds me of "I Will Not Follow", and "This is the Sea" is another take on "A Pagan Place". Once I've surfaced these comparisons, this album loses even more luster for me. I have the strong feeling I'm being unfair to it, especially since this album was their commercial breakthrough, but I wouldn't recommend bothering with this album unless you have all the others and you're still hungry for more.

### *Fisherman's Blues*, 1988 CD

It is a different band entirely that emerges from the three-year silence between the third and fourth albums under the name of the Waterboys. Karl Wallinger departed to form World Party in 1986, and some soul-searching later, Anthony Thistlethwaite changed main instruments from saxophone to mandolin, and he and Mike Scott recruited fiddler Steve Wickham and a sizable supporting cast to put together this heavily traditional album in three stages over the course of 1986, 1987 and 1988.

The album is traditional in two senses. The first, of course, is that the mandolin, fiddle, bouzoukis, organ, congas, accordion, piano, harmonica, upright bass, bells, flute and other instruments that populate these songs, as well as the songs' styles and temperaments, are much more strongly rooted in Celtic folk music than

any of the Waterboys other albums had been. The second sense, though, is that Scott recaptures some of what originally made the Waterboys themselves appealing, and lets these songs sway and jangle along at their own unhurried paces. He gives every sign of being *comfortable* with what the band is doing, and not being out to prove anything.

As a result of all this, *Fisherman's Blues* is at once like and unlike the other Waterboys work. Fans who were particularly fond of the exact instrumentation of *The Waterboys* and *A Pagan Place* may be taken aback by the relative cacophony of this album's larger ensembles, and certainly anyone looking for synthesizers or drum machines here will not find what they are after. Fans, on the other hand, of Mike Scott's sophisticated, poetic songs will find them here in force, and it will be up to you whether you like them better or worse in this setting than the other.

For me, *A Pagan Place* is still the definitive Waterboys record, and its four-year head start over this one is probably enough to hold it until I have moved on to some other style of music entirely, can't understand why I ever cared for this racket, and don't care to reread this book to remind myself. *Fisherman's Blues* is a fitting continuation to the band's career, though, and my mental model of the band's progress tends to graft this album right after the second one and forget about *This is the Sea*. The insistent "We Will Not Be Lovers" and the charming ex-girlfriends remembrance "And a Bang on the Ear" are my favorite songs from a strong, richly textured album that ushers in the band's second incarnation in impeccable style.

### ***Room to Roam*, 1990 CD**

The revolving cast of *Fisherman's Blues* stabilizes to seven for *Room to Roam*. Besides Scott, Thistlethwaite and Wickham, the other full members are whistle/flute/organ/piano player Colin Blakey, drummer Noel Bridgeman, bassist Trevor Hutchinson and accordion player Sharon Shannon. Hutchinson played on all but two of *Fisherman's Blues'* songs, Blakey had a hand in three and Bridgeman one, so only Ms. Shannon is new to the credits.

The two years of experience between albums and the coherence of the band are both clearly evident in this exquisite album, which improves on its predecessor in almost every way. It is more traditional, more original, better crafted, more spontaneous, faster, slower, longer, shorter, softer and harder than the already excellent album it follows.

How does it manage all these seemingly contradictory achievements? It doesn't try to do them all at once. In 17 songs over the course of only 42 minutes, the band goes from short instrumentals like

"Natural Bridge Blues" and "Kaliopé House" to the album's centerpiece, the sinuous, pulsing "A Life of Sundays". Along the way are such things as the Celtic standard "The Raggle Taggle Gypsy", the soft "In Search of a Rose" and "A Man Is in Love", the carnival-like big-band swing of "Spring Comes to Spiddal" and "Room to Roam", the Celtic-rock energy of "Song from the End of the World" and "Further Up, Further In", and the gleeful unnamed jig that ends the album.

The album was #7 on my Top Ten album list for 1990, and "A Life of Sundays" was #5 on the song side. Both have held my esteem since. The album is a joy to listen to, without a single dull moment, and "A Life of Sundays" is probably my single favorite Waterboys song. I have a abiding fondness for songs that hold my attention despite being essentially repetitive, such as Big Country's "Winter Sky" and everything by Tirez Tirez, and this song is one of those. A simple oscillating bass-and-guitar part carries the song along effortlessly, while Scott's voice, sounding better than ever, and a dramatic second vocal by Noel Bridgeman, spin the melody.

Wonderful.

## **Simple Minds**

### ***Real to Real Cacophony*, 1979 LP**

How appealing does a cross between Magazine, Devo and *The Absolute Game*-era Skids sound to you? Well, it sounds appealing to me, but this record doesn't. Somehow in the cross-breeding the Simple Minds got all the most awkward elements of the three bands, and most of this record is a mixture of thin discordant synthesizers, desultory singing, robotic beats and conceptual pretensions that I can't identify with at all.

There *are* a couple of moments that aren't as grating. "Premonition" has some powerful, slashing guitar that partially rescues its chorus. "Changeling" has some sinuous synth lines that hold it together. The rest of the album, though, varies from painful to unpleasant.

The good news, from my perspective, is that after a few albums like this, Simple Minds executed a striking about face and began producing appealing pop music. The good news, if you *like* this album, is that before making the switch, they put out four other "early" records: *Life in a Day*, *Empires and Dance*, *Sons and Fascinations* and *Sister Feelings Call*. Explore at your own risk.

### *New Gold Dream (81-82-83-84), 1982 LP*

*New Gold Dream* begins the “later” Simple Minds’ period. Whether you like “early” Simple Minds or not will probably have no bearing on whether you like this record and the ones that come after it. This record shows a few faint traces of the band’s awkward adolescence, but only if you’re looking for them, and by *Sparkle in the Rain* they’re gone entirely.

That said, I’m not particularly crazy about this album, either. The Simple Minds came into my life with *Sparkle in the Rain*, and my explorations in both directions have failed to unearth anything comparable. The hits here, “Someone Somewhere in Summertime” and “Promised You a Miracle”, are catchy, and most of the other tracks are decent, but the band hasn’t wholly accepted their new sound, I don’t think. Jim Kerr’s vocals still have a tendency to slide off their notes a few instants before they cut off. Michael MacNeil’s airy keyboards give the songs the seeds of nice atmosphere, but he doesn’t get the guitar support he needs. And the rhythm section sounds resigned to sticking to vaguely danceable beats, but not inspired by the prospect.

### *Sparkle in the Rain, 1984 CD*

This is the only Simple Minds album that I ever enthusiastically embraced. It has a few strange moments, but when it gets rolling it is brilliant. “Speed Your Love to Me” is the high point, and the main reason I list the Simple Minds with the Icicle Works. *Sparkle in the Rain* and *The Icicle Works* came into my life at around the same time, and the initial impact of both was due to fabulous, churning drums. “Speed Your Love to Me” charges along on waves of drums, cymbal crashes, and wood-block hits, and “Waterfront”’s drums are fewer but smash down like bomb impacts. Kerr’s vocals sound a bit more like Bono than Ian McNabb’s, but they have some of Ian’s deep resonance. Sweeping keyboards and guitars fill out the sound. The Simple Minds don’t change pace within songs, for the most part, and I doubt that these songs would sound like much done acoustically, so I’m only trying to explain the bands’ proximity in the book, not equate them.

As for other points of interest, there is a cover of Lou Reed’s “Street Hassle” complete with battering drums, surging keyboards and some not-very-noticeable backing vocals from Kirsty MacColl. “The Kick Inside of Me” gives the rhythm section the chance to prove that they can put their heads down and rock, and lets Jim Kerr cut loose and scream a little. It sounds more than a little like INXS, but I like it anyway. “Shake Off the Ghosts”, with its thickly reverbed drums, might have been an early outtake from U2’s *Unforgettable Fire* sessions. Steve Lillywhite’s

production is characteristically sympathetic and unobtrusive.

Just as the Simple Minds as a band have not worn well on me over the years, this album has lost a bit of its luster in my mind since 1984, to the point where I still love several of the songs, but am not as sure about the album as a whole. If you like the later albums, you should definitely delve this far back, but perhaps no farther. Then again, I did recently replace the LP with a CD, so I clearly have lingering feelings for it. In my grouchier moods I’m not sure this album still has quite the magic needed to pull me out, but when things in general sound good I can remember pretty clearly how the cover’s coat of arms used to hang, glittering, in my mind. A moment in my life, occasionally glimpsed again in passing.

### *Once Upon a Time, 1985 CD*

In their mad dash from craggy artistic pretensions to pop accessibility, the Simple Minds just didn’t know where to stop. This album is determined to reproduce the huge stadium-force grandeur of U2 or the Call (Michael Been even contributes backing vocals). It essentially succeeds, but at the cost of drowning the vitality that drove “Sparkle in the Rain”. A layer of gloss over every element interferes with my visceral appreciation of touches that I approve of in theory, especially the addition of co-lead singer Robin Clark on several tracks. In the end, each of these songs on their own are palatable, and even impressive, “Alive and Kicking” especially, but the collective force of more than two or three of them at once I find just too cloying. The whole album strikes me as a series of remakes of the band’s breakthrough hit “Don’t You (Forget About Me)”, from the soundtrack of *The Breakfast Club*. That was a great, catchy pop song, but it really derails the band just when they were closest to establishing their own identity.

Of course, you don’t have to take my word for it. This album was a big commercial success both in the US and the UK. It went to #1 in Britain, and hung on the charts for 83 weeks. I don’t have a US album-chart book, but “Don’t You (Forget About Me)” hit #1, “Alive and Kicking” made it to #3, and the three singles from this album hung in the top 40 for a respectable total of 31 weeks. You may have heard “Alive and Kicking”, and you couldn’t have spent much of the mid-Eighties listening to the radio without hearing “Don’t You (Forget About Me)” (which isn’t *on* this album, mind you, but sounds like it is), and if the thought of listening to a whole album of songs like that doesn’t scare you, you and *Once Upon a Time* will probably get along fine, and there are some more albums after it for you to covet, as well.

This was the end of the Simple Minds for me, though. I can't really explain why it is, for example, that when the same sort of "huge" sound shows up on *The Joshua Tree* or *Reconciled* that I like it, while here it bothers me, but there you are. Or I am, anyway.

In an interesting small-chapter note, percussionist Sue Hadjopoulos, who played on Joe Jackson's *Night and Day* album and tour at the beginning of this chapter, shows her head here for one song ("All the Things She Said").

## Cactus World News

### Urban Beaches, 1986 LP

Cactus World News first came to my attention through Melissa, my sister the U2 fan, because Bono released their first single on his Mother record label, which led to their getting signed to MCA for this album.

Actually, Cactus World News is an Irish band that I'd have listed in this chapter even without the connection. I don't have the slightest idea what became of them after this record, and I really wish I knew, because this is an awesome album and an awesome band that could have been one of my very favorites if they'd kept making records this good every year or two since 1986.

As it is, this album is probably in my top thirty or forty. Cactus World News' sound is driven by Frank Kearns' distinctive fiery electric guitar playing and Eoin McEvoy's expressive voice, and filled out by Eoin's acoustic guitar and a solid, supple rhythm section of Wayne Sheehy and Fergal Macaindris. Combining the Armoury Show and the early Waterboys, in Ireland, would get you to the approximate neighborhood of what Cactus World News sounds like. They have the smooth rock accessibility of the Armoury Show, though without the synthesizers and studio tricks that the Armoury Show used to achieve it, and some of the acoustic feel of the Waterboys in its place. There were no synthesizers used on the album at all, the liner notes point out, but Kearns' whammy-bar intensive guitar style accomplishes effects not unlike those that the Edge uses electronics to produce. A more sophisticated version of the Alarm might also make music like this.

"Worlds Apart" (the anthemic opening track, with the arresting first verse "Mixing in with the purest magic, / Move with the kings and the comi-tragic, Figures that shadow box / Falling through windows. / When another hand played fails them, / And another chance just goes to the wall / They carry their regrets so close / To their chests they can barely breathe at all"),

"Years Later" (a song about social decay that features the band's trademark howl "Ahoohh!") and "The Bridge" (a song about *spanning* precisely the distance that "Worlds Apart" laments) are the initial standout songs, and at least the latter two were released as singles. "The Bridge" is my favorite song on the album, and its aching, soaring chorus the finest moment. "Pilots of Beka", an odd song about some Islamic legend that I can't quite decipher, is also especially good, as is the rousing "Jigsaw Street".

### Years Later, 1986 12"

The single for "Years Later" features an extended remix of the title song, and two non-album tracks. The remix stretches the song out by isolating parts of it, an instrument or two at a time, while letting the drums loop. I wouldn't say it really adds any appeal that the original didn't have, but it does prolong the enjoyable experience of listening to the song, which is fine by me.

"Hurry Back", the first b-side, sounds like it got left off *Urban Beaches* because of space reasons, not because there is anything wrong with it, as it is as good as anything on the album. I don't know what I would have traded for it, but if you revised history to put it on and take any other song off, I'm sure I'd say the same thing about whatever was displaced.

The third song is listed on the sleeve as "Third One Live", and as you might guess, that is not actually a song title. In fact, the third track is a live version of "Pilots of Beka". It's pretty faithful to the version on the album, but the mix favors the bass part more here than on the album version, making me realize how good Fergal MacAindris is, which isn't as obvious on the album.

### Special Forces radio concert, 1986 LP

At some point I ran across this SPIN Magazine promotional recording of Cactus World News live at the Whisky A Go Go in LA, apparently intended for radio broadcast. I can't imagine actually broadcasting something whose sound quality is this poor, but maybe radio stations have magic sound gear that would make this seem like you were right there in the club. The *performances* sound great, anyway.

Since the chances of you being able to locate a copy of this odd document are on the order of none, give or take not very much, I won't linger too long on it. It does contain the songs "Tables Overturn" and "The Other Extreme", which aren't on *Urban Beaches*, and a cover of Simon and Garfunkel's "America", which I think is great. A few minutes of interview, cut into :30 to 1:00 segments and sprinkled throughout the program, recount the story of the band's formation, their compositional methods, the Bono connection and

some other reminiscences, and allude to “our first EP”, but don’t answer any of *my* burning questions about the band, since they all have to do with what happened to the band *after* 1986, not before it.

## Cry Before Dawn

### *Crimes of Conscience*, 1987 LP

In the universe that Cactus World News has vanished into, Cry Before Dawn opens their concerts. I only know of Cry Before Dawn because one of the other projects that were done in my junior-year college filmmaking course was a short film about illegal Irish immigrants in Boston, and the Irishman who played the lead role knew someone in the band, or just liked them, or something like that, and the filmmakers used a couple Cry Before Dawn songs on the film’s soundtrack.

Cry Before Dawn is mellower than Cactus World News, but they write great songs and play them smoothly. “The Seed (That’s Been Sown)” and “Tender Years” are the standouts for me, the Uilleann pipes on the latter a particularly nice touch. They sound a little like a simplified arrangement of a cross between Runrig and *Sirius*-era Clannad; they don’t have Runrig’s intensity or Clannad’s ethereality, but they do have some of Clannad’s smoothness and Runrig’s directness. This is an unprepossessing album that I enjoy more than I usually remember. Cry Before Dawn doesn’t do anything mind-blowingly original, but their music is put together well enough that I don’t much care.

### *Last of the Sun*, 1989 CD5

There is evidently another Cry Before Dawn album, called *Witness for the World*, released in 1989. I’ve never seen it, but I have two tracks from it on this CD single acquired in a used-CD stall on Amsterdam’s Waterlooplein. Judging from “Last of the Sun” and “Witness for the World”, *Witness for the World* is probably a pretty good record, though possibly a little over-mellow compared with *Crimes of Conscience*. The single adds “Gone Forever” and “The Seed (That’s Been Sown)” because, I guess, somebody thought it would be a good idea. I won’t argue; it’s nice to have them on CD and it doesn’t look likely that I’ll get them there any other way.

## Cliffs of Dooneen

### *The Dog Went East and God Went West*, 1991 CD

Cliffs of Dooneen sound Irish, and I believe a couple of the members have Irish blood, but the band as an entity is from here in Boston.

I resisted buying this album for quite a while, because the songs I heard on the radio invariably made the band sound like they were trying to copy U2, the Simple Minds or INXS. The fact that the three songs I’d heard didn’t agree on *which* band they were mimicking was an interesting detail, though, and I liked “Through an Open Window” enough to show some local-music support and buy this album.

I’m glad I did. In the context of a whole album, the Cliffs of Dooneen take on an identity of their own that isn’t as clearly apparent in any single song. Though a straight-ahead guitar rock band at heart, they throw in acoustic guitars and some harmonica, and every once a while a Celtic riff or a violin pokes its head around the margins of a song. This album also has one of the coolest snare drum sounds I’ve heard, well-played by Lex Lianos.

For followers of the Boston rock scene, this is one of 1991’s better albums. For others, if you like the bands before and after this, here’s another album you might like. If I didn’t live in Boston I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t have bothered with Cliffs of Dooneen, but that doesn’t mean I don’t like it.

### *Undertow*, 1993 CD

In fact, I liked the first album enough that I bought the second one without waiting to hear anything off of it first. *Undertow* is a mixed bag for me. On the one hand, I’d have to say that it is a better composed and played album than the first one. On the other hand, the slight Celtic flavor that originally drew me to the first album is even less noticeable on this one, replaced with a harder rock drive that reminds me uncomfortably of Pearl Jam, who I loathe. At other moments here the band sounds like the Cult, which isn’t much better.

“Excellent and forgettable” is a strange thing to say about an album, but it captures my feelings pretty well. If you told me you were thinking about buying this album, I can’t think of any reason to discourage you, and I like listening to my copy, but at the same time I can’t think why I’d ever mention it to anyone unbidden, unless, for example, I was writing a book reviewing every record I own.

## This Picture

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### *A Violent Impression*, 1991 CD

This Picture *is* Irish, and sometimes even sounds that way, mostly due to the presence of Wonder Stuff fiddler Martin Bell on “Naked Rain”, whistle player Richard Evans on “All I Believe In” and “Death’s Sweet Religion”, and the degree to which the beginning of “As Deep as This One” sounds like U2. Neither Bell nor Evans are band members, though, and the U2 similarities aren’t deep enough to carry This Picture very far.

On their own, then, This Picture sound like, well, like Cliffs of Dooneen. As with *Undertow*, there’s nothing much *wrong* with this album, but I don’t feel like listening to it does anything other than kill time painlessly. There are worse fates, certainly, and fans of This Picture or Cliffs of Dooneen should probably check out the other, but if This Picture wants to get me to buy their next album, they will have to do a lot more than just release it.

## In Tua Nua

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### *Vaudeville*, 1987 CD

Another Irish act that thus gets attached to U2 in this book, In Tua Nua came to my attention via the live version of “Seven into the Sea” that appears on the *Live for Ireland* compilation. I also remember reading somewhere that before she got her own career underway, Sinéad O’Connor wrote some songs for In Tua Nua, but there’s no sign of her name of the credits for this record.

The strong voice of vocalist Leslie Dowdall gives In Tua Nua a character all its own among the other Irish bands in this chapter, and makes the band remind me as much of Rubber Rodeo as of U2. A seven person band (thus the “seven” in “Seven into the Sea”, perhaps), In Tua Nua’s default configuration is drums, guitar, vocals, keyboards, bass, violin and Uilleann pipes. I’m tempted to say that In Tua Nua sounds like a cross between the Waterboys and T’Pau, but nobody would know what I mean by that, and it fails to capture the country-ish, gospel-ish timbres of Leslie’s voice. Suffice it to say, then, that In Tua Nua are somewhere in between slick commercial pop and traditional Irish music. I find it an interesting tension.

“Seven into the Sea” makes a galloping beginning to the album. “Valuable Lessons” has similarly high energy, as does “Voice of America” and “Walking on Glass”. At the mellow end of *Vaudeville*’s spectrum

are the somewhat softer “No Solutions”, “Rain” and the title track. As far as I know, *Vaudeville* was not released in the US, so if you’re interested in investigating In Tua Nua you should start instead with...

### *The Long Acre*, 1988 CD

In Tua Nua concentrate on their higher-energy side for this follow up. “Woman of Fire” starts off the album with a crashing metallic snare, thundering bass, sawing violin and belted vocals from Dowdall. “All I Wanted” is a little less dark, but just as fast, and goes from reminding me of Siouxsie and the Banshees during the verses to being closer to Lone Justice in the choruses. “Wheel of Evil” slows slightly, and Leslie lets her voice get softer, which makes the soaring chorus that much more powerful. “Meeting of the Waters” is a gentle acoustic guitar, violin and voice ballad. “The Innocent and the Honest Ones”, a song sung to God, pleading for signs, saying “I want to believe in you / But I’ve learned to hate”, eases the accelerator back down a little, starting from a stirring Uilleann pipe solo and building to crashing cymbals a bit like U2’s “With or Without You”.

The energy-level cycle then begins again. “Seven into the Sea” re-appears here (the same version, not a new one) to get things moving again, “Some Things Never Change” is like “All I Wanted”, “Don’t Fear Me Now” is like “Wheel of Evil”. “Emotional Barrier” is slow like “Meeting of the Waters”, but lasts longer and builds into a country-ish sway. Drummer Paul Byrne then takes a turn at lead vocals for the title track, a sad epic about the decline of Ireland. I don’t mean that the second five songs are clones of the first five, because they aren’t, but merely that the flow of energy levels in the second half is very similar to that in the first half.

Lest the album end on as a depressing a lyrical note as “The Long Acre”, “Sweet Lost Soul” begins with the admonishment “Don’t be so sad now, / Don’t you know it’s not / The end of the world just yet”. Dowdall and Byrne duet on this one, and the whole band chimes in to give it the tired-but-exuberant feel of the last song of a long night, and thus a fitting spirit with which to end a fine album.

Unfortunately, as with Cry Before Dawn and Cactus World News, the end of this album is also the last I’ve heard from In Tua Nua, and I have to wonder whether there’s a pub somewhere in the depths of Dublin where the three bands take turns in residence, making more great music that they ungraciously refuse to commit to CD and ship to America for my enjoyment.

I get sad and angry just thinking about it.

## Kevin Rowland and Dexy's Midnight Runners

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### *Too-Rye-Ay*, 1982 LP

When "Come On Eileen" came out, I hated it, as did everybody I knew. Years later, after I'd been lured into Celtic music by several of the bands above, I developed a retrospective fondness for the song, and picked up a copy of this album in the always-dangerous \$1.99 bin.

What I'd forgotten was that the Celtic feel of Dexy's Midnight Runners was never what annoyed me about them; it was Kevin Rowland's voice and the band's fondness for soul music. I found I hadn't warmed to either of these things over the years, and so this album ends up not appealing to me, though I *do* now like "Come On Eileen". I mention the album here because if you find yourself with a hankering for something that mixes Celtic music with other unexpected cultural ingredients, you might be interested in Black 47, who I like better.

## Black 47

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### *Black 47*, 1992 CD

It'd been ten years since "Come On Eileen", and frankly the world was *due* for another preposterous Celtic novelty-hit to renew the average pop fan's disdain for the Irish, which had taken quite a beating from the success of U2 and Sinéad O'Connor in the meantime. Right on schedule, along came Black 47's "Funky Céili", an irresistible hard-luck story about an Irish pub-crawler exiled to NYC, USA by his pregnant girlfriend's irate father, where he takes up residence in the Bronx, forms a band, gets on MTV, and pines for the girl he left behind. The music is a combination of drum-machine dance-pop, hip-hop and Celtic piping, and it makes the song the perfect heir to "Come On Eileen". One of the members of Black 47 (saxophonist Geoffrey Blythe, I believe, but I could be wrong) was actually *in* Dexy's Midnight Runners at one point later in their career, but this is really unpremeditated convergence. Celtic jigs and reels are fantastic dance music, and are bound to crop up in the context of *any* dance genre that makes its way to Ireland or the Irish.

The five-song EP rushed out to hold "Funky Céili" is a powerful blast of exuberance. "Maria's Wedding" is "Funky Céili"'s spiritual b-side, and the more-muted "Our Lady of the Bronx" would have made an excellent third track on the 12". The other two songs, "James

Connolly" and "Black 47", re-cross the ocean for some Irish history, the former a union battle anthem and the latter a deceptively cheerful-sounding ode to some long-ago plague the details of which somebody once explained to me, but which I've now completely forgotten.

Songwriter/singer/multi-instrumentalist Larry Kirwan's plaintive voice may make or wreck Black 47 for you, but if you like it this is a surprisingly strong debut despite its size. Kirwan's songwriting has a ragged honesty, and the band's sound *is* unique, antecedents notwithstanding. Ex-Cars singer Ric Ocasek co-produces the record, which is an odd-sounding match, but one that seems to work well. I'd recommend this EP whole-heartedly if it hadn't been almost completely subsumed in the band's even more-impressive first full album the following year.

### *Fire of Freedom*, 1993 CD

Take four of the five songs from the charming *Black 47* EP ("Our Lady of the Bronx" is omitted), add ten more tracks to bring the album to a more-than-respectable hour-plus of music, and you'd expect to have a meal of whatever it was the EP offered a taste of. At least, that's what *I* expected. What I got was *very* surprising. In fact, the first couple times I listened to *Fire of Freedom* I was convinced that not only was this album not an *improvement* on the EP, but that there was actually *nothing* here that was any good *except* for the holdover tracks. The self-agrandizing, name-dropping rap "Rockin' the Bronx" was *painful*, the reggae title track made no musical sense to me at all, and most of the rest of the additions seemed alarmingly spiritless. Why anybody would want to make such a bloated, misshapen muddle out of the lean debut was absolutely beyond me.

I couldn't escape the feeling that I was being somehow unfair to the album, though, and so I gave it a few more chances, on the theory that since I couldn't think of any reason why the band would have *wanted* to ruin their album, perhaps they'd had some *other* motivation for constructing it this way. To my not-inconsiderable surprise, before very long the album snapped into focus after all.

It's very important to put aside the EP when trying to understand *Fire of Freedom*. *Black 47* is a small, fun record; *Fire of Freedom* is sprawling, painful and profound. *Black 47* is a party record with more credibility than most, but not much more ambition; *Fire of Freedom* is an awesomely ambitious portrait of life as an Irish immigrant in New York City. A roller-coaster mood-ride from glee to despair and most points in between, this album weaves together home-sickness, history, hope, regret, love, self-reliance, defiance,



racism, melancholy, betrayal, instability and the feeling of being *alien*, in a remarkable soap-opera collage of experiences that is on the whole rather bleak, but very affecting.

"Living in America", broken into three parts, frames the album, and its chorus line, "Oh Mammy dear, we're all mad over here" appears to be the primary conclusion the album draws. From the evidence of the other songs, it's a pretty reasonable summary of life in the city. "Maria's Wedding" is second, followed by the story-of-our-origin "Rockin' the Bronx" (ironic that though the band has a theme song, the track whose title is their name is actually about a centuries-old plague). "Fanatic Heart", next, sounds a lot like the real story of that Irishman imprisoned for years as an IRA terrorist, even though the government knew he was innocent. Next to this, "Funky Céili" doesn't seem nearly as flippant, and the sadness in the narrator's plaintive invitations to Bridie to come join him take on some additional depth.

"Fire of Freedom", the reggae title track, took me the longest time to get into. This is simple to explain: I hate reggae. The song's lyrics are also rather unspecific compared to most of the others. I've grown fond enough of it not to reach for Skip when it comes on, but I still don't think it's the strongest thing here. "James Connolly", next, channels the same sorts of sentiments into a much more involving form. There's another "Living in America" interlude then, followed by the scathing "Banks of the Hudson", which concludes with this telling bit of observation:

On the banks of the Hudson my love and  
I lay down,  
Just above 42nd Street, while the rain  
was pouring down.  
When I covered her with kisses, the  
sparks lit up her eyes.  
We made love like mad angels, while  
the Jersey trucks rolled by.  
She said "Don't you ever leave me, oh  
for God's sake don't let me down",  
But how could I ever take a black girl  
back to Wexford town?  
Just then the streets of fire turned to  
blood, a yellow Cadillac cruised by,  
And as I raced up 42nd Street, the Ice  
Man shouted  
"Hey Paddy, it's time to die".

"40 Shades of Blue" is the album's emotional low point, the line "And the letters that you sent back home / Were full of all the things you'd done, / But they don't say you're down there on Bleeker Street / With your hand out on the bum" neatly summarizing the

tension between the dream version of New York and the real one. "New York, NY 10009" is completely involved in the city, the narrator admitting "I don't care about the money, you can keep the fame, / I just want to beat this city at its own dumb game". "You've wrecked me 'til I have become / Half the man I might have been, / Half the hero of my dream", he sings, railing against the city even as he is swallowed by it.

"Sleep Tight in New York City/Her Dear Old Donegal" reverses the narrative perspective, jumping the teller back to Ireland and recasting the saga with the *woman* going to America. This role reversal helps reveal the emotional distance between the places, which is a much wider gulf than the physical ocean, and helps explain why Bridie didn't come to New York after all, and why the narrator is so alone in the city even though there must be hundreds of thousands of other expatriate Irish there.

Then, while we're in Ireland, there's "Black 47", and the album concludes back in NY with the bulk of "Living in America", a pounding, bitter, romantic duet between Kirwan and Mary Courtney, both railing against the menial jobs and battered lives they've fallen into, while they each ponder the motives of the other. "Ah what the hell, nothing' ventured nothin' gained", they both conclude, succumbing to the madness of their environment in the hopes that *something* positive might come of it, even though so little ever has. Is their budding relationship a ray of hope or the whistle before the thud of the final blow? It's hard to tell, and that ambiguity is an ending very much in character with the rest of this dense, complex, exhausting and remarkable album.

## various

### *Live for Ireland*, 1987 LP

One last entry before I leave Ireland, this collection serves as a decent overview of Irish rock music. It features songs from U2, In Tua Nua, Elvis Costello, The Pogues, Paul Brady, The Chieftains, Chris De Burgh, Cactus World News, The Boomtown Rats, Clannad, The Fountainshead, Van Morrison and Christy Moore/Paul Doran.

I think the U2 song was intended to be the main draw of the album, but I find it tediously overlong. The In Tua Nua song, "Seven Into the Sea", was my highpoint of the collection, as it was my introduction to the band. Chris De Burgh's live rendition of his classic song "Don't Pay the Ferryman" is spirited, and Cactus World News' performance of "The Bridge" is also excellent. The rest of the album varies, in my

estimation, from okay (Paul Brady's "The Island", Clannad's "Theme from Harry's Game") to awful (The Fountainhead's "Feel It Now"). The *performances* are all decent, though, so I imagine that most people with any sort of weakness for Irish music would find a few songs they liked here.

## Billy Bragg

It was, I believe, 1984, and I was standing pressed against the barricade at the front of the stage of the Bronco Bowl auditorium in Dallas, Texas, having survived an abysmal set by the Fleshtones and waiting for the arrival of Echo and the Bunnymen, who were, in retrospect, an odd choice to be playing in an auditorium behind the free world's largest indoor bowling/archery/pool/batting-cage complex. The Fleshtones' equipment had been hosed off the stage, and everything looked ready for Echo et al, when a scruffy looking man shuffled onto the stage, dragging behind him a small white amplifier with a sheet of notebook paper taped to it that looked like they cost, at most, \$6.49, including the whole pack of notebook paper and the pen used to write the song list on it.

The person who had introduced this inexplicable device to the stage went off again, returning with a guitar that looked like it probably came free with the amplifier. He plugged it in, stepped up to an available microphone, and introduced himself as Billy Bragg, which meant nothing to me. Amused, I waited to see how long it would take before someone ejected him. Astonishingly, nobody did, and he proceeded to play a series of intensely wonderful songs, rendered in shades of blaring cheap guitar and thick, undisguised English accent. In between them, he tossed off hilarious jokes that made absolutely no sense to me at the word, sentence or paragraph level, but still managed to be funny.

He also mentioned that he had an album out, called "Fuck Me, I'm Famous". This seemed like an appropriate-enough album title, so the next day I dutifully presented myself at the counter of Metamorphosis and asked after it by name. The clerk had never heard of it, for the good reason, I later discovered, that that wasn't the title. I never did see a Billy Bragg record in Dallas, but upon arriving in Cambridge for the start of my first year at Harvard, the first record-store I walked into had *both* Billy Bragg albums (his second one having come out in the meantime), which I immediately bought. I've since realized that that was the worst record store in Harvard Square by far, and I've never bought anything there since, but for one glorious moment there it was my favorite place in the universe.

### *Back to Basics, 1987 CD*

Billy Bragg's first three releases, *Life's a Riot with Spy vs Spy*, *Brewing up with Billy Bragg* and the single *Between the Wars*, were collected, sensibly, on this single CD; with 21 songs, this omnibus still checks in at less than an hour.

It's a thoroughly amazing hour, however.

*Life's a Riot with Spy vs Spy*, the first seven songs, is one of the simplest records rock music has ever produced. Recorded straight to stereo, with nothing but Billy Bragg's raw, raspy voice and loud, somewhat sloppy electric-guitar playing, these songs may be the ultimate marriage of the ideologies of punk music and folk music.

"The Milkman of Human Kindness" takes a potentially-simple love song, and wraps it in the drawn out, nasal way Bragg sings the word "pint". "To Have and To Have Not", with its chorus of "Just because you're better than me / Doesn't mean I'm lazy", explores the personal side of England's recession, showing some of Bragg's topical side, which isn't very much in evidence on this first record, compared to how prominent a feature it would later become.

"Richard" is a love song of some sort, or a song *about* love, at any rate, though exactly what it says eludes me. To be honest, I always thought he was saying "he can't reach her", instead of "here comes Richard", and the former makes more sense. "Lover's Town Revisited", on the other hand, is about gangs and ignorant violence, not lovers. I think.

"A New England" is the first album's masterpiece. Over the record's simplest accompaniment, the lyrics are a hilarious and poignant evocation of confused emotions. "I don't want to change the world", goes the chorus, "I'm just looking for another girl". For a while in my life, this was my theme song. This is the sort of song that leads people to take an overly dim view of their lives, just so this *can* be their theme song.

"The Man in the Iron Mask" is a slow, sad love song that gets mostly lost between "A New England" and the last song, "The Busy Girl Buys Beauty". "The Busy Girls Buys Beauty" is almost as good as "A New England", in fact, and is probably the most socio-critical song on the record, attacking the way societal pressures warp the priorities of women.

For the second album, *Brewing Up with Billy Bragg*, which comprises songs 8-18 on the CD, Bragg makes some slight concessions to studio technology, and indulges in some over-dubs and the occasional guest instrument. He makes no attempt to cover up the rough edges of his playing and singing, however, so the resulting album ends up sounding basically as raw and direct as the first one.

The songwriting is even better. "It Says Here" opens the album with Bragg's first blatant left-wing fusillade, lashing out at the hypocrisy and sugar-coating that he feels characterize the English right-wing press. The interplay of electric and acoustic guitar brighten a sparkling song.

"Love Gets Dangerous" uses only one guitar, but doubles the voice for good effect. "From a Vauxhall Velox" returns to the instrumentation of *Life's a Riot* for the most part, in what strikes me as a brief, raucous English version of "Paradise by the Dashboard Lights". "The Myth of Trust" then switches gears for a song with a pace and tone somewhat like "The Man in the Iron Mask". Vicious lyrics ("We were upstairs in the bedroom, dancing disgusting / And flushing our babies down the drain") focus it, though, and there's no danger of it being eclipsed by the songs around it. "The Saturday Boy" relieves the dark mood of "The Myth of Trust" for another schoolboy love story in the genre of "A New England". This is the song with the trumpet.

"Island of No Return" is another one that goes over my American head. I think it has to do with the army fighting right-wing extremists somewhere in England, but beyond that I can only tell you that there are strong emotions involved, war is unpleasant, and it is uncomfortable eating dinner in a foxhole.

"This Guitar Says Sorry" returns to the fringes of birth control and abortion, which "The Myth of Trust" also skirted. This song points out that "The time that it takes to make a baby / Can be the time it takes to make a cup of tea". I believe it is arguing for abstinence, but it may be advocating tolerance of mixed-race marriages, or perhaps just more tea. "Like Soldiers Do" casts romance in the terms of war, with men as soldiers fighting because they don't know any other way to deal with it. This goes a long way to explain the confused situations of "The Myth of Trust" and "This Guitar Says Sorry".

"St. Swithin's Day" is another slow relationship song, a less bitter and more melancholy sort than "The Myth of Trust". It fades out quietly, and is replaced by the frenetic blare of "Strange Things Happen". "A Lover Sings" then ends the album with another inimitable Billy Bragg relationship song, this one with an organ helping out Bragg's guitar on accompaniment. "Walking in the park, kissing on the carpet / And your tights around your ankles / Late at night a lover thinks of these things".

Though at 35 minutes this is still not an album of epic length, the over-3:00 average length is quite a change from the first record's seven songs in sixteen minutes. So adroitly and subtly has Bragg fleshed out his arrangements and songs, though, that the two

albums taken together as they are on this CD fit together perfectly.

The three tracks of the *Between the Wars* single round out the collection. These three are the most political songs here. "Between the Wars" attacks the British government for continuing to spend money on weapons, not welfare, during peacetime. "The World Turned Upside Down", written by Leon Rosselson, relates a historical incident, the veracity of which I won't bother doubting, from 1649, when a group of idealistic laborers attempted to establish a communal self-government, only to be wiped out by the orders of the evil property owners. "Which Side Are You On?" is a traditional union song. It would be easy for these unflinchingly political songs to come off as patronizing, cloying or pedantic, but for me the sincerity of Bragg's delivery, and the solid simplicity of their arrangements prevent this, and they round out the collection nicely.

In case I haven't made it clear yet, I think this collection is masterful, and is absolutely required for any self-respecting modern rock record collection. Though plenty of artists have followed Billy Bragg into political consciousness, nobody before or since has tried to duplicate the awesome simplicity that he achieves on these first few releases. Where punk stood up and said that you didn't have to be a virtuoso to be in a band, because you could make up for technical failings by playing fast and loud, Billy Bragg goes one step further and demonstrates that if you truly care about making music, you really don't have to worry about anything else.

### *Days Like These, 1985 7"*

"Days Like These" continues the sentiments of "Between the Wars". It's an okay song, but it concentrates on its lyrics to such an extent that the song's music is pretty boring, resulting in a song that strikes me as somewhat lackluster.

The two songs on the flip-side, however, are terrific. "I Don't Need This Pressure, Ron" is a hilarious a cappella socialist diatribe with one classic line after another, two of the best of which are "I like toast as much as anyone, but not for breakfast, dinner and tea", and "There's drudgery in social change", though to appreciate the second one you have to hear Bragg say "drudgery".

"Scholarship is the Enemy of Romance" isn't political at all, and I don't think it's coincidental that it's a better song than either of the others. It, more than the others, makes me wish that Bragg had extended the scope of *Back to Basics* just one single further, and included these three songs on the compilation, relieving me from dependence on my scratchy copy of this 45.

### *Talking with the Taxman About Poetry, 1986 CD*

This is subtitled “The *difficult* third album”, and it isn’t immediately clear whether Bragg means that it was difficult for him, or that it will be difficult for us. On further inspection I conclude that it is actually some of both. For listeners new to Billy Bragg, this album is somewhat more accessible than the first two, thanks to an expanded sonic palette that incorporates piano, organ, percussion, bass, violin, trumpet and flugelhorn, as well as backing vocals from Kirsty MacColl and some guitar from Johnny Marr. Mind you, most songs only have a couple of these, so this is far from a conventional rock album, but the overall effect is still less startling than the rawness of the first two albums.

For the more established fans, the presence of other musicians might seem somewhat disappointing, and this pessimism isn’t totally unwarranted. At times, Bragg’s voice is still ragged, his accent still thick, and his guitar still the strongest musical element. At its best, the songwriting here is as good as ever, sometimes better, and political and personal themes mix nicely. At its low points, though, Billy seems to lose his edge among the trumpets and jangling piano, and the charm of brilliance of the first two albums gets largely eclipsed.

On the other hand, it really *doesn’t* sound like the album was too hard for Billy to make. The added instruments are not overdone, his wit remains keen, and it seems to me that he is progressing without forcing himself to change. In fact, the problem may be that he is relaxing too much. In the end, “difficult” probably refers most to Bragg’s suspicion that some ardent supporters (like me) wouldn’t find this album as much to their liking. And he isn’t *entirely* wrong.

“Greetings to the New Brunette”, the first song, is probably the album’s most polished track, and features the highest concentration of guest players. Lines like “I’m celebrating my love for you / With a pint of beer and a new tattoo” prevent the production from dulling Bragg’s rough appeal, and the result is quite charming. A dark cover of “Train Train”, originally by the Count Bishops, featuring a wildly warped violin part, balances the mood out quickly.

“The Marriage” and “Ideology”, next, are songs firmly in the classic Billy Bragg mold. “The Marriage” contains the classic line “Marriage is when we admit our parents were right”, and “Ideology” lashes out at the government not for subscribing to the wrong ideology, but for letting the unresolvable warring of ideologies itself keep them from doing the job they really exist for.

“Levi Stubb’s Tears” is the high point of the album for me. A gut-wrenchingly sad song about an abused and abandoned woman whose only solace is music, it

never fails to give me shivers. Although Bragg’s songs tend to intentionally avoid the larger-than-life feel that often characterizes “great” rock songs, I think this one qualifies anyway. After it ends I leap for the stop button, though, because I can’t stand “Honey, I’m a Big Boy Now” at all. The cheesy piano turns what might have been a palatable song into a cloying mess that I’d just as soon wasn’t here.

“There Is Power in a Union” gets back on track quickly, a rousing sing-along that doesn’t bother to cloak its political message in anything. “Help Save the Youth of America” turns Bragg’s attention on this country, just in case American listeners thought his songs were quaint English documents that don’t apply to them. The song itself is not Bragg’s strongest, in my opinion, and the message seems, to me at least, overwrought. “Wishing the Days Away” is, like “Honey, I’m a Big Boy Now”, too cheesy and old-fashioned for my tastes.

“The Passion”, “The Warmest Room” and “The Home Front” are better, but for some reason I find them a forgettable trio. They’re too slow, or Bragg’s voice is too subdued, or the instrumentation isn’t energetic enough, or the lyrics aren’t compelling, or perhaps I’m just close-mindedly insisting on wanting another *Life’s A Riot*. Whatever the reason, the album seems to trail away for me, leaving feeling that if you traded “There is Power in a Union” for “Train Train”, you could cut the album off after the first five songs and have a much better work. “The Marriage” and “Levi Stubbs’ Tears” remain two of my favorite Billy Bragg songs, but the album as a whole I can’t recommend with much enthusiasm.

### *Workers Playtime, 1988 CD*

After flirting with full arrangements on *Talking with the Taxman About Poetry*, Bragg goes all the way here, and most of these songs feature bass, piano and horns, with drums, percussion and other miscellany making frequent appearances.

The result is pleasant, which I mean to sound ambiguous. On the one hand, this album is very well-crafted, the songs are excellent, the performances fine and the production deft. On the other hand, the album sounds more like *Everything But the Girl* than it does like *Life’s a Riot*, and though I try and partially succeed in taking in this album on its own terms, I cannot successfully transfer the strong emotions I feel for Billy’s early albums to it.

To put it neutrally, *Workers Playtime* is a very different album from the ones that precede it. Instead of Bragg’s brash electric guitar and unschooled voice, these songs are more often centered on Cara Tivey’s lilting piano, and Billy makes a concerted effort to sing

“better”. The lyrics tend toward the introspective, and the outrage and cynicism of many of the early songs is here replaced with melancholy. Instead of “The Busy Girl Buys Beauty”, here we get sad lines like “For the girl with the hourglass figure / Time runs out very fast”, from “Valentine’s Day Is Over”.

Even so, it is clear that the change in mood is due to Bragg maturing, not fading. These songs are undeniably more sophisticated than “A New England” or “Like Soldiers Do”, and it no longer makes any sense to say that Billy is covering up for any technical inadequacies. The album is more unified and consistent than *Talking with the Taxman*, and there isn’t a song here that I don’t think stands well on its own. The players aren’t as famous as Marr and MacColl, but I think they are more effective, and Cara Tivey in particular makes an excellent foil for Billy.

So yes, I like this album. In certain moods this is just the kind of music I want to hear. However, I definitely experience this album as a mood, not as a work with its own strong personality, like Bragg’s first two albums. And this is why, though I can’t point to anything I *dislike* about it, the album just isn’t on the same level in my worldview as *Life’s a Riot* and *Brewing Up*.

### *The Internationale*, 1990 CD

I’m infinitely sorry to admit that Bragg’s next record, this 7-song, 19-minute EP, I find awful to the point of embarrassment. I don’t for a moment doubt Billy’s political sincerity, but his rendition of “The Internationale” makes me cringe so hard I threaten to sprain something. “I Dreamed I Saw Phil Ochs Last Night” isn’t as painful to listen to, but the treatment still seems overly somber. “The Marching Song of the Covert Battalions” reverts to the genuinely painful. “Blake’s Jerusalem” never has a chance, once I realize that he’s singing the song for getting Mr. Lambert to take the bag off his head after somebody has said “mattress” to him. “Nicaragua Nicaraguita” is even more absurd, Bragg singing a cappella in some of the worst sounding Spanish I’ve ever heard. “The Red Flag” sets a communist anthem, bafflingly, to the traditional Celtic tune “The White Cockade”. “My Youngest Son Came Home Today” is the least unpleasant song of the lot, but it doesn’t rescue a lamentable record from its unfortunate fate.

### *Don’t Try This at Home*, 1991 CD

In fact, *The Internationale* so disillusioned me that I initially refused to buy Bragg’s next album. The single, “Sexuality”, was only okay, and it didn’t help that Bragg had been socializing with REM, who by this time I was sick to death of. I spent the money on the

*Back to Basics* CD and fully intended to sit out this phase of Bragg’s career listening to “A New England” over and blissfully over.

Georgia had a bit more tolerance than I, and she bought the album, so it ended up in my life anyway. The first time or two I heard it, it sounded like I expected it to, inoffensive but nothing remarkable. The third or fourth time, though, something clicked, and *Don’t Try This at Home* and I snapped violently into alignment. This was, thus, the only album in the first edition of this book that wasn’t actually in my *personal* collection. I made this sole exception for the simple reason that the album is unbelievably wonderful, and I wanted to rave about it. Now, of course, I have my own copy...

Those of you who are familiar with this album and with *Workers Playtime*, and who have just read my somewhat tepid review of *Workers Playtime* may express initial ridicule at my having such different reactions to two albums that have such strong similarities. And you would be correct, to an extent, in claiming that the albums are similar. *Don’t Try This at Home* is certainly *most* like *Workers Playtime*, with many of the same people, including Cara Tivey. *Don’t Try This* is not at all a return to Bragg’s early form, and most of the stylistic trends that I described for *Workers Playtime* continue here. The album is lushly instrumented, Bragg’s increasingly adept voice drifting through a deep aural space. Gone are the stridently left-wing lyrics of songs like “There is Power in a Union”, and in their place are quiet, personal stories.

What separates the two albums, though, for me, is that where *Workers Playtime* is gentle, *Don’t Try This at Home* is *aching*. *Workers Playtime* I find soothing and agreeable, in an ambient sort of way that never monopolizes my attention. When I put on *Don’t Try This*, on the other hand, I find almost every song absolutely riveting, beyond melancholy to sad, beyond merely sad to where sadness becomes so poignantly beautiful that it seems to wrap around to ecstasy again.

I’m not going to walk through the individual songs, because I’d end up saying the same things about each of them, and though I wouldn’t necessarily mind that, it doesn’t seem like a good use of your time. Don’t let that fool you, however, into thinking that the songs here are all the same. In fact, there’s a reasonably wide range of pace and mood on this album. At one extreme are slow, somber songs like “Moving the Goalposts”, “Trust”, “Tank Park Salute”, “Dolphins” and “Rumours of War”. At the other are such exuberant romps as “Accident Waiting to Happen”, “Sexuality”, “Mother of the Bride”, “North Sea Bubble” and “Body of Water”. And in between lie songs like the haunting war-and-racism song “Everywhere”, the wistful “You Woke Up My Neighborhood”, “The Few”’s self-critical look at

England, and the delicate pop sway of “Wish You Were Her”.

Michael Stipe and Peter Buck both participate without annoying me, and Johnny Marr and Kirsty MacColl return to help out on “Cindy of a Thousand Lives” and “Sexuality”. The indomitable Wiggy even gets a cowriting credit for “Body of Water”. It is Billy himself that drives the album, though, giving the talented assemblage of musicians songs to play that richly reward their efforts.

It is rare that a single musician can impress me this deeply with albums from two separate phases of their career, but I consider this album just as essential as *Back to Basics*. If you choose to skip the ones in between, I won’t hate you, but if you don’t know these two you are missing some of rock’s finest moments.

### *The Peel Sessions Album, 1991 CD*

As if rewarding me for having come around to appreciating *Don’t Try This at Home*, fate then dealt me an unexpected treat with this marvelous collection of 19 solo recordings from six different sessions for the BBC’s John Peel show.

The first session (though the last on the CD, as its six songs are the CD bonus tracks) is from 1983, and features “A New England” from *Life’s a Riot*, “Strange Things Happen”, “This Guitar Says Sorry” and “Love Gets Dangerous” from, eventually, *Brewing Up with Billy Bragg*, a cover of John Cale’s “Fear is a Man’s Best Friend”, and the hilarious English “Route 66” rewrite “A13 Trunk Road to the Sea”. These songs are definitely my favorites on the album, so don’t buy it in a format that doesn’t have them.

The second session contributes the charming and otherwise unavailable song “Lovers Town”. The third session, from late 1984, is not as dynamic as the first two, and the deep, booming production of this session isn’t as appealing to me as the dry, edgy sound of the first one, but it provides great renditions of “Between the Wars”, “Which Side Are You On?” and “A Lover Sings”. A 1985 session tosses in “Days Like These”, *Talking with the Taxman’s* “The Marriage” and the Smiths’ song “Jeanne”. I like this version of “The Marriage” even better than the one on the album. “Jeanne” doesn’t show up on any of the Smiths albums I have, so I don’t know what the original sounds like, but Bragg’s version sounds predictably terrific.

The 1986 fifth session features “Greetings to the New Brunette” and the non-album song “Chile Your Waters Run Red”. I like hearing “Greetings to the New Brunette” with just Billy and his guitar, but “Chile Your Waters Run Red” sounds like it comes from *The Internationale*, and should have stayed there.

The last session, from 1988, has tremendous, vital, energetic performances of “She’s Got a New Spell”, “Valentines Day Is Over”, “The Short Answer” and “Rotting on Remand”, all from *Workers Playtime*. Hearing how great these songs sound in this simple arrangement just increases my confused ambivalence about the album they come from, but that’s a small price to pay for this perfect postscript to *Back to Basics*.

## Kirsty MacColl

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### *A New England, 1984 7"*

Kirsty MacColl’s continued friendship with Billy Bragg may be harder to understand after you hear this sugar-pop cover of Bragg’s “A New England”, produced by MacColl’s husband, Steve Lillywhite. If you don’t manage to find this version hilarious, and thus charming, you will probably consider it an aesthetic crime of virtually unparalleled severity. MacColl cavorts through the song with the same bubble-gum upbeat cheeriness as the Tracey Ullman hit “They Don’t Know”, which Kirsty also wrote and sang on. She even has the nerve to add another verse or two the song herself.

I’ve played this single for several people over the years, and every single one of them has threatened to hurt me if I ever played it in their presence again (I’m writing this review while Georgia is out of the apartment). Nonetheless, I still think it’s marvelous. Make up your own mind, assuming you can *find* this single. I read in an interview somewhere that it was included on a collection that MacColl’s label put out without her involvement in the UK, but other than this one copy I bought, I’ve never seen any sign of the song here in the US.

### *Kite, 1989 CD*

I probably wouldn’t have thought to put Kirsty MacColl in this chapter on her own, but once the Billy Bragg connection has landed her here, she doesn’t fit in too badly. I would have put her, I think, in *The Border*, especially after I noticed that a few of these songs feature bass player Pino Palladino, who also played with Joan Armatrading and Julia Fordham. Then again, Johnny Marr plays on a number of songs, so I might have tossed Kirsty into Hull. And with the Tracey Ullman connection, she might have gone in *Earth*.

The point, I guess, is that musically she could go in any of the four chapters. There are plenty of acoustic guitars and Celtic tinges, and there’s enough of the folk-music storyteller in her to put her in with Richard

Thompson. The giddy bounce of “What Do Pretty Girls Do?”, and her cheery version of “You Just Haven’t Earned It Yet Baby” (along with “A New England”, of course) are more than enough to land her next to Tracey, Jane Wiedlin and the like. And songs like “Fifteen Minutes” and “Don’t Come The Cowboy With Me Sonny Jim!” have a sardonically campy merry-go-round cynicism that would go well alongside the Beautiful South and Marr’s own band, the Smiths, and she has sung with the Wonder Stuff and the Simple Minds, too, come to think of it.

The good side effect is that by telling you where in the book MacColl *could* have gone, I’ve actually done a decent job of describing her music. I’m not a huge fan of hers on her own, and this album leaves me largely unmoved, but she crops up lots of other places in the book, so if you buy all the other records I tell you to you’ll get various tastes of Kirsty’s voice and can make up your own mind whether to pursue it.

## Attacco Decente

### U.K.A., 1986 EP

Billy Bragg’s blurb on the back of this EP sold me on it, though I hadn’t heard of the band before I bought it. In fact, I haven’t ever heard them mentioned since, either, so its possible they exist only inside my head, though if that’s so then I’m pretty confused about how Billy Bragg got onto them.

Attacco Decente is three guys who play dulcimers and acoustic guitars, and sing in wonderful Housemartins-like harmonies. The lyrics make the Bragg connection less mysterious: “U.K.A.” stands for “United Kingdom of America”, and the song seems to accuse the US of having caused a litany of British catastrophes, most of which I, personally, know nothing about, though I realize that hardly exonerates us. “Touch Yourself” is a thoughtful defense of masturbation, which there aren’t nearly enough of in rock music, if you ask me. “Dad Hits Mum” is a vicious song about abuse.

The buoyant, ringing music that drives these songs is what makes the band stand out. The dulcimers are such a great sound that it’s a wonder more pop bands haven’t incorporated them, especially seeing as they are dead easy to play. And the band’s folk harmonies are straight out of the Simon and Garfunkel handbook, except that that are three of them.

Given how unsure I am that either this record or the band really ever existed outside of the second-hand record store I found my copy in, I imagine that you would find it unrewarding to intentionally try to locate

one of these records for yourself. If one happens across your path of its own volition, though, catch it carefully and give it a listen. This is definitely a band that, in a world where my personal whims replaced ordinary physical laws, would have been hugely successful.

## Midnight Oil

### Red Sails in the Sunset, 1985 LP

I got into Midnight Oil, like many people, with *Diesel and Dust*. Having not liked “The Power and the Passion”, the hit from the Midnight Oil album previous to this, I crept into their back catalog rather cautiously. And indeed, *Red Sails in the Sunset* is a scattered album, to my ear.

The best songs approach the manic energy of *Diesel and Dust*. “Best of Both Worlds” is good, though largely in the mold of “The Power and the Passion”. “Kosciusko” is excellent, a driving anthem about some Australian issue I can’t quite decipher, though this doesn’t deter me from singing along happily.

The other songs I find more *odd* than actually appealing. The half-rap/half-rant of “When the Generals Talk” grates. “Sleep”, with only bass and drums accompanying Peter Garrett on most of it, feels thin. “Minutes to Midnight” isn’t nearly as good as Iron Maiden’s “Two Minutes to Midnight”. “Jimmy Sharman’s Boxers” is spooky, but cryptic. “Bakerman” is a throwaway instrumental. “Helps Me Helps You” sounds like the Stray Cats with a digeridu.

Overall, the strange production feels like the band couldn’t decide whether it wanted to sound like the Alarm, Adam and the Ants, or possibly a desert-crazed version of the Cocteau Twins. Not an uninteresting album, but a wildly unfocused one.

### Diesel and Dust, 1987 CD

Focus, however, arrived presently, and this album, the band’s big commercial breakthrough (in this hemisphere, at least), is breathtaking. About the only fault I can find with it is that the handwritten lyrics on the original liner looked like they were done by a Koala bear, using a fountain pen that had previously suffered some severe chewing. (The CD corrects this, retaining the expressive penmanship only for the song titles.)

The album’s overarching theme is Australian aboriginal rights, but the sentiments resonate with the historical treatment of American Indians, so you don’t need a primer in Australian history to feel their socio-political thrust. Musically, these songs are less experimental and more solidly crafted than those on

*Red Sails in the Sunset*. Drums pound, guitars ring and churn, the bass rumbles, Peter Garrett howls anguishedly but musically, and keyboards, strings and trumpet fill out the sound when needed. Where the previous album went from mood to mood unpredictably, this one maintains a more or less constant intensity level: high.

Keeping up the intensity doesn't preclude a range of expression, by any means, and there are slow songs here like "Arctic World" and "Put Down That Weapon", as well as all-out rock catharses like "Sometimes" and "The Dead Heart".

"The Dead Heart", in fact, acts as a good encapsulation of the whole album. It begins with a pulsing bass line over methodical crashing drums. Garrett's voice comes in in a near-monotone, and he is joined presently by some acoustic guitar, which builds to a explosion that heralds the arrival of the chorus, in which the rest of the band's voices chime in, backed up by strings and horns, rising to the impassioned cry "We will listen, we'll understand". This pattern repeats a couple of times, each time more extreme, before the drums and guitars fade away into the rising strings and horns, which end the song. Outrage and beauty intertwine.

There is still something undefinably odd about Midnight Oil, something that keeps me at a slight distance even in the most frenzied moments. I suspect it has something to do with their coming from a land where Paul Hogan seems normal, but I can't be entirely sure. Whatever it is, it keeps this album from being as visceral a pleasure as some albums that I have much less intellectual regard for, but that doesn't stop me from believing that this is one of the Eighties' best albums, on par with U2's *The Joshua Tree* or Paul Simon's *Graceland*.

### ***Scream in Blue Live*, 1992 CD**

The singles from the album *Blue Sky Mining* sounded bland to me, so I sat that one out, but Midnight Oil's reputation for amazing live shows, and the killer advance version of "Dreamworld" that got played on the radio here convinced me to pick up this live album. Not knowing the old Midnight Oil albums very well, I can't place all the songs on this album in their original historical context, but "Dreamworld", "Beds Are Burning", "Sell My Soul" and "Sometimes" are from *Diesel and Dust*, "Powderworks" is from *Midnight Oil*, "Brave Faces" is from *Place Without a Postcard*, "Only the Strong" is from *10,9,8,7,6,5,4,3,2,1*, and I'm guessing that at least one or two of "Read About It", "Stars of Warburton", "Progress" and "Hercules" are from *Blue Sky Mining*, on the thin evidence that the recordings of them here are from a

1990 show. Where "Scream in Blue" comes from, I have no idea.

The band's live reputation is clearly well-founded. Even the oldest selections here, the 1982 recordings of "Brave Faces", "Only the Strong" and "Powderworks", are as clear and forceful as their best studio work, and the newer songs are transcendent. The odd directions that characterize *Red Sails in the Sunset* are nowhere to be found, and the undefinable strangeness that dulls my appreciation of *Diesel and Dust* ever so slightly gets blown into oblivion by the blazing energy of the band's stage presence.

Listening to Midnight Oil slam through these 12 songs it is hard to imagine why millions of American teenagers haven't shaved their heads bald, strapped on stilts and pledged themselves to law school in emulation of Garrett and this amazing band. If only all their albums had been live albums, maybe this *would* have happened. I'm not a huge fan of live albums, in general, but this one and Runrig's *Once in a Lifetime* are two I consider truly phenomenal.

## **Hunters and Collectors**

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### ***Human Frailty*, 1986 LP**

For the simple reasons that they are Australian, play rock music, use horns and seem to care about stuff, Hunters and Collectors tend to get paired with Midnight Oil in my mind. Musically they are actually a little closer to The Call than to Midnight Oil (at least on these albums; apparently their earlier work is very different), but here is where I think of them, so here is where they get listed.

A seven-piece band, Hunters and Collectors augment the drummer, bassist and guitarist/singer with a trumpet player, French horn and trombone players that double on keyboards, and Robert Miles, who is credited with "sound mixing, artwork". The slick horn section is the most distinctive element of an otherwise somewhat conventional rock band.

The appeal of Hunters and Collectors for me, though, is not the horns, per se, or that the band is breaking particularly new stylistic ground, but rather that they write wonderful, melodic, affecting songs that soar and swoop out of my speakers as if originating in some immeasurably vast and beautiful unseen landscape. Vocalist Mark Seymour's delivery is simple but sincere, and complements the thoughtful but unpretentious lyrics nicely. The horns, backing vocals and miscellaneous guest instruments only enhance the strong feeling of *space* that these songs exude.



"Throw Your Arms Around Me" and "Relief" are my favorites on this album. "Throw Your Arms Around Me" is the upbeat side of things, a heartfelt love song, and "Relief" is slower and sadder, a pained portrayal of a life from which sleep is the only relief. "Dog", on first listening, sounds like a relationship story of some sort, but on closer inspection it proves to be a love song sung from the point of view of a dog. I think I can safely say that it is easily the best such song I'm aware of.

I have a weakness, I realize, for album titles like *Human Frailty*, *Doubt* and *One Simple Word*, but I'd like this album even if it were called *Hunters and Collectors Go to EuroDisney*. I can't imagine *why* they'd call it that, but it would still be a great album.

### *Living Daylight*, 1987 EP

This five-song EP mostly restates the atmosphere of *Human Frailty*, and indeed the CD version of *Human Frailty* includes the three songs from the first side of this EP without comment. "Inside a Fireball" and "Living Daylight" are both in the mode of "Is Anybody In There?"; "January Rain" is more like "Relief". *Human Frailty* by itself is worth your consideration, and these additions just make it three songs longer and better. The two tracks on the back of the EP, which do not make the jump to digital, won't be missed.

### *Fate*, 1988 CD

*Fate* finds *Hunters and Collectors* even more assured, and producing an even more anthemic set of passionate rock songs. The production here is a little slicker, and the arrangements are a bit more polished, but the emotional drive of the album comes from the overpowering sense of absolute commitment dripping out of Mark Seymour's voice and every other noise-making device involved in the creation of the album. When I listen to Henry Rollins talk, this is the music I expect his band to make. This is Resilience, Stamina, Strength, Courage. Every horn slide is a breath inhaled in preparation for closing with the Minotaur, or diving into a burning building to save a neighbor you didn't even particularly like until this very moment. Every drum is a steady step of the sheriff coming to take his town back from the cowering minions of Evil; the bass is the imperturbable beat of his cholesterol-free heart; the guitar is the sun glinting off the sweat on his arms. You can hear the bruises on his face, the cuts on his arms, the dirt on his hands, the determination in his eyes. *Fate* is the music of the power of the people to be their own cavalry, the soundtrack of doing what is right, the celebration of resourcefulness and the lament that it's human evil that has always made such heroics necessary, and always will. "This is what will

happen", the band seems to say, "and here's is how you should hold yourself when it does."

There are several songs on *Human Frailty/Living Daylights* that are about as good as any here, but as an album *Fate* is clearly superior. Amidst the stirring epics the previous records had songs that were not what I consider H&C's forte, but this album is natural-amphitheater arena-rock all the way through. "Back on the Breadline", with chiming guitar, is a call to renewed purpose. The solemn, half-acoustic "Wishing Well" cries "Throw your money in the air, hold your heart in your hand", *inviting fate, embracing it*. "You Can Have It All", with its simmering organ and keyboards, concludes the opening triptych in the narrative persona of one of the defeated, empathizing for a moment with the desperate, defiant admission "Credit made me what I am today".

"Do You See What I See?", the next song, is probably my favorite H&C piece, and the lines "I see the safest place around / In that suburb down below" figured prominently in a paper I did in college about the effects of suburbanization on the collective psyche. "Safety" is the defining characteristic of the suburbs, both their greatest achievement and their most dangerous social flaw. Too much safety is deadening, however appealing, and though the wistfulness in the narrator's voice is plain, he maintains staunchly that "My hands are empty now / And I'm laughing as I go". In the chorus, "Do you see what I see?", he is asking his companion-you-if you still understand the suburbs' dynamic of promises and threats the same way he does, if you still consider it a worse crime to abandon high hopes for middle-class relative prosperity than to suffer some pain on the road to better things.

Well, do you?

"Around the Flame" retreats into slow introspection, into the realization that these life-choices mean that there will *never* be "peace" in the usual sense (though there can be a sort of peace in the very *acceptance* of constant change), and into trumpets and stately hi-hats. The mood soon passes, though, replaced by "Faraway Man"'s edgy work-week chafing, a mournful harmonica sounding like a caged wolf's plaintive howl. "Under the Sun (Where I Come From)" leaps forward in time to find the Faraway Man grown old, worn down by endless wandering in search of salvation, despairing of the quest and wondering whether anybody will ever learn that the search is futile, after all. "What Are You Waiting For?" answers that question immediately, a strident, stomping song that exhorts you to get off your ass and *do* something. Is it futile? Sure-but so what? *It doesn't matter*.

The band finally takes a break from this emotional wringer with "So Long Ago", a shouted passion-lost love song that lopes along on surging organ and

cracking snare. "Real World" drifts through a few more minutes of comparative restraint, a small, bluesy guitar lick underscoring a spotlighted vocal performance by Mark. The album proper then ends on "Something to Believe In", a vintage surging H&C quiet-triumph-in-hope mid-tempo ensemble piece.

The CD adds two more tracks. "Breakneck Road" is nice, but doesn't add much ("Real World" is too similar). The last track, though, "What's a Few Men?", is awesome, Hunters and Collectors' answer to Motorhead's "1916", a beautiful, mournful war requiem about the indifference to death that the leaders cultivate in order to carry on the war. It serves as a powerful reminder that "fate" doesn't mean out of *human* control, it only means out of *your* control. This album can't bring back the dead or necessarily even soften evil hearts, but the chances are that nothing *else* you could do with \$10-15 would, either, so why not spend it on records?

### *Ghost Nation*, 1989 CD

After *Fate*, where do you go next? How much more like that can an album be? Not, apparently, very much. *Ghost Nation* is both a fine album, and a somewhat disappointing follow-up to *Fate*. I'm a staunch defender of a band's right to just *make its music*, and there's no reason on earth why Hunters and Collectors shouldn't continue making records like this until the Sun collapses. Still, personally, I'm beginning to wonder whether I've begun to reap diminishing returns from H&C records. There are several solid songs, some as good as those of *Fate*, some not, but the album as a whole doesn't capture my attention like *Fate* or *Human Frailty* did. I listen to it, I like it, and in moods when I'm particularly attuned to Hunters and Collectors' wavelength I can get lost in it deeply enough, but it doesn't do anything that *Fate* didn't do, and what it does it doesn't do any *better*. If you don't feel like *Human Frailty*, *Living Daylight* and *Fate* have exhausted your desire for Hunters and Collectors' style, *Ghost Nation* provides some more of it. I'll keep buying their albums even if they're all like this, and you may want to, too, but you only need one to evaluate the set, and I still think *Fate* has to be it.

## Juluka

### *Scatterlings*, 1983 CD

At first glance, the primitive-looking painting on the cover of this album, and the map on the back with South Africa circled, identify this as some sort of world music that probably wouldn't appeal to me. On further

examination, you realize that two of the dancing figures in the painting are wearing Converse hightop sneakers, and that one is carrying a guitar in place of the usual wooden stick. After a little more thought you realize the much more significant detail that three of the dancing figures are black, two are white, and the band is from South Africa! Somehow, in defiance of apartheid, a mixed-race South African band has managed to come into being.

Admittedly, I didn't discover Juluka by intently studying the cover art of this album; I heard "Scatterlings of Africa" on The Rock and Roll Alternative, which was Dallas' one alternative music radio show back then. "Scatterlings of Africa" is Juluka's standard, showing their distinctive combination of Western rock and pop styles with a measure of Zulu melodies and percussion, something like an African Big Country. Three years before Paul Simon made a masterpiece and a lot of money by mining African music, this album accomplishes many of the same things with much less fanfare.

For me the key elements that make Juluka's sound special are the harmonies of singers Johnny Clegg and Sipho Mchunu, and the flute playing of Scorpion Madondo. The vocal harmonies are intoxicating, and hold my interest even through the occasional bits sung in whatever African language that is. The flute provides the musical hook that the E-bowed guitars did on *The Crossing*. Behind these, acoustic guitars, drums and plentiful percussion, and some saxophone and keyboards, fill in the rest of an instantly agreeable musical amalgam that is definitely pop with African influences, not the other way around.

The lyrics are resolutely topical, but with more subtlety and sophistication than you might expect. Juluka are an anti-apartheid band by the example of their very existence, and thus they do not need to turn every song into an explicit plea for racial equality. "Scatterlings of Africa" itself is a simple song of hope for displaced wanderers. "Umbaqanga Music" is the African equivalent of "Rock will never die". "Digging for Some Words" is a complex portrait of timeless spiritual questing amidst the disruption of modern guerrilla warfare. "Ijwanasibeki" paints a picture of life in a South African mine, and with its closing couplet, "I shake the world beneath your feet / 'Cause I'm just working a little bit", it hints that the miners haven't been defeated by their labor, by any means, and suggests that they harbor the potential for much-more-potent action. "Two Humans on the Run", which concludes the album, might be about the difficulty of interracial friendship in South Africa, but it might just be a love song. Then again, are those two things different?

## Stand Your Ground, 1984 LP

Juluka's second American album is a little slicker and keyboard-heavy than the first one, and the lyrics correspond a little more to what the world expects of them. "What a strange strange freedom / Only free to choose my chains", Clegg sings on "Kilimanjaro". "Can you hear a long sung song of freedom?" he asks on "Mana Lapho (Stand Your Ground)". These are less oblique, and to me less affecting, than the songs on the first album, but whether this is due to Juluka giving in to expectations, or whether they felt that the message wasn't getting across well enough the other way, I can't say.

Both songs *sound* great, though, and the rest of the album provides plenty in the way of more personal narratives. "December African Rain" is a beautiful song sung, if my analysis is correct, by a narrator who is growing old and saying good-bye to his life and his land. "Mantombana", the one song here written by Siphos Mchunu, not Clegg, is about a tribesman journeying into the hills to bring home the girl he will marry. "Bullets for Bafazane" sits in hiding with a silent, smiling fugitive who "makes dancing shoes from old car tires" and whose crime seems to be that his people are too proud when he is around.

Sadly, *Stand Your Ground* went quickly out of print in the US, and as I write has not been reissued on CD as best I can tell. In order to hear any of these songs, then, you'll either have to scour the few stores that still have second-hand vinyl, or buy:

## The Best of Juluka, 1991 CD

Released several years after the group disbanded, this retrospective combines songs from the two US albums ("Scatterlings of Africa", "Siyayilanda" and an all-Zulu version of "Umbaqanga Music" called "Umfazi Omdala", from *Scatterlings*; and "December African Rain", "Fever" and "Walima 'Mabele" from *Stand Your Ground*) with six songs from the group's four albums originally released only in Africa (though at least some of these have now been issued on CD in the US). An awful "Mega-mix" dance version of "Scatterlings of Africa", retitled "Scatterlings of Juluka", is added as a bonus that the album would have been much better off without.

Naturally the compilation leaves off some of my favorite songs from the two albums I have, notably "Digging for Some Words", but on the other hand, the African tracks seem like a good enough taste of those albums that I haven't felt it necessary to actually buy any of them, so I don't know who I am to criticize.

## Johnny Clegg & Savuka

### Cruel, Crazy, Beautiful World, 1989 CD

Juluka broke up in 1985 or so, and I had no idea what had become of them. I was vaguely aware of the existence of "Johnny Clegg and Savuka" over the next few years, but not having committed the membership of Juluka to memory, the name didn't mean much to me, and I subconsciously assumed the group was some Brazilian teenager and his retinue. One night while I was idly watching the Tonight Show (Carson), Clegg and his band appeared as the musical guest. Peering suspiciously at the screen, I mumbled to Georgia, "This band is just ripping off Juluka!" When the white lead singer and a black percussionist started doing a tribal dance that involved kicking their feet high above their heads, just like the cover of *Scatterlings*, I realized that I had missed an important detail. Fetching the two Juluka albums out of the other room confirmed that Johnny Clegg was in Juluka, and then things started to make sense. After the departure of Siphos Mchunu, the creative other-half of Juluka, Clegg apparently found some new musical partners and started again. *Cruel, Crazy, Beautiful World* is actually their third album, *Third World Child* and *Shadow Man* having come out while I wasn't paying attention.

This incarnation of Clegg's cross-cultural enterprise is much more heavily weighted towards the slick, commercial Western side of Juluka's sound than even *Stand Your Ground*, and this is why I haven't yet got around to buying the two albums I missed. On the other hand, this album really is excellent, and the music is even catchier and more addictive than Juluka's, which was already pretty accessible stuff. The range of themes and feels is similar to, but even wider than, *Scatterlings*, with songs at the African extreme, like "Moliva", about Clegg remarrying his wife in a traditional Zulu ceremony in Natal, and "Vezandlebe", a cheerful song about sibling rivalry, and at the other extreme songs like "Jericho" and "Warsaw 1943" that have nothing to do with Africa. "Warsaw 1943" is a haunting song about a tortured political prisoner who gives the name of his best friend not to betray him but out of desperate loneliness. "I never betrayed you, and I never betrayed the revolution, / I just didn't want to die alone."

Musically, the flute is no longer a standard instrument, and extra horns and lots of keyboards (both synthesizers and samplers) take its place. There are plenty of harmonies, but they, too, tend to have a more conventional Western feel than Juluka's did. Clegg and producer Hilton Rosenthal are the only participants left over from *Scatterlings* (although drummer Derek De

Beer played on *Stand Your Ground*) so this makes sense. This band is certainly very Westernized compared to Juluka, but all things considered, the transition has worked out pretty well. This is first and foremost music to make you feel good. It will try, sneakily, to get you thinking along the way, but dance first, think second.

# The Border

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from the Thompsons' song "When I Get to the Border"

## Soundtrack

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Richard Thompson: "1952 Vincent Black Lightning"  
Simon and Garfunkel: "The Sounds of Silence" (second version)  
Cat Stevens: "Don't Be Shy"  
Gordon Lightfoot: "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald"  
Joan Armatrading: "(I Love It When You) Call Me Names"  
Beth Nielsen Chapman: "Emily"  
Richard Shindell: "Are You Happy Now?"  
Suzanne Vega: "The Queen and the Soldier"  
Melissa Etheridge: "No Souvenirs"  
Thin White Rope: "The Ruby Sea"

## Introduction

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My parents met folksinging, and my earliest musical memories are of folk music, of the Weavers, Woody Guthrie and the Kingston Trio. I might have rebelled against this music (and I guess I did for a while), but about the time I started actually buying records of my own my mother was going through a particularly abominable Neil Diamond/Anne Murray/Johnny Mathis/John Denver/Dan Fogelberg phase, and I think this stuff focused my repugnance, sparing folk music the brunt of my youthful antipathy. Even so, this ends up being the chapter farthest removed from my normal sources of new music information, and so is the one in which I feel, on the whole, least well-informed. This is reflected in the fact that my selections from the careers of many of these artists are much more random and incomplete than in other chapters. I have come upon this place by winding ways, as some quote that I can't locate goes.

Anyway, here in the creaking old late-twenties, traces of the folk influences I grew up on have crept back into my record collection in enough strength to earn themselves their own chapter. My parents will probably laugh when they see what I've classified under and along with "folk", as the first few entries in the chapter are the only ones that date from their original folk days, but *all* of the music in this chapter has strong folk (or country, which is related) influences. There are a few artists who use pianos more than

guitars, but the musical spirit contained in my idea of folk music isn't linked to any one instrument. Ironically, as I've started to get into the *current* wave of folk performers, my parents' grudging purchase of a CD player has gotten *them* back into music as well, and so I find that *I'm* introducing *them* to folk-singers, which makes a nice symmetry. (Though I still can't believe they'd never heard of Fairport Convention...)

Perhaps the most important characteristic this chapter centers around is a straightforwardness of presentation. Most of these people are storytellers first, not "bands". It is not coincidental that so many of the artists in this chapter go by their own names, rather than constructing an identity as a musical group. Contrast this with the previous three chapters, where aside from a handful of ex-band members who went on to go by their names, like Ozzy, Dio and Jello Biafra, about the only performer not to go by a band name was Billy Bragg, who I could easily have fit into *this* chapter if I'd wanted to. The significance of this, I think, has something to do with the way rock music attempts to be *larger than* ordinary life, while folk music attempts to be *ordinary* life. Slayer and Megadeth and U2 and the Sex Pistols are all about much more than a person or a few people making music; the bands are themselves works of art, as much as are their individual songs and albums. Folk music strips away, for the most part, that layer of construct, and attempts to make the songs and, to a lesser extent, the albums, the only works of art, the performers almost invisible. Of course, a folk musician's persona is, technically, as much of a thing in itself as a heavy metal band's, but for most folk musicians their artistic presence is an illusion of transparency.

By the end of this chapter, most of the things I just said cease to apply. Folk and country lead inexorably to folk-rock and country-rock, and the influx of rock methods and values dilutes the personal, storyteller elements. This dilution happens gradually, though, and almost painlessly, so grit your teeth a little and you should be fine.

## Simon and Garfunkel

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### *Wednesday Morning, 3am, 1964 CD*

This is almost certainly the only true old-style folk-music album that I have. My old vinyl copy even *looks* like a folk record; nobody makes album covers like this anymore. The "360 Sound" stamp, the "exciting new sounds in the folk tradition" subtitle, the sincere album notes by Art on the back, the note above the song list reading "The selections are followed by their publishers

and timings", all these things are now relics of a vanished, simpler and far more naïve age when the music business was a much smaller place and even Columbia Records was just a place "downtown".

The music has the same feel. Most songs simply feature the two of them singing and playing acoustic guitars. More than half of the songs are folk standards like "You Can Tell the World", "Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream" and "Go Tell It on the Mountain", and even the five originals sound as if they have always existed, and have been sung by countless folksingers before these two.

My love for Simon and Garfunkel, like most people's, is for the folk-rock synthesis that comes into being on their second album, so for me this album is of mostly historical interest. The high point is the original version of "The Sounds of Silence", with just voice and guitar, showing the folk genesis of what would, in its second life, become for me the definitive folk-rock song, and the evolutionary ancestor of much of the music I like today.

#### *Sounds of Silence, 1965 CD*

The redone version of "The Sounds of Silence" that opens this second album is both awesome and painful. On the one hand, the addition of bass, electric guitar and drums to the sedate original transforms it into the potent announcement of a new style. On the other hand, it is excruciatingly obvious if you listen to the original version and this one back to back that the additional instrumentation has been grafted onto the first version with incomplete success, by somebody other than the duo themselves. The drummer covers up poorly for the irregular tempo of the original, and the electric guitar is even a little bit out of tune with Simon's original acoustic.

Nonetheless, there is a sense in which almost every kind of music I like today can be said to have descended from a combination of "The Sounds of Silence" and Black Sabbath's "Paranoid". These two, of course, come no doubt from some older precursors that I'm not aware of, but who cares? They are the soft and hard seeds, the melodic and the destructive urges in their primal states.

The rest of the album shows that whatever the historical origin of the remake of "The Sounds of Silence", Paul and Art had no trouble whatsoever switching gears to their newfound role. Ten of the eleven songs here are Simon originals. "Somewhere They Can't Find Me", "We've Got a Groovey Thing Goin'" and "I Am a Rock" do for real what "The Sounds of Silence" attempts. There are a few songs here that still hold to the guitar and voice structure of the first album, like the beautiful "April Come She

Will", but surrounded by fuller band arrangements, this becomes a conscious choice, not just a default style, and this makes the songs all the more powerful. In a historical note, "Leaves That Are Green"'s opening lines "I was 21 years when I wrote this song / I'm 22 now but I won't be for long" would later resurface in Billy Bragg's "A New England".

The album still feels *early*, but it is more like the ones to come than the one past.

#### *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme, 1966 CD*

The duo hit their stride with this third album. The idea of more-complex instrumentation is no longer new, and here Paul and Art seem in better control of the process. Every song on the album is a classic, from the pristine beauty of "Scarborough Fair/Canticle" to the hilarious romp "A Simple Desultory Philippic (Or How I Was Robert MacNamara'd Into Submission)". If you've been alive during the rock age, you've probably heard "Homeward Bound", "The Big Bright Green Pleasure Machine" and "The 59th Street Bridge Song (Feelin' Groovy)", and that's just the first half.

The second half is even better. "A Dangling Conversation", "Flowers Never Bend with the Rainfall" and "For Emily, Whenever I May Find Her" are gorgeous. "A Simple Desultory Phillipic" is one of the funniest, most bitingly satirical songs ever recorded.

The closing track, however, is to me the most awe-inspiring. Titled "7 O'Clock News/Silent Night", the song is just that: Paul and Art perform a slow, beautiful rendition of "Silent Night", while the evening news is read over it. The juxtaposition of the nightly rundown of murder, political turmoil, racial tensions and Lenny Bruce dying of a drug overdose with the ancient Christmas carol is more effective than any straight song about the subjects could possibly hope to be. It is also one of the only thoroughly conceptual tracks rock music has produced, though a few songs over the years have borrowed its technique of mixing spoken voice-overs with sung material. In fact, I did a project my senior year in college that featured me reading aloud from Allan Bloom's book *The Closing of the American Mind*, while a song I'd written attacking the book played, and a synchronized slide-show showed indecipherable fragments of what eventually, assembled, formed a picture of my father.

"7 O'Clock News/Silent Night" is a good deal more effective than my hopelessly cryptic performance.

#### *Bookends, 1968 CD*

*Bookends*, to me, slips a little, and comes up less coherent than *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme*. There are some great songs, of course, like "Mrs. Robinson" and "A Hazy Shade of Winter" (later covered by the

Bangles), and the others aren't anything to be ashamed of, but I must not have heard them as many times over the years as I have "Scarborough Fair" or "Bridge Over Troubled Water", because they don't resonate with me the same way.

The most important song here, to me, is "America", less for this version of it itself than for comparison with the awesome cover of it by Yes (and another less-significant, but still intriguing, rendition by Cactus World News).

I guess it says something that the two songs that stand out most for me, here, do so because other bands covered them later. Whether it says more about *me*, or the album, I won't try to determine.

### ***Bridge Over Troubled Water, 1970 CD***

Simon and Garfunkel's last album is my favorite. Anchored by the hits "Bridge Over Troubled Water", "Cecilia" and "The Boxer", this album goes from one wonderful, timeless song to another. "Bridge Over Troubled Water" itself is about as close to perfection as a rock song can get. Swelling strings, crashing cymbals, and Paul and Art's angelic voices combine with genuinely poetic lyrics to produce a song as huge as the duo's initial efforts were unassuming.

"El Condor Pasa", foreshadowing Paul Simon's later penchant for assimilating other cultures' musics, turns a Peruvian folk-melody into Western pop. "Cecilia" is a jubilant sing-along, with the timeless line "Making love in the afternoon with Cecilia / Up in my bedroom. / I got up to wash my face, / When I come back to bed / Someone's taken my place".

"Keep the Customer Satisfied", "The Boxer" and "The Only Living Boy in New York" form a sort of trilogy, though separated on the album. All three feel distinctly New York-ish, the second two set there and the first probably about a New Yorker's adventures elsewhere. They all tell of the difficulties of leading a *human* life amidst the impersonal turmoil of the country's most-urban city. And despite Simon's New York intellectual leanings, all three manage to generalize their experiences enough that they become not just songs about New York, but songs about "modern" life anywhere (as if the year I was three could be considered "modern"!).

"So Long, Frank Lloyd Wright" is this album's sardonic jab, and though it's much vaguer than "A Simple Desultory Phillipic", and thus a bit less satisfying as a put-down, it's a better song.

And Simon and Garfunkel go out somewhat the way they came in, singing someone else's song, the album closing "Bye Bye Love". Because the duo had split long before I was conscious of such things, I grew up assuming that they had existed for decades, pillars

of the musical world, not just for a brief five albums in six years. Even now, listening to all five albums together to write these reviews, it feels as if these selections are only a small sample of what must be a much greater body of work, and that Simon and Garfunkel are much more than two guys who sang a few dozen relatively simple songs that the shorter one wrote.

That's what I get for experiencing them in retrospect, I guess. I think this kind of delusion is why so many people maintain (at any point in history, mind you) that "they just don't write songs like they used to". The songs they "used to" write have become mythologized, and have taken on a certain unassailability solely through the effects of time and familiarity. It isn't that the songs written today are worse than the songs written "then", it's just that the songs written today aren't as *old* and entrenched as the ones written years ago. It's the same reason stodgy English professors can maintain, with a straight face, that a hack playwright from hundreds of years ago, whose overcontrived plots would be laughed out of a first-year fiction-writing course today, is the greatest literary genius to ever have lived. Age becomes quality. And anybody who doesn't think this is true in music had better be able to tell me the actual lyrics to "Louie Louie", and have a cogent explanation of why there aren't any Cliff Notes for it.

## **Paul Simon**

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### ***Graceland, 1986 CD***

Paul Simon, of course, being the one of the duo who actually wrote songs and played instruments and such, went on to have a long and successful career, still going as I write. I never found him as appealing on his own, with this one exception.

Juluka's earlier efforts notwithstanding, Paul Simon gets credit for introducing African music to the Western pop world. This album, made with the help of a number of African musicians, as well as the Everly Brothers, Adrian Belew, Linda Ronstadt and Los Lobos, incorporates African influences seamlessly into Simon's own literate folk-pop. Except for "Under African Skies", the lyrics have nothing to do with Africa, and I must admit that it seems extremely strange to have African musicians playing on a song about Elvis' estate. In the context of the whole album, though, "Graceland" becomes separated from its connection to Elvis, and takes on a meaning closer to the word itself, a graceful world where the high close-harmony of the Gaza Sisters somehow makes perfect sense as accompaniment to a

song about the cocktail-party banter of the American intelligentsia.

For the fluency with which Simon accomplishes this merging of styles, and the airy bounce of the resulting songs, I consider this album a Masterpiece. As I've said in other contexts, "Masterpiece" doesn't necessarily mean that I *like* it, but rather that I feel the album is original enough, and significant enough in the history of music, that even if you don't like it, without it your understanding of pop music as a whole will be incomplete.

That said, most of the masterpieces that I *own*, I like, and I certainly like this one. It has had enough airplay since its release that I don't find myself needing to listen to it very often, but when "You Can Call Me Al" and "Diamonds in the Soles of Her Shoes" have finally faded out of mass consciousness, this record will be sitting here in its crate, waiting to remind me that, every once in a while, the public shows a brief, probably accidental trace of good taste.

## Cat Stevens

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### *Footsteps in the Dark*, 1984 CD

Cat Stevens earned himself a permanent place on most thinking people's shit lists by coming out, ludicrously, in support of the Islamic assassination order placed on *Satanic Verses* author Salman Rushdie. 10,000 Maniacs actually had their album *In My Tribe* reprinted without their cover of Stevens' "Peace Train", to avoid associating with the man, who had converted to Islam in 1977, changing his name to Yusuf Islam and leaving the music business.

Years before any of this, however, he made some very nice, quiet little songs, and I bought this record. It collects tracks from *Teaser and the Firecat*, *Izitso*, *Mona Bone Jackson*, *Tea for the Tillerman*, *Back to Earth*, *Foreigner*, *Catch Bull at Four*, and two songs from the soundtrack to *Harold and Maude*, "If You Want to Sing Out, Sing Out" and "Don't Be Shy".

The *Harold and Maude* soundtrack is, in fact, the reason for Stevens' presence in my life. My parents had a couple of his albums, but they never meant very much to me. *Harold and Maude*, which may be my favorite movie, changed everything. The film features a number of Cat Stevens songs, but more than that, it does the best job I've ever seen of incorporating incidental songs into the flow of a film. The songs are inextricably intertwined in the fabric of the movie, and I can neither conceive of seeing the film without them, nor hear them without seeing the movie in my mind.

Perversely, the soundtrack was *not* released as an album, and though several of the songs in the movie are from Stevens' previous albums, the two here exist nowhere else, which explains why I have this album, in particular. It's a good record, but it's an amazing film. If you haven't seen it, put the book down and go rent it.

## Gordon Lightfoot

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### *Sundown*, 1974 CD

Another prolific folksinger with a token representation in my collection, Gordon Lightfoot is someone who, like Simon and Garfunkel and Cat Stevens, I inherited from my parents (not that they're dead, or anything). He's a solid songwriter, and never having been an instrumental purist, he uses a full band on this album, complete with strings and occasional Moog synthesizers. Lightfoot's warm voice and friendly guitar round out a sound that manages to survive the Seventies intact enough that I can listen to it without the phrase "period piece" caroming around the inside of my skull like a poorly but forcefully hit racquetball. The overall effect is close enough to such mainstream performers as Gerry Rafferty and Bob Seeger that folk novices should find Lightfoot quite accessible. The strength of the songs and Lightfoot's own agreeable presence, on the other hand, should keep hardened folkies from writing the album off as overly commercial. In a way this is the most successful merging of the two styles, as opposed to folk-flavored pop or pop-flavored folk.

"Sundown" and "Carefree Highway" are the two best-known songs here. Amiable, gentle, relaxed and charming, these are perfect campfire sing-along songs, folk-songs in the most to-be-sung-by-folks sense. "The Watchman's Gone" and "Circle of Steel" are just as catchy, and the album as a whole is solid enough that it's worth starting here instead of with a greatest hits album.

### *Summertime Dream*, 1976 CD

I like *Summertime Dream* slightly less, as an album, than *Sundown*. It's absolutely essential, however, for it contains the epic that secures Gordon Lightfoot a high place in my cosmos: "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald". A narrative of the sinking of an ore carrier in Lake Superior in 1975, this song isn't really very long by today's standards, but it feels like it goes on forever. It's one of the only songs I've ever been tempted to memorize the words to just so I could trot them out at parties. The music is nice, but it's



simple and its repetitive; the narrative is the song's focus, and in that sense this is a folk song of the truest sort. There's no chorus, no tempo shifts, no drum solos. The few instrumental breaks exist solely as pauses in the narrative, not departures from it. To call it a song even misses the point: It is a good story set to good music.

There are enough other good songs to support the album. "Race Among the Ruins", "I'd Do It Again", "Never Too Close" and "Summertime Dream" are upbeat songs similar in feel to "Sundown" or "Carefree Highway". "I'm Not Supposed to Care", "Protocol" and "Spanish Moss" are slower, with nice Travis-picked guitar. They aren't what sticks in my head after listening to the record, though. "The legend lives on, from the Chippewa on down, / Of the big lake they called Gitche Gumee..."

## Bruce Cockburn

### *Stealing Fire*, 1984 CD

Next is another Canadian songwriter with folk leanings and a extensive back-catalog quite poorly represented here. I suppose I'd heard "Wonderings Where the Lions Are", an early Cockburn hit, before this album came out, but I'd certainly never connected the name with anything until the strident left-wing retribution anthem "If I Had a Rocket Launcher" appeared. It was kind of interesting, I thought, but a bit gimmicky. "Lovers in a Dangerous Time", on the other hand, wasn't gimmicky at all, just a great, catchy song, and I went out and bought the album.

Circa 1984, Bruce Cockburn is a intently political left-wing activist and a deft guitarist, not afraid to use keyboards and other technological elements to enhance the atmosphere of this songs. Or, to put it the other way around, he is a pop songwriter not afraid to use acoustic guitar to give his songs a folky feel that enhances their political credibility. This album uses the instrumentation of 1984 to the same good, but not dated, effect as Gordon Lightfoot's *Sundown* used that of a decade earlier.

Whichever way, *Stealing Fire* is a smooth and accomplished album. The first few songs, actually, are not particularly political. "Lovers in a Dangerous Time", "Sahara Gold" and "Making Contact" are basically relationship songs, though the "dangerous time" that forms the backdrop of "Lovers" hints at a political awareness that gives it an added dimension. "Maybe the Poet" starts out as if it is going to be a denunciation of homophobia, but it turns out to be a literary song about the value of poets' insights.

"Peggy's Kitchen Wall" starts the topical section, a little song about random urban violence, and where stray bullets ended up. "To Raise the Morning Star", which follows, is about, vaguely, the value of diversity. "Nicaragua", written in Managua, is a poignant portrait of the strife-torn country. "The kid who guards Fonseca's tomb / Cradles a beat-up submachine gun- / At age fifteen he's a veteran of four years of war". "If I Had a Rocket Launcher", written in Mexico, is a startling expression of desperate frustration, saying "If I had a rocket launcher...I'd make somebody pay." Make who pay? Well, Bruce doesn't know, and neither does anybody else, but this impotent fury is about all that one gets from seeing the victims of endless conflicts, famine, overpopulation and other global realities whose causes are too insidious to eradicate, and often too complicated to fully understand, and it's refreshing to hear someone, especially someone as meticulously politically-correct as Bruce Cockburn, break down and admit to honest, undirected rage.

Cockburn calms down again for the finale, "Dust and Diesel", which is another tableau of Central American life. "Smiling girl directing traffic, / .45 strapped over cotton print dress". Cockburn definitely runs the risk of his conscientiousness being cloying (the album's liner notes are printed in English on one side of the sleeve, and French on the other, for example), but the release offered by "If I Had a Rocket Launcher", the classic rock melody of "Lovers in a Dangerous Time", and the quality of observation in "Nicaragua" and "Dust and Diesel" rescue him for me.

### *World of Wonders*, 1986 LP

The next album is both more and less to my taste. On the one hand, the music is improved, with crackling bass and spacious keyboards giving songs like "Call It Democracy" and "World of Wonders" a bigger, more impressive sonic presence than anything on *Stealing Fire*. On the other hand, the intricate poetic lyrics are just too convoluted and conscious here, with "Lily of the Midnight Sky", "Berlin Tonight" and "Dancing in Paradise" almost unbearably precious. The taglines, letting us know what a seasoned world-traveler Cockburn is, and, I guess, meant to establish his credentials for writing about wherever he happens to be, bother me more on this album, where they cite Boulder, Berlin, Bridgenorth (wherever that is), Santiago and Jamaica, than the ones from a single trip through Latin America did on the previous record.

In another life, what strikes me here as overwrought might seem utterly brilliant, so your experience may definitely vary, but this album downgraded Bruce Cockburn from buy to hold for me.

## Rumors of the Big Wave

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### *Burning Times*, 1993 CD

This is another album, like Mark Isham's (see Appendix A), which I bought because of an interesting write-up in *Electronic Musician*. I should learn that as much as I like that magazine, their musical tastes aren't quite mine. The thing about Rumors of the Big Wave that sounded intriguing was that they were an eco- and politically-conscious rock band with a full-time electric cellist. This is undeniably true; they play rock music, they are conscious of many things, ecology and politics very much among them, and they have cellist Jami Sieber.

The bad news, from my perspective at least, is that the balance of elements makes Rumors of the Big Wave feel overwhelmingly to me like a band who wishes they were Bruce Cockburn, and who wishes Bruce was doing even *more* of what I find annoying about his music. Lead vocalist (and primary songwriter) Charlie Murphy's singing, especially his frequent spoken interludes, are *very* Cockburn-like. The band's music isn't quite as folky as Cockburn's, but it definitely inhabits the same general vicinity of smooth world-aware semi-new-age over-mellow studio-savvy soft-rock as *World of Wonders*.

Not *all* the songs are eco-political diatribes, by any means, but the ones that are are even balder than Cockburn's. "Burning Times", a Gaia-esque pro-witch epic, is filled with lyrics like "There were those who came to power through domination, / And they bonded in the worship of a dead man on a cross. / They sought control of the common people / By demanding allegiance to the Church of Rome, / And the Pope declared an Inquisition. / It was a war against the women whose power they feared; / In this Holocaust against the nature people / Nine million European women died." You may react differently, but to me these don't sound like *lyrics*. I don't hear any awareness of the *song* form, any acknowledgment that this is a *musical* communication medium, and this makes me feel like the music has been simply grafted onto an unrelated musical background, and that bothers me. The frequent PC reference-dropping throughout the album ("there's a hole in the sky" in "Nightmare", "Black smoke in the Brazilian sky" in "The Only Green World", "netted fish" in "Echo of a Scream") only serves to add to the impression that the admittedly pleasant music Rumors of the Big Wave plays is merely sugar-coating to ease the passage of their polemical pills.

This might have worked for me if the album was only a little different in some key way. If the political

songs were a bit more sophisticated in their delivery, if the non-political songs didn't seem like filler, or if the music was *dynamic*, rather than simply agreeable (Sieber's cello might as well be a synth, I was disappointed to discover), then I might have liked this album quite a bit. Accordingly, if your impression differs from mine in one of these respects, perhaps *you'll* really like it.

## Gentlemen Without Weapons

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### *Transmissions*, 1988 LP

Gentlemen Without Weapons are probably the *definitive* example of a band who attempt to garner support by allying themselves with worthwhile global causes, rather than making interesting music. The gimmick on this album (which a cover-sticker heralds as "The first rock n' roll New Age record") is that all the sounds on it are from "natural" sources, recorded on location "around the world", and assembled into musical form using a host of samplers. The participation of veteran producer Vic Coppersmith-Heaven assures a measure of musical credibility, and the liner notes offer a one-stop course in politically-correct global issues, with explanations of Endangered Species, Rain Forests, Soil, The Ozone Layer, Greenhouse Effect, Lead, Water Supplies, Acid Rain, Pesticides, Nuclear Waste and Cost of Arms. The song lyrics are much less interesting than these short issue summaries, and mostly stick to wholesome eco-platitudes like "Unconditional love, planet earth" and "Earth love, / Think about future generations". The credits for each song are careful to cite the participation, via sampling, of such animal luminaries as humpback whales, dolphins, Bali birds, howler monkeys, hornbills, chimpanzees, fish eagles, hoot owls, peacocks, indrises and termites.

The damning thing about this record, though, is none of that earthy excess, but rather the fact that all these samples and sounds and world-representative elements are simply channeled into completely bland, unremarkable Western pop music with only the thinnest veneer of world-music spice. Listening to this album without examining the credits, you'd have no reason to suspect that the bulk of the music wasn't the usual bank of Korg M1 patches. The music sounds like synthesizers and the rhythms are constructed out of sounds that resemble drums. There are lots of sound effects, but that's not all *that* unusual. The band may have traveled all over the globe gathering the ingredients for this album, but the end product tastes remarkably like spam. If the idea of spam made from

tree bark, crickets and owl features appeals to you, here's your record. To me, I'm afraid, spam is spam.

## Richard and Linda Thompson

### *I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight*, 1974 CD

Richard Thompson was in the original Celtic folk-rock band, Fairport Convention, and had a solo album or two before teaming up with (and marrying) Linda, and releasing this brilliantly bleak duo-debut. This was apparently the *happy* period in their personal lives, but you'd never know it from the anguished, exhausted tone of these songs.

Both of their voices seem rather plain at first listen, with obvious traces of British accents. Richard's guitar seems to hang forever on the verge of plummeting out of tune, and it's startling even for 1974 how cheap its timbre seems. The songs are slow and halting, as if the music is dragging a wounded leg behind it. Linda sounds like she's killing time until the poison takes effect, and Richard sounds only slightly more enthusiastic. The songs revolve around desperation, bitterness, loss and futility. Even the jaunty "The Little Beggar Girl" seems to invest its musical cheer with virulent sarcastic venom, as if *daring* you to crack a smile.

That all sounds *bad*, but I assure you it isn't. As I listened to this album, my first impression was sapped from below, its thin facade holding steady right up until I suddenly discovered that I'd gone from unmoved to agape without even noticing. For all their superficial lethargy, the Thompsons degree of control over their performances is actually awesome. Richard's guitar style is like folk seen in a fun-house mirror that has Picasso's doomed spirit imprisoned inside of it, friendly picking twisted and stretched into frightening nightmare shapes that nonetheless bear traces of their original selves. Neither singer is trying to assemble a résumé to get themselves into opera, but every couple lines or so they perform a little vocal pirouette that suddenly makes you aware that indifference has *nothing* to do with their presentation. Their harmony owes more to a bagpipe's drone than to Motown, but I *like* bagpipes, both in practice and in principle. When Richard and Linda sing together I can sense the stored electrical charge in the space between them as if it was crackling audibly.

The stories on *I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight* are definitely bleak, that much of the first impression is correct. There's not a cheerful moment on the whole album. "My dreams have withered and died", they sing. "There's nothing at the end of the rainbow. /

There's nothing to grow up for any more." The title track's frantic live-for-the-weekend aspirations are the height of ambition for the characters here. Like Raymond Carver short stories, though, the emotional portraits here are so vivid, so real, that I don't end up feeling depressed at all, only *moved*.

And impressed.

### *First Light*, 1978 CD

There are a couple records between *I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight* and *First Light* (and they actually *don't* have the word "light" in them). During that time, too, Richard converted to Sufism, and though *First Light* isn't oppressively religious (most of the religious lyrics could just as easily be interpreted as secular love songs, as several writers before me have noted), it is strongly affected by the conversion. The bleak narratives of lower-class subsistence that made *I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight* so powerful are nowhere to be found, here. The music, too, has a different tone. Where the earlier record was striking, and sometimes disconcertingly, spare, this album is smoother, fuller and more conventionally produced.

It's a shame, unfortunately. This is a nice album (Richard and Linda would be hard pressed to make a truly unpleasant one), but compared with *Bright Lights* or *Shoot Out the Lights* it is uninspired and uninteresting, closer to Fleetwood Mac than Richard's usual harrowing flair. I'm very glad this wasn't the *first* of Richard and Linda's albums that I got.

### *Shoot Out the Lights*, 1982 CD

There's another album between *First Light* and this, but *Shoot Out the Lights* is the last album that Richard and Linda did together. Recorded *before* their breakup, it could easily have been done during or after it from the tone of the album and the sinister cover shot (which finds Richard slouched on the floor in the corner of a shabby room with Linda's picture askew on the wall, illuminated by a single bare light bulb).

If you didn't know, and didn't check the dates, there'd be nothing to keep you from believing that this album was the immediate follow-up to *I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight*. The lyrical tone is similar (though these songs are more personal for the most part than the set on *Bright Lights*), the music is pared back to something like *Bright Lights'* economy, and the emotional claws come out of their sheaths as sharp as ever. With "Walking on a Wire", "Shoot Out the Lights", "Did She Jump" and "Wall of Death", this album has almost as many Thompson classics as the earlier one. The copy of this that I bought had a big sticker reminding potential buyers that the album was on Rolling Stone's top-ten for the entire decade of the

Eighties. That's a reasonable thing to say about it, even though I doubt it would make *my* 1980's top ten. I'd like it more, I think, if it *didn't* remind me of *Bright Lights* so much, because I end up *preferring* the earlier album, but I'm sure many people would say the same thing with the names reversed.

In the end it's a toss up, I think. Get one or the other, get both, it makes little difference. Richard Thompson almost never seems to learn any new tricks, but this is because he seems to have known them all along.

## Richard Thompson

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### *Across a Crowded Room*, 1985 CD

In the Simon and Garfunkel analogy, Richard Thompson is definitely Paul and Linda is Art. She went on the make one solo album and then I don't know what happened to her. Richard went on to have a brilliant career that establishes him as one of the greatest living songwriters.

*Across a Crowded Room* is his third post-breakup solo album, after *Hand of Kindness* and the acoustic live album *Small Town Romance*, which he eventually retracted. At this point he seems to have almost completely recovered from the breakup, and adjusted his writing and arrangements to being a solo artist, not part of a duo. Without Linda around, Richard is both allowed and forced to expand his own vocal range, which he does with enviable grace. I've often said that if I had to trade voices with someone, it would be with Ronnie James Dio, but the last time I said that Georgia cocked her head at me and said "What about Richard Thompson?". "Oh yeah," I said. "Good point." Dio has the power of jet engines, but Richard's voice is fascinatingly expressive, working confidently with its range as if notes outside of it simply don't exist. Like his guitar playing, his singing has the ability to circle around notes, describing them without actually having to stomp through the middle of them, and his mastery of phrasing is remarkable. I swear sometimes his songs de-tune a quarter-tone somewhere in the middle, every instrument staying in perfect tune with each other as they dive, but probably that's merely an aural illusion ("aurallusion"?).

The main change from Richard and Linda's style to Richard's on his own is that he trades most of their stark bleakness for a cynicism that at times borders on gleeful, but for the most part is as *dark* as their duo work in its own way. This is a smart transition, as without Linda's voice the rundown tales of defeat wouldn't have nearly as much impact. Richard is more

than capable of biting wit, however, and the transition makes sense in terms of his public persona, as well (older, wiser, grouchier, etc.).

*Across a Crowded Room* is also substantially more upbeat and rocking than any of the R&L albums that I have. "Fire in the Engine Room" and "Little Blue Number" are bona-fide rock and roll songs, and "I Ain't Going to Drag My Feet No More" is close, too. Only "When the Spell is Broken" really tries to reproduce the slow, haunting grace of "Walking on a Wire" or "Calvary Cross", and even it doesn't stay in character all the way through. This may make the album *more* palatable to you, but it leads to my being a little disappointed with it. I covet the moments of *I Want to See the Bright Lights* where chills run up my spine from the intensity of the songs' restraint, the desperation held barely in check, the fractured, tormented hair-trigger souls, and though this album is infectious, that's not enough yet to make it seem like a victory to me.

### *Amnesia*, 1988 CD

I skip one more (*Daring Adventures*) and then tune in to stay with *Amnesia*. This was not the first Richard Thompson album I actually bought, but it was the one that got me interested in him. "Turning of the Tide" got Boston airplay, and the reviews that started cropping up suggesting that Thompson was actually the greatest living guitar player interested me greatly, since I was painfully in need of someone to defend myself against Clapton fanatics with. For a while someone left their copy lying around the Harvard Lampoon Castle, and I'd put it on to play pool to, and was completely into it. Eventually, like everything in the Castle, it got smashed and covered with lobster butter (and not necessarily in that order, either), and I didn't hear it for a while. Some time later I bought a copy on CD, and it was like being reunited with an old friend who turns out to be even more fun than you remembered. I can't decide which is more incredible about *Amnesia*, the individual songs, the *variety* of songs, the lyrical acuity, the musical muscle, the production or the liner photo of Thompson playing a chainsaw.

My favorite song here is the invigorating anti-American anthem "Yankee, Go Home". The percolating organ and jangling mandolin contrast intriguingly with the unflappable rhythm section, and Richard's vocal melody provides a killer hook, to which he puts scathing comments like "My girlfriend still won't talk to me / Since she met with a sailor from the land of the free. / I'm tired of being alone. / Yankee, go home." I also particularly like the dodge of listing

"Coca-Cola" as "vodka-cola" in the printed lyrics, to get around having to put copyright notices on it.

"Turning of the Tide", "Reckless Kind", "Jerusalem on the Jukebox" and "Don't Tempt Me" are in the same musical vein as "Yankee, Go Home", limber rock songs with just enough folk and Celtic flavor to keep them unmistakably Thompson's. "Don't Tempt Me", a ragingly incoherent bluster, is hilarious, especially when the singer points out menacingly that "I've got friends, mean sons, / They've got knives, chains, guns, / Gas, grenades, knuckle-dusters, / Lazy Susans, Blockbusters." One of the many appealing things about Richard Thompson is that he's *smart*, and doesn't believe that intelligence and rock music are incompatible in the least. His intelligence is evident in his music, just as much as his lyrics, actually, and when people call him the greatest living guitarist, it has at least as much to do with the fact that he has the ability to invent his own guitar style, rather than simply perfecting somebody else's, as it does with his technical ability.

Around the rock songs are a few other types. "Gypsy Love Songs" and "Pharaoh" have eerie Arabic overtones, perhaps left over from Richard's serious Islamic phase. "I Still Dream" and "Can't Win" are slower and softer, closer to traditional folk. Perhaps the most striking, though, is "Waltzing's for Dreamers", a beautiful and painful tune that would have fit in just fine on *I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight*. Richard's voice and guitar are accompanied only by Danny Thompson's double bass (at least, I think it's him) and Aly Bain's fiddle, and at times I can almost hear Linda's ghost inhaling to chime in on harmony, only she never does. Even without her, though, Richard manages a near-mystical rapture. The fact that this album can move from "Yankee Go Home" to "Waltzing's for Dreamers" with only "Can't Win" in between, *without* seeming to come apart, is the hallmark of a patently first-rate work.

### *Rumor and Sigh*, 1991 CD

*Rumor and Sigh* is, naturally, even better than *Amnesia*. Richard is so firmly in control of his music at this point that it's almost painful to sit still for this album. Producer (and keyboardist) Mitchell Froom is a perfect foil for him, and this whole album just *sounds* amazing.

The centerpiece this time is the simple guitar and vocal story-song "1952 Vincent Black Lightning", about a rogue's motorcycle and his red-haired girlfriend. If not for the detail that British motorbikes are a relatively recent invention, this could be a hundreds-of-years-old traditional song, this the millionth rendition, pub patrons gathered round with stout ales on the thick oak

tables in front of them, watching the lamplight flicker across the pipe-smoke-blackened rafters as the bearded old guitarist spun out the familiar tale of their meeting ("Red hair and black leather, my favourite colour scheme"), connection ("Said James to Red Molly, 'Here's a ring for your right hand'"), tragedy ("For they've taken young James Adie for armed robbery. / Shotgun blast hit his chest, / Left nothing inside."), and resolution ("I see Angels on Ariels in leather and chrome / Swooping down from heaven to carry me home." / He gave her one last kiss and died / And he gave her his Vincent to ride."). It may well be the perfect modern folk song.

The rest of the material on *Rumor and Sigh* spans an even wider range than *Amnesia*. There are three straight ahead rock songs, "Read About Love", "I Feel So Good" and "Keep Your Distance", which are in the vein of "Turning of the Tide" and "Reckless Kind". There's one with a Egyptian flair like "Pharaoh", "Backlash Love Affair". There are a couple slower ones, "I Misunderstood" and "Mystery Wind", which remind me of "Can't Win" and "I Still Dream". "Grey Walls" and "You Dream Too Much" throw in a dose of Celtic reel, "Mother Knows Best" adds some rockabilly stomp, and "Why Must I Plead" and "God Loves a Drunk" are two more old-style slow songs like "Waltzing's for Dreamers".

That's already more songs than *Amnesia* had on it, so Richard tosses in a couple of hilarious throw-aways, "Don't Sit on my Jimmy Shands" (a plea for the safety of some valued 78s!) and "Psycho Street". This last track, which concludes the record, alternates the jokey chorus with several bizarre koan-like spoken vignettes that make me wonder whether Richard has been listening to Laurie Anderson records. The last one is my favorite: "A thoughtful woman sends her best friend a parcel. Inside, it says, is a free sample, Full Body Beauty Treatment, but really it contains acids and chemicals. When her friend tries it, her hair falls out, her face is wrinkled and her body scarred. The thoughtful woman turns to her husband and winks, and says, 'Pre-emptive strike...'"

If you didn't like *Amnesia*, I don't see why you'd like this one, particularly, either, unless it's that it isn't quite as dominated by the more-conventional rock songs. If you *did* like it, I'd have to guess that you'll like this one more. If you aren't familiar with Richard Thompson at all, this is a fine place to start, as *Rumor and Sigh* is effectively a nicely representative cross-section of many of Richard Thompson's redeeming features.

### *Watching the Dark*, 1993 3CD

Then again, if you don't mind spending money, here's a breathtaking box that is *literally* a cross-section of Richard Thompson's long and impressive career so far. Three discs, 47 tracks, 217 minutes, this shared my compilation/reissue-of-the-year honors with Game Theory's *Distortion of Glory* in 1993.

There are exactly two annoying things about this box, and I'll go ahead and tell them to you right up front. First, the live version of "Can't Win" that is the second track in the whole set is *way* too long and monotonous for me, and it's unfortunate that the thing has such a poor beginning. Second, although songs are clumped together by period, the period clumps are *not* in chronological order. This means that you get Richard's career in the order 1987-1988, 1969-1970, 1981-1982, 1978-1980, 1990-1992, 1974-1975, 1985-1986, 1972-1973, 1983-1984. The fact that the periods span three discs makes it that much more arduous to program the proper order. Inconsiderate. I'm sure they had reasons, but whatever they were, they were wrong.

Those are the *only* bad things I can think of to say about this box, though. It is comprehensive enough for newcomers, and has enough live and previously-unreleased material to make the most dedicated fans happy. Here is the selection by album:

from Fairport Convention's *Unhalfbricking* (1969): "Genesis Hall" and a long alternate version of "A Sailor's Life" (and a new mix of the 1970 single "Now Be Thankful")

from *Henry the Human Fly!* (1972): "Nobody's Wedding", "The Poor Ditching Boy" and "Twisted"

from *I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight* (1973): "Withered and Died", "The Great Valerio" and a post-Linda live version of "Calvary Cross"

from *Hokey Pokey* (1974): "Old Man Inside a Young Man", "Never Again", "Hokey Pokey" and a live version of "A Heart Needs a Home"

from *Pour Down Like Silver* (1975): "Jet Plane in a Rocking Chair", "The Dimming of the Day", a new remix of "Beat the Retreat" and a version of "For Shame of Doing Wrong" from the unreleased Gerry Rafferty/Hugh Murphy-produced sessions that were originally intended to become *Shoot Out the Lights*

from *First Light* (1976): "Strange Affair"

from *Sunnyvista* (1979): "Borrowed Time"

from *Strict Tempo* (1981): "The Knife-Edge"

from *Shoot Out the Lights* (1982): "A Man in Need", "Walking on a Wire", "Wall of Death", the Rafferty-sessions version of "Back Street Slide" and a post-Linda live version of "Shoot Out the Lights"

from *Hand of Kindness* (1983): "Hand of Kindness", "Two Left Feet", the Rafferty-sessions version of "The Wrong Heartbeat" and live versions of "Devonside"

and "Tear-Stained Letter" (the latter with Shawn Colvin on backing vocals!)

from *Small Town Romance* (1984): "Small Town Romance"

from *Across a Crowded Room* (1985): "Walking Through a Wasted Land" and live versions of "When the Spell is Broken", "Little Blue Number" and "I Ain't Going to Drag My Feet No More"

from *Daring Adventures* (1986): live versions of "Jennie" and "Al Bowlly's In Heaven"

from French, Frith, Kaiser, Thompson's *Live, Love, Larf & Loaf* (1987): "Bird in God's Garden/Lost and Found"

from *Amnesia* (1988): "Waltzing's for Dreamers", "I Still Dream" and a live version of "Can't Win"

from *Rumor and Sigh* (1991): "Keep Your Distance"

and from no album at all: "Shepherd's March/Maggie Cameron" (live, 1982), "Crash the Party" (live, 1988), "From Galway to Graceland" (live, 1990), "Bogie's Bonnie Belle" (live, 1990), "Poor Wee Jockey Clarke" (live, 1992)

The only album not represented, then, is the b-sides/outtakes album (*Guitar, Vocal*).

For the newcomer, this is an excellent selection. *Rumor and Sigh* is under-represented, of course, but that's fine, as you'll want to buy it right away anyway. I might have picked a few different tracks from the albums I'm familiar with (I would *certainly* have included "Yankee, Go Home" from *Amnesia*, and I'd have tried to squeeze in "When I Get to the Border", from *I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight*), but this is quibbling. The albums I don't have I can't really tell you much about how appropriate the selection here is, but I can say that I *like* the songs they picked. The Fairport Convention and French, Frith, Kaiser, Thompson tracks are nice inclusions, too, to round out the picture of Thompson as an artist.

For the fan, this box is completely essential. The live versions are almost all good, and the ones that are just Richard and his guitar (seven: "Small Town Romance", "Shepherd's March/Maggie Cameron", "From Galway to Graceland", "Bogie's Bonnie Belle", "Poor Wee Jockey Clarke", "Devonside" and "Jennie") are phenomenal. "From Galway to Graceland" in particular may even be better than "1952 Vincent Black Lightning". The three songs from the never-released sessions with Gerry Rafferty and Hugh Murphy are a joy to finally hear. The booklet is also superb, with a detailed biography and meticulously detailed track credits. The only downside is that hearing all the solo live versions now makes me wish that I'd bought a copy of *Small Town Romance* before Richard had it deleted. I could listen to him just sit, play and sing for hours and hours and hours.

## various

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### *The World is a Wonderful Place, 1993 CD*

*Watching the Dark* announced two Richard Thompson tribute albums, neither of which had actually appeared at the time. The first to see daylight was this Green Linnet compilation of largely obscure British artists. This one made my best *various-artists* compilation section in my 1993 year-end write-up. It's a rare compilation that can actually stand up on its own as an album; mostly I find that liking several isolated tracks is about the best I can do with compilations.

Stipulate that all the songs be ones written by Richard Thompson, though, and recruit a group of artists which such obvious reverence for the material, and you get something quite special. The general mood of the album is quiet and moving, with most participants taking quiet folky approaches to their chosen songs. There are many stand-outs, like Christine Collister's ethereal version of "How Will I Ever Be Simple Again" (she sings backup on several of Richard's albums), Marvin Etzioni's strange-instrument version of "It Don't Cost Much", Martin and Jessica Simpson's uncannily faithful "Down Where the Drunkards Roll", Victoria Williams' nasal "Reckless Kind", Ron Kavana's bizarre talking-over-toy-keyboards rendition of "I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight", Men and Volts' garage-rock "Love Is Bad for Business", Gregson, Hewerdine, Reader's multi-vocaled "Dimming of the Day" (Clive Gregson used to sing backup along with Christine Collister), and Plainsong's brilliant four-voiced a cappella version of "Galway to Graceland".

The ones I didn't mention are merely excellent.

Track 13, shiftily omitted from the back-cover and the liner notes, is actually a Richard and Linda original, called "The World is a Wonderful Place", which was recorded in 1973 for a musical of some sort, but never released. It's just Richard playing guitar, and Linda singing, and so of course it's chilling, gorgeous, and would make an album of cereal commercials worth its price.

## Fleetwood Mac

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### *Rumours, 1977 LP*

Returning to the modern age, I used to get Fairport Convention confused with Fleetwood Mac, so it seems natural to do them next. Of course, I imagine that just about everybody in the free world who would care to probably already has this album. Even if you

don't, you've either heard "Second Hand News", "Dreams", "Don't Stop", "Go Your Own Way", "The Chain", "You Make Loving Fun" and "Gold Dust Woman", or you are completely oblivious. In fact, about the only thing you need to know about the album is that it *doesn't* have "Rhiannon".

The reason I'm bothering to talk about it, then, is to discuss how it relates to other artists in this chapter, using it as a point of reference.

If you like the interplay of male and female voices, Fleetwood Mac's sweet harmonies are sort of the flip side of the darker, often bitterer sound of Richard and Linda Thompson. If you like the soft-rock feel of Fleetwood Mac, but want something less dense and more straightforward, you might like Gordon Lightfoot. If you wish the group would lay off the instrumental flourishes and concentrate on their rich vocal harmonies, Knots and Crosses might please you. If you wish that they would play really really loud and fast, and scream like the world was either about to, or already, disintegrating around them, you might want to forget about this chapter entirely and go back to the part about Slayer.

If, on the other hand, you find Fleetwood Mac palatable, but overrated, and think them too saccharine, too clichéd, too bouncy and cheerful, or just too hairy, then don't necessarily give up on this chapter. Plenty of the artists here, though inhabiting in my view a nearby musical space, share few or none of these characteristics. In fact, come to think of it, this is about as cheerful and groovy as my collection gets. Hippies make me uneasy, I don't wear brown, and the most useful thing I can think to do with bell-bottoms is to soak them in gasoline and stuff in them in a VW bus just prior to tossing a match in and rolling it off a cliff.

But I like this album anyway.

## Joni Mitchell

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### *Wild Things Run Fast, 1982 LP*

We now begin an extended string of female singer/songwriters, for which Joni Mitchell is a sort of patron saint, so with her I'll start. I know Joni Mitchell is important, and I've liked other people's versions of her songs, like Judy Collins' "Both Sides Now", but I know essentially nothing about Joni herself. At some point, then, I bought an album of hers essentially at random, just so I'd have one. From reading record guides since then, I've determined that nobody thinks this is a particularly good example of her work, but at this point I have plenty to do keeping up with the music I know, let alone worrying too much about the

myriad important artists like Joni that are probably the focal point of somebody else's musical worldview, so this remains the only Joni Mitchell album I have.

Anyway, I mention this album only to say briefly what I think of it, so people who know Joni well can calibrate my taste against theirs. I find most of the music on this album pleasant, if unremarkable. Larry Klein's bass playing is my favorite element. Joni's voice I like okay on its own, but I don't like virtually any of the harmonies or backing vocals on this album (Lionel Ritchie?!). The title track is the only one that really sticks in my mind, and overall the album just makes me like Suzanne Vega and Beth Nielsen Chapman more.

## various

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### *Sweet Relief, 1993 CD*

Soul Asylum's "Summer of Drugs" is the highlight for me of this tribute/benefit album to/for Victoria Williams, who was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis in 1992, having no medical insurance at the time. I don't think I'm really a Victoria Williams fan, though, because I don't care for much of the rest of the album. Buffalo Tom's "Merry Go Round" I don't like nearly as well as I like their own songs, ditto for Michael Penn's version of "Weeds". Maria McKee's rendition of "Opelousas (Sweet Relief)" has a powerful gospel bite, but in the end the only other song besides Soul Asylum's that I feel strong affection for is Shudder to Think's blazing version of "Animal Wild", which actually led me to buy a Shudder to Think album.

## Suzanne Vega

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### *Suzanne Vega, 1985 CD*

If you take the punk component in Billy Bragg's punk/folk mixture and replace it with a little more folk and some American studio polish, and then change his sex, remove his thick accent, give him an acoustic guitar instead of an electric one, and replace his socialist political lyrics with some introspective poetry, he'd probably resent it. So might Suzanne Vega, because the result would tread squarely on her musical territory.

It's hard to say exactly why Billy and Suzanne remind me so much of each other. It isn't instrumentation, mood, text, rhythm or cover art. Suzanne Vega's music is quiet, flowing, her corps of backing musicians (including Frank Christian and

Mark Isham) staying out of the way but undeniably present. Her songs are personal but often oblique, their meanings entangled in webs of poetry, each word carefully selected and placed for a conscious effect. Her voice is waifish and soft, and at times her lyrics are nearly spoken. Underneath their differing presentations, though, there is something they hold in common, some songwriter's instinct for melody and song structure that a semester of music history in college evidently didn't equip me to describe effectively.

Or maybe it's just that for a long time I thought Bragg's "Like Soldiers Do" said "I saw the Queen as she raised your shield" (instead of "I saw the gleam as you raised your shield", which it really says), and Vega has a song here called "The Queen and the Soldier". Whatever the reason, my opinion of this album is greatly enhanced by the association.

That's not to say that the album can't stand on its own, mind you. "The Queen and the Soldier" is a great folk song not entirely unlike "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald". Vega's songs are peopled with characters, dialog, metaphor and allusion, and I bet if I looked hard enough I could find metonymy and synecdoche. I don't like the first and last songs on the album as much as the rest of it, but "Marlene on the Wall", "Small Blue Thing", "Undertow", "Some Journey" and "Knight Moves" are all exquisite, in a small, self-contained way.

### *Solitude Standing, 1987 CD*

Suzanne Vega's second album opens with a remarkable pair of songs. The first, an a cappella song called "Tom's Diner", has to be heard to be understood. The sense of implied rhythm that Suzanne seems to be singing *around*, sketching by negative sound, is vivid, and the lyrics are hilarious in their utter mundanity. The song is thoroughly inspired. It is followed by her breakthrough hit, "Luka", a catchy and, of course, thoughtful, pop song about the denial of child abuse, with backing vocals from Shawn Colvin, later to do quite well on her own.

Suzanne goes down from there, both on the album and in my life. I don't care for "Ironbound/Fancy Poultry", "In the Eye" or "Night Vision", for one. For the other, both "Tom's Diner" and "Luka" have been corrupted for me by things largely outside of the songs' control.

"Tom's Diner" was redone in 1990 by a "group" called DNA, who set a new record for missing the point by dubbing a hip-hop rhythm track onto a song whose whole charm derived from the *absence* of a rhythm track. The resulting abomination was a big hit, and



really makes me ill and angry, in a way that only the remake of "Pretty in Pink" prompts otherwise.

"Luka" was then tainted for me by the pointless cover of it by the Lemonheads, a band who seem to subsist on pointless covers.

So, at this point I got sick of Suzanne Vega. This is somewhat unfair to *Solitude Standing*, which is about as good, overall, as Suzanne's debut, but both Suzanne's voice and her relentlessly detached lyrics began to grate on my nerves, and I didn't listen to either of these records for a good long time.

### 99.9 F°, 1992 CD

Then, shortly after the release of 99.9 F°, Suzanne's fourth album (my anti-Vega phase having lasted through her third album, *Days of Open Hand*), I was in Buck-a-Book, comparing copies of *The Great Bean Cookbook* to pick the one with the least cover damage, when *Suzanne Vega* came on. As I browsed through the endless tables of 1984 NFL Yearbooks, *The World's Greatest Golf Courses* and copies of my ex-girlfriend Stacie's book *A Coed's Companion* (worth a dollar), the album played, and I began remembering what it was I once found so appealing about it. A day or two later, I was in a record store (a phrase that could be applied to any time in the last year or two), and picked up 99.9 F° in a wave of buying things that I'd heard good things about but hadn't heard (a wave that also netted me Lyle Lovett, Nanci Griffith, Mary Chapin-Carpenter, Julia Fordham, Nicky Holland and Loreena McKennitt).

It is a surprising album, in a number of ways. The main one is that Suzanne has largely abandoned the restrained aloofness and deliberate unobtrusiveness that characterized her earlier work. This applies to the songs, the cover art, the pictures of her on the liner, everything. Where the first two albums' covers are warm sepia tones with simple type and shadowy pictures, this one is loud psychedelic oranges, yellows and reds, punctuated with the crude woodcut fontwork you see in reproductions of Old West auction posters. The inside liner picture is a carnival-backstage tableau of Suzanne, in some strange, shabby showgirl costume, surrounded by people who, though I suppose they might be the band, look like either sword-swallowers, contortionists and tamers of the Incredible Snake-Boy, or perhaps random homeless lunatics.

The difference in the music is even more striking than that in the packaging. For the first time, Suzanne lets the *music* share the attention with her singing. On the first two albums, the music is definitely accompaniment, tasteful and subtle, not intended to draw attention away from the poems and narratives she is singing. On this album she breaks this cardinal folk-music rule, and odd percussive noises permeate the

record. "Rock in This Pocket", "Blood Makes Noise", "99.9 F°", "Fat Man and Dancing Girl", "(If You Were) In My Movie", "As a Child" and "As Girls Go" all pulse with a strange cross between hip-hop and Laurie Anderson, featuring throbbing bass, programmed drum tracks, spoken verses, eerie background noises and buzzing synthetic instruments. The acoustic guitars here sound like they are being played with some sort of strumming machine, except when, on "As Girls Go", Richard Thompson is playing them, or on "When Heroes Go Down", a genuine Suzanne Vega rock song.

The combined effect of all these odd infusions is truly striking. It may not appeal to many of Suzanne's previous fans (though three songs here *do* sound like the Suzanne Vega of old), and it's hard for me to say what kind of new fans it would appeal to, either, but I think it's very cool, and it increases my respect for both Suzanne and producer Mitchell Froom by quite a bit.

## Beth Nielsen Chapman

### Beth Nielsen Chapman, 1990 CD

Record stores around here vacuum in an alarming amount of my money without, to be frank, expending a whole lot of effort on my specific behalf. Every once in a while, though, one makes a stab at earning its keep by bringing to my attention an artist that I would, otherwise, probably never come across. Such was the case when the Boston Tower Records decided to play this record while I was intently accumulating an armful of Celtic Frost and Slayer CDs. I was immediately taken with it, and mumbling to myself "*This* will confuse the cashier", I grabbed a copy on my way past the folk bin.

For months I couldn't stop listening to it. There are plenty of things that, intellectually, I recognize as criticizable aspects of the album. For one, it got played regularly in shopping malls and supermarkets. For another, it's shamelessly sentimental, seriously suburban, and will hardly knock you down as it speeds past on the way to unexplored musical wildernesses. But you see, I really don't care, because Beth's voice is gorgeous, the songs are beautiful and powerfully addictive, and the stories are honest and affecting.

Beth herself, though the cover photo might lead you to expect a Tori Amos-like pianist, contributes keyboards and some acoustic guitar, and only plays piano on a single song. A long roster of session musicians fill in the rest of the music, in very competent but basically ordinary studio soft-rock fashion. What elevates their performances is the quality of the songs

themselves (all written or, in a couple of cases, co-written, by Ms. Chapman), and Beth's expressive voice. Comparisons with Tori turn out to make a certain warped sense after all. If you can imagine Tori Amos having traded her LA, rock-bitch, Y Kant Tori Read early adulthood for a stint as a happy Midwestern housewife who took occasional vacations in Nashville, then this is sort of what she might have ended up sounding like. Not that Ms. Chapman's personal life, about which I know absolutely nothing, is necessarily anything like that.

Here's another idiotic analogy: imagine a cross between Amy Grant and Shawn Colvin. It's a good thing this is 1993, not 2093, because 100 years from now I'd probably have a little gene lab, and would test out these theories by actually synthesizing horrible musical crossbreeds that would inevitably escape and begin eating the neighbors (horror movies being timeless). In fact, that gives me a good idea for my *next* book, which I think will be a rollicking western about Waylon Jenner and Herschel Jeff Walker, the fastest country music duo ever seen (called, of course, *High Speed Noon*).

The song that best captures the spirit and appeal of the album is "Emily", the most simply arranged track. It is a story of reminiscences between two old friends, like "Remember we both have each other to thank / For all the boyfriends we're not married to", that brings tears to my eyes when the second to last verse puts the rest of it in context: "We can't stay, it's getting late / And they said not to let you get tired. / We'll just be up the street, / The number's right here by your side". Sure, you can call a chorus like "Best friends are made through smiles and tears, / And sometimes that fades over miles and years" trite if you wish, but I *hear* the *truth* of this story in Beth's voice, hear how much the illness or accident or whatever it is that her friend has suffered has made her regret their not keeping closer, hear her resolve to do whatever she can to make up for the missing years. Is the song autobiographical? It doesn't matter. This is *truth* as Orson Scott Card describes it, a larger thing that transcends mere facts to embody an underlying rightness that mere real-world events are only the ghosts of.

It wasn't until I discovered Tori Amos' *Little Earthquakes*, over a year later, that another album could produce such a palpable emotional attachment.

### *You Hold the Key*, 1993 CD

After liking *Beth Nielsen Chapman* so much, I was very much looking forward to Beth's second album, *You Hold the Key*. It was to my intense dismay, then, to discover almost immediately upon putting the disc in that in between her first and second albums Beth had

accidentally stuck a foot into the Big Evil LA Hit-Making Machine-Beast, which proceeded to snatch her up, grind her into unrecognizable little bits, swallow her, digest, process and package her in the form of a giant glistening record-industry fewmet, and deposit her on the sidewalk with a smugly self-satisfied cartoon-mutt grin on its stupid Hallmark-cute moist-nosed face.

In case I haven't made this clear *yet*, this album is terrible. Normally I carefully qualify negative judgments with "in my opinion" disclaimers, but in this case I will make an exception. This album is *terrible*. Every bit of the simple, affecting charm that the first album possessed has been bled out of Beth, and this album is an effort to remake her as a bluesy, jazzy, Mariah-of-all-trades pop diva. There is, I'm sure, a place in the world for such people, but there's certainly not enough of a shortage of them to justify warping a talented performer with her own distinctive style like Beth Nielsen Chapman *into* one. From the nude-hiding-behind-a-mirror cover shot (actually a visual play on Magritte's 1936 painting *Dangerous Relationships*, and not a bad one, though I would never have realized that it was anything but seductive if I hadn't happened across the Magritte painting by accident recently) on, this album replaces character with polish at every opportunity, and ends up as one of the most lifeless and disappointing second albums in recorded history. The soulless hit-making dance-duet with Paul Carrack, "In the Time It Takes", is probably the most hateful moment here, but there really isn't any further down for this album to be dragged. Here's hoping the record is a disastrous commercial failure, so that next time Reprise will leave Beth the hell alone. I only hope that after this digression *she* still remembers what originally made her special.

## Tracy Chapman

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### *Tracy Chapman*, 1988 CD

In the future, when I redesign the world, I'm thinking about changing the way music works, so that once you buy some music, *you* control when you hear it. This has two major effects: first, something you hear, like and buy won't subsequently get played every five minutes wherever you go until you think you'll go crazy if you ever hear it again. Secondly, and this is a side effect that just occurred to me, you can actually pay money to not have to listen to a song ever again. Those 12-CDs-for-1¢ offers will be especially useful in this regard.

Anyway, once I get this change to the fabric of reality installed, I won't have to worry about the kind

of thing happening that happened with me and Tracy Chapman. "Talkin' 'Bout a Revolution" and "Fast Car" are superb songs, which I realized after hearing them only a couple times. I bought the album, which has several more songs of similar tone and topic. Both songs continued to get played on the radio, constantly, becoming more depressing with each repetition, until not only could I not bear to hear them any more, but they have completely blotted all the other songs on this album out of my mind, so thoroughly that even now, as I listed to the record again while reviewing it, all but the first two songs flow in my left ear and out my right nostril, leaving no trace on my mind and collecting in a sticky heap under my desk next to a pile of income-tax paperwork that I haven't filed away because my filing box is too full.

## Tanita Tikaram

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### *Ancient Heart*, 1988 LP

This may be revisionism in my memory, but it seems to me that I bought Tracy Chapman's debut on the same record-store trip as this album. *Ancient Heart*, however, I bought without having heard anything on it, on the strength of Melissa, my sister, having gone on at some length about Tanita's song "Twist in my Sobriety".

The album is a very odd thing. Judging from the cover, with its cinemascopic sepia-toned landscape-with-singer illustration, solemn handwritten song list, tasteful white space and dignified title, I expected the record to be an atmospheric, detached album, something like a new-age version of Suzanne Vega. And in fact, that's not a completely inaccurate description of the vocals. Tikaram's voice is low and dusky, but slips into near-talking in a way similar to Vega's. Her vocal mood is somber and somewhat dark without being bitter. "Cathedral Song", the track from which the album title is derived, is the slowest, moodiest song.

Most of the music, however, has an eager bounciness that either rescues the songs from ponderousness or hinders it from achieving the quiet epiphanies that the cover seemed to suggest, depending on your point of view. I vacillate between the two opinions. Upbeat songs like "Good Tradition" and "World Outside Your Window" are very pleasant, but about every other listen they just seem insubstantial. Meanwhile, the slower songs like "Cathedral Song", "For All These Years" and "Twist in my Sobriety" seem half the time to show a distinctive style, and half the time seem limp. Tanita Tikaram is

clearly a competent songwriter and singer, but I guess the album in the end touches me only lightly.

## Joan Armatrading

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### *The Key*, 1983 LP

Joan Armatrading, Tracy Chapman and Tanita Tikaram's spiritual godmother, begins this album (her eighth, I believe) with a song that is on my short list of the greatest of all time. "(I Love it When You) Call Me Names" is a driving, insistent rock song about masochism. The chorus, "Big woman / And a short short man, / And he loves it / When she beats his brains out", just begs to be screamed along with. The band, with Tony Levin on bass and Larry Fast on keyboards, and Adrian Belew dropping by for a guitar solo, are tremendous, and the song is absolutely irresistible. Armatrading is a qualitatively more sophisticated lyricist than most, and manages to portray the narrator's masochistic fetishes without passing judgment on them one way or the other.

The rest of the album doesn't reach as high a pinnacle again, but few albums do. The other songs are *only* flawed by comparison with "Call Me Names", however. Joan makes good use of Levin's powerful bass playing and Fast's nimble synthesizer, and the other players also acquit themselves admirably. The album is more synthetic and electrified than her earlier albums, I gather, but it covers a wide range of moods, from the swaying outside-yourself ballad "Everybody Gotta Know" and the helpless, nearly speechless adoration of "I Love My Baby", to the sexual ambiguity of the edgy "Tell Tale" (with Stewart Copeland drumming) and the high power of "Drop the Pilot", which is undoubtably the only rock song to use the word "mahout", which means "elephant keeper".

Male fantasies, the drug trade and various warped relationships populate the rest of the album. There is little question that this album is rock, not folk, but just as clearly to me, Joan herself is essentially a folk musician. Rather than dulling the force of the band's (and Joan's) loud guitars and drums, though, this underlying tension gives the record a unique depth that helps it support its awesome opening song.

### *The Shouting Stage*, 1988 LP

By five years later, Joan has traded away all her previous supporting cast for a core that plays much closer to jazz than rock. The only guests here I know anything about are Mark Knopfler, who plays on a couple of songs, and Big Country drummer Mark Brzezicki, who also plays on two, but neither of their

presences are as distinctive as bassist Pino Palladino, who plays on all but one song. I don't know anything about Pino, but this album's low end is just as credible as *The Key's*, and Tony Levin is about as good as they come.

Heavily distorted electric guitars are nowhere in evidence here, with Phil Palmer's slick, restrained playing taking its place for most of the record. "Slick and restrained", in fact, is a good three-word summary of this album. Stray noises and stray emotions have been diligently sanded off. Joan hasn't lost her knack for relationship songs, but none of the ones here have the strange details that made "Call Me Names", "Tell Tale" or "Drop the Pilot" special to me. Joan's voice is a remarkable instrument, but I found it more appealing when she let it get stressed a little. Here it is always under close control, and while I appreciate her *ability*, it doesn't affect me as directly. As mood music, this album is of the first rank, but "mood music" is a lesser species for me than music that you actually listen to.

#### *Hearts and Flowers*, 1990 CD

Having enjoyed *The Key* more than *The Shouting Stage*, I suppose I should have continued my exploration into Joan's catalog backwards. As I said at the outset of this chapter, though, I'm woefully under-informed on this whole genre. When in doubt, then, I buy the new stuff. This strategy seems to work out okay more often than not, and this instance is of the "more often" variety. *Hearts and Flowers* is still the same *type* of album as *The Shouting Stage*, but for various reasons, some of which I can isolate and some of which I can't, it holds my active attention in a way that the previous record doesn't.

Joan continues her tradition of recruiting amazing bass players here, with Mick Karn sharing time with Pino Palladino. Several other players from *The Shouting Stage* make appearances here, but the most interesting instrumental detail is that Joan herself takes a much more active role, playing all the guitars herself. This returns a folky quality to the music that was missing in the studio playing of *The Shouting Stage*. Whether for this reason or something else, the songs are more dynamic than on the prior album, not in the raw-energy way that *The Key* barreled along, but in a less linear fashion, retaining the sophistication of *The Shouting Stage* without letting it constrain this music to a gentle jazzy breeze, as it tended to do before.

"Can't Let Go" and "Free", at the physical center of the album, are emblematic of the improvement this record shows. Performed entirely by Joan herself, "Can't Let Go" combines a jittery keyboard part with a flamenco-flavored guitar, over which Joan's voice flies from one end of its range to the other, restlessly.

Without any of the obvious rock trappings, this song manages to construct a complicated rhythm that fences with the unadorned vocals, each element fascinating on its own and even more so in interplay. "Free" brings in the bass, drums, piano and sax, for a more conventionally arranged song that is still highlighted by Joan's stunningly versatile singing. She sounds like she's singing at the edge of her abilities (a distant edge, admittedly), and the effect is mesmerizing.

With the possible exception of the slow, slightly dull "Always", the rest of the album lives up to this potential. Parts, like "More Than One Kind of Love", "Hearts and Flowers" and "The Power of Dreams", are very close in mood to *The Shouting Stage*, and parts, like the robotic snare of the sinister "Good Times", hearken back further, but as a whole the album has an identity of its own. Don't let the sedate title deter you.

#### *Square the Circle*, 1992 CD

I guess Joan didn't have a firm enough grasp on what made *Hearts and Flowers* special (or else, just maybe, my opinion of her albums isn't how she steers her career (or maybe it is, but while waiting for this book to appear she has had to muddle along on her own)), for *Square the Circle* backslides. Tempos vary here from song to song, but neither tempos nor anything else particularly interesting varies *within* each song. Listen to the first few seconds of any of these songs, and you've heard all you need to to pass judgment on it.

Why is Joan playing mournful blues leads? Why does Joan, of all people, need a cadre of backing vocalists? Why has repetition seemed to overwhelm invention in her lyrics? Why do I find alternate albums of hers forgettable, but love the ones in between? I don't know the answers to these questions. I guess I should buy the next one, though.

## Julia Fordham

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#### *Porcelain*, 1989 CD

On a women-I've-heard-of-but-haven't-heard binge I picked up this album, which I'd seen hovering elegantly over the Fiona section for a few years. I admit to hoping that Julia would sound like Jane Siberry, solely on the grounds that she has short hair in the cover picture, which I realize is about as inane an expectation as one can bring to a record.

Nonetheless, I was pretty surprised to find that Julia sounds strikingly like *Joan Armatrading* at times, both in music and voice. It wasn't until I started studying the liner notes to write this entry that I

realized that Joan's sometimes bass player Pino Palladino actually plays on much of this album, and given how key I thought bass was to Joan's later sound, that explains much of my impression. Still, their vocal *styles* are quite similar, and the cool precision of this album is a lot like that of *The Shouting Stage*.

At least, the first three songs are like that, gentle and atmospheric. Be forewarned, though, that lurking in the middle of the album is a sudden unexplained bout of appalling cheesiness, the lounge-act torch song "For You Only For You" and the Brazilian oddity "Genius". These two songs color my impression of the whole album, and I listen to all the songs that come after in an anticipatory cringe, fearing that smarmy piano or velour strings will soon resurface, breaking the otherwise smooth plane of the music. They don't return in force, but there are hints of them in "Did I Happen to Mention" and "Your Lovely Face", enough that I am forced to conclude that I haven't quite come to terms with this album, as much as the first three songs intrigue me.

## Nicky Holland

### *Nicky Holland, 1992 CD*

When I bought this record I didn't know a thing about Nicky Holland, I'd just seen the album around enough times that I'd gotten curious. In writing this book I've discovered that she factors into work by UFO and Cyndi Lauper, and is friends with Robert Bell of the Blue Nile (who co-wrote a song here, and plays on it) and Lloyd Cole (who does the same), and of course she looks, in the cover pictures, strikingly like Jane Siberry.

The superficial Jane Siberry resemblance is certainly the most inane association on my part, but perversely, as with Julia Fordham, it was the one that factored most strongly into my expectations for the album. Initial disappointment was inevitable, then, as musically Nicky has nothing to do with Jane whatsoever. I think that between Nicky and Julia I have learned my lesson about placing too much importance on short haircuts and sharp cheekbones.

At any rate, Nicky Holland's music is cool, poppy and pleasant, with occasional jazzy and bluesy overtones. Take Julia Fordham, subtract the Joan Armatrading component and emphasize a range in between gauzy atmospherics and bouncy silliness, and you have something like this album. To me it's pleasant but not very much more. The cheery cover of the Grateful Dead's "Box of Rain", with Nicky's

sparkling piano, is my favorite track here, but this isn't an album I listen to often.

## Sara Hickman

### *Shortstop, 1990 CD*

Mike, my best and second-oldest friend (we met in first grade), didn't used to be somebody whose musical taste was his most notable virtue. It's not that he had *bad* musical taste so much as that the range of music he liked simply happened to be rather narrow. The Who was good, Pink Floyd, Yes and the Moody Blues were acceptable, and beyond that things got shaky quickly. The clogged capillary in the brain responsible for this weakness unexpected started functioning around the time he graduated from college (perhaps the thermal- and culture-shock of returning to Texas after four years at Yale was responsible), and to my surprise he started getting into singer-songwriters like Nanci Griffith, which is about as far a remove from the Who as there is.

One day in 1993 I got an email from him enthusing about his latest musical discovery, a Texan named Sara Hickman. That evening I happened to be at a record store (what a coincidence, the chance of that couldn't have been more than, oh, two in seven...), and there in the cutout bin I came across a bedraggled copy of *Shortstop*. Having badgered Mike into buying all sorts of things that I like when he had visited a few months previous, I felt that my heeding his recommendation was only fair, and I bought it.

Good decision. I suspect that this album is somewhat over-produced as Sara's work goes, but numerous qualities are evident nonetheless. Sara's voice is capable and possessed of an impish folk personality, and her lyric-writing complements it nicely, moving with surprising ease from serious topics like aphasia and hostages to lines like "I work at the popsicle plant. / I pour the dye in the number five machine. / I am responsible for turning popsicles green." Her acoustic-guitar playing is catchy, and when Mike claims that she's an arresting solo performer I have no trouble whatsoever believing him. She thanks Billy Bragg for inspiration, and percussionist Paulinho da Costa, who has also worked with Tori Amos, appears here.

The parts of this album that I'm not so crazy about are the ones that feel more like Nicky Holland and Julia Fordham. There's little mystery why there should be similarities; core players Denny Fongheiser (drums) and Tim Pierce (guitar) also played on Nicky's debut, as did Steve Madio (trumpet). Pino Palladino is

nowhere to be found, but studio veteran Larry Klein provides some fretless bass, which is pretty close. Ironically, though Sara doesn't physically resemble Jane Siberry at all, she has a song that most reminds me of Jane much more than anything on Julia or Nicky's albums ("Salvador", which reminds me of Jane's "Marco Polo").

I feel like I need at least one more album to really begin to understand Sara, but for the moment her first one seems to be out of print and her third is held up in legal and financial wrangling, so I will simply have to be patient.

## Anne Richmond Boston

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### *The Big House of Time, 1990 CD*

I resented Anne Richmond Boston leaving the Swimming Pool Q's, as her voice elevated them at times from a very good southern pop band to a great one. That given, though, I was pleased when she resurfaced with this solo album a few years later. It was hard to know what to expect from it, since she wasn't a songwriter with the Swimming Pool Q's, and isn't here, either (actually, she co-wrote the first song, but that's it). She has good taste, though, and the album's material is excellent. Guitarist/producer Rob Gal is primarily responsible for five of the eleven songs, the rest coming from John Hiatt, SPQ leader Jeff Calder, John Sebastian, bassist Jeb Baldwin, Neil Young and Bob Welch.

The result is less distinctive than the Swimming Pool Q's, but she isn't trying to compete with them or her past. Instead, this album is a confident, straightforward set of rock songs somewhat on the soft, folky side of the genre. To Gal's credit, his songs easily hold their own against the other writers' tracks. His "Claudine" and Hiatt's "Learning How to Love You" are the two best songs, in my opinion, with "Dreaming" and Young's "When You Dance I Can Really Love" close behind. The Neil Young song is particularly interesting, as Boston's double-tracked harmony captures the spirit of Neil's voice, and Gal's normally smooth guitar is allowed to squall a bit to keep pace. The most traditional folk rendition is "Banks of the Ohio", with a mandolin accompanying Anne and Bart Boston (relation unknown, but he also plays harmonica) in a duet that sounds terribly off-key some of the times I listen to it, and absolutely perfect some others.

## Juice Newton

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### *Queen of Hearts, 1981 7"*

Though it will go down in history, or may have already, as a country-pop crossover novelty before such things became commonplace, "Queen of Hearts" is a very nice song, with jangling guitars, nice harmony vocals, and folky lyrics. I don't feel a need to buy a whole album, or even go back and listen to the b-side, but the song brings back strong memories from the era.

## Nanci Griffith

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### *Late Night Grande Hotel, 1991 CD*

The same CD binge that netted me Julia Fordham and Mary-Chapin Carpenter also introduced me to Nanci Griffith, who I'd heard mention of many times over the years, but never known much about. She has several albums before this one, which I haven't gotten around to investigating, but I certainly like this one. *Late Night Grande Hotel* is produced by Peter Van-Hooke and Rod Argent, the same duo who did Tanita Tikaram's *Ancient Heart*, and Tanita herself shows up to sing backing vocals on one song here.

Nanci has a thin, reedy, almost-girlish voice that gives these songs a simple directness, and the band and production fleshes it out with strings, airy keyboards and fretless bass, in addition to the expected complement of acoustic guitars and countrified percussion. As a songwriter Griffith's strength seems to be in seductively melodic, but quietly personal songs that show hints of country's hyperbolic rusticness (as in "One Blade Shy of a Sharp Edge") without descending into its clichés. Her voice has the occasional country twang, but she makes it sound like a natural feature of her Texas upbringing, rather than a genre affectation, as it usually affects me.

She also foreshadows the next album by covering Vince Bell's "The Sun, Moon, and Stars" and Tom Waits' "San Diego Serenade". I've heard neither original, but I have to imagine that Waits' own version of "San Diego Serenade", if he in fact recorded one, didn't sound like a slow piano-blues ballad, as Nanci renders it. She throws in the occasional garish syllable to hint at the writer's style, but mostly plays it straight. Bell's song, and Julie Gold's "Heaven" earlier in the album, could be Griffith's own.

*Other Voices, Other Rooms, 1993 CD*

I'm not sure if *Late Night Grande Hotel* alone would have been enough to get me to buy this follow-up, but after reading its premise, that Nanci was performing all her favorite performers' material, including songs by the Weavers, Gordon Lightfoot and John Prine, my fascination with covers and my folk-music upbringings joined forces to stampede me into buying it the week it came out.

Their instincts were good ones. A long, wide-ranging album, this is a mesmerizing compendium of great folk songs resuscitated specially for the benefit of people like me who are too busy trying to keep up with new music to ever stop and look backwards. To join her in her odyssey, Nanci recruited an impressive array of kindred spirits, including Emmylou Harris, Frank Christian, Arlo Guthrie, Bob Dylan, John Prine, Bela Fleck, Iris Dement, Chet Atkins, Leo Kottke, Odetta, the Indigo Girls and Kennedy-Rose. Despite the long guest list, the music here is much less overtly ambitious than the atmospheric wash of *Late Night Grande Hotel*. In keeping with the original spirit of folk music, the players stick to acoustic guitars, banjos, violins, piano and some subtle percussion.

Beside reminding me of folk music's original instrumental roots, this album even more strikingly reminds me that folk music is *sad*! Many of these songs, like Townes Van Zandt's "Tecumseh Valley" and Dylan's "Boots of Spanish Leather" are starkly tragic narratives, and most of the others are moving in other ways. Folk music expresses pain by sharing it, where rock tends to rage against it, and in drawing together so many songs from all over the folk world, Griffith has produced a concentration of expressed pain much higher than any album by a single songwriter could probably manage, and the songs are all the more affecting for having come from so many different authors.

Listening *closely* to this album, then, especially at sixty-two minutes and 17 songs, is a surprisingly intense emotional experience. There are occasional reprieves, like Janis Ian and Jon Vezner's perseverance epic "This Old Town", Gordon Lightfoot's traveling song "Ten Degrees and Getting Colder" and the Weavers wordless (well, Englishless anyway) classic "Wimowet", but it's telling that the light moments on this album are about a weather-beaten town's string of disasters, a frost-bitten hitchhiker's inability to get a ride, and some sort of traditional South African singalong that is bound to have some strangled significance that mercifully escapes me.

If you can bear so much raw emotion, though, this album is a remarkable and rewarding tour.

*The MCA Years, 1993 CD*

This best-of compilation came at a perfect time in my introduction to Nanci Griffith. I'd gotten into her with *Late Night Grande Hotel* and *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, but was still somewhat intimidated by the size of her back catalog. What better than a good career summary to save me from having to assimilate another dozen albums into my already-straining repertoire?

Not having most of the albums that this compilations covers (*Lone Star State of Mind*, *Little Love Affairs*, *One Fair Summer Evening* and *Storms*, as well as *Late Night Grande Hotel*), I can't really say how well it represents them, but the two tracks from *Late Night Grande Hotel*, "Late Night Grande Hotel" and "It's Just Another Morning Here", are probably my favorites from that album, and there's no reason to expect that the selections from the other albums are any less astute.

*Lone Star State of Mind* contributes "Trouble in the Fields", Julie Gold's "From a Distance", "Ford Econoline" and "There's a Light Beyond These Woods (Mary Margaret)"; *Little Love Affairs* produces "Gulf Coast Highway", "I Wish it Would Rain", "So Long Ago" and "Outbound Plane"; *One Fair Summer Evening* has Eric Taylor's "Deadwood, South Dakota", "Love at the Five and Dime" and "The Wing and the Wheel"; and *Storms* has "I Don't Wanna Talk About Love", "Listen to the Radio", "If Wishes Were Changes", "Drive-in Movies and Dashboard Lights" and "It's a Hard Life Wherever You Go".

It's an impressive set. "Trouble in the Fields" is the only song whose down-on-our-luck country-isms seem to me overdone, and it's the first song, so after it's done you've got seventeen songs straight of uninterrupted folk-country charm. My favorite songs are probably "Love at the Five and Dime", which has a hilarious introduction about Woolworth's the world over (*One Fair Summer Evening* is a live album, you see), and "Ford Econoline", a rollicking tale of a sheltered Mormon wife escaping Utah for a singing career in the car her husband bought her ("his big mistake!"). "From a Distance" is a classic ballad, and certainly the best-known song here, and I prefer Nanci's rendition to Julie Gold's own (on the second *Four Bitchin' Babes* record). The song has dangerous potential for schmaltz, which Bette Middler unfortunately recognized and actuated, but Nanci's elfin voice keeps it manageable. I probably would have liked it even more with just Nanci and her guitar, instead of the thick string arrangement, but that's life.

This collection hasn't spurred me to buy any other Nanci Griffith records, which I suppose means that in one sense it's a failure. On the other hand, it's a good enough overview that I don't feel like I *need* to buy any other old ones, and that's a compliment. Right?

## Emmylou Harris

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### *Cowgirl's Prayer*, 1993 CD

Nanci Griffith having lowered my resistance to real country music, and my resistance to Emmylou Harris in particular having been lowered even further by her backing vocals on Lyle Lovett's *Pontiac* and her song "'Til I Gain Control Again" on the *Original Versions* disc from the This Mortal Coil boxed set, it didn't take more than a couple positive reviews to sway me towards getting her next album when it came out.

I find this album pleasant but not overwhelming. Emmylou's voice is beautiful, but the quality of her material isn't completely even. The songs that concentrate on her ethereal harmonies, like the opener "A Ways to Go" or "Crescent City", or mostly stick to acoustic guitar accompaniment like "Prayer in Open D" and "I Hear a Call", I like a lot, and her quiet version of Leonard Cohen's "Ballad of a Runaway Horse" is brilliant. Her attempts at bluesy, smoky, barroom-country grit, however, underplay her voice, and as that's what I like about her, they lose me. Worst is the spoken story-song "Jerusalem Tomorrow", on which she doesn't sing at all, leaving me to concentrate on the words, which don't hold my interest at all. The Old West holds no magic for me, and the more country songs I hear about it, the less seriously I take the whole genre. What other genre is so seemingly locked into anachronistic subject matter? What fraction of the music-buying market are actual cow-ropin' log-cabin-dwellin' alfalfa-chewin' ranchers these days, anyway? I'll tell you: rounded to the nearest percentage, none. So why do country songs and beer commercials continue to obsess over them? It's some lost dream embedded in the American psyche, I think, and the sooner therapy can root it out, the better.

## Mary-Chapin Carpenter

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### *Come On Come On*, 1992 CD

At the top of my "Okay, okay already, I'll get it" list at the end of 1992 was this Grammy-award winning album that seemed to show up on everybody's top-ten lists with some description that used the word "mature". I was at least a little leery, since this and Lyle Lovett's *Joshua Judges Ruth* were the first two records I'd ever bought from the Country section, but I figured they were likely to be a more palatable way to learn something about the inexplicable country resurgence (did it ever *surge* to begin with?) than giving Garth Brooks another few dollars he didn't

need, or having to ever hear "Achey Breaky Heart" again.

And yeah, I guess this is country music. "I Feel Lucky" definitely is, a hilarious daydream about country heartthrobs, the lottery, burritos and Barq's root beer, with honky-tonk piano, twangy backing vocals and the sort of beat you'd be hard pressed to do anything but the two-step to even if you wanted to. "The Bug" is, too, which is ironic since Mark Knopfler wrote it. Although on second thought, Dire Straits has often had a country tinge to their music.

For most of the album, though, this is folk-pop-rock very much in the same spirit as Nanci Griffith, Suzanne Vega or Melissa Etheridge. Guest appearances by the Indigo Girls, Shawn Colvin and Benmont Tench further increase the resemblances between this album and the world outside the Country aisle, and some stores without particularly rich Country sections toss Mary-Chapin into the pop bins without any apparent qualms.

As with Nanci Griffith, I don't find this album so overwhelming that I rush out to buy all Carpenter's other albums, but I attribute that less to the quality of the album than that this isn't *really* the sort of music I tend to be overwhelmed by, no matter how well it's done. The few exceptions in this chapter, like Richard Thompson and Thin White Rope, have features that *could*, if I felt like moving them, justify their inclusion in some other chapter.

Even so, I think the lavish praises this album received were richly deserved. Mary-Chapin is able to go from such infectious upbeat songs as "The Hard Way", "He Thinks He'll Keep Her" and "Walking Through Fire" to slow, moving songs like "I Am a Town" and "Come On Come On" with admirable facility. Her voice is better, technically, than Nanci Griffith's, but still avoids both overdone country twang and overproduced rock gloss. Her lyrics take the best elements of country, like its attention to detail and its empathy with real, personal stories, without any of the foibles that lead much of current country music to make me cringe in disgust, notably the overuse of the American pick-up truck as a metaphor for suffering, dedication, patriotism, honesty or large, dumb, overly enthusiastic dogs. I'd quote some lines, but these songs are written to be heard complete, and individual lines aren't meant to stand alone the way they often are in rock. I'd quote whole songs, but if I started doing that I'd *never* finish the book. Besides, the lyrics are all printed on the fold-out liner, so you'll see them when you buy the album.



## Lyle Lovett

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### *Pontiac, 1987 LP*

I said I'd only ever bought two albums out of the Country section, and that's true: this one was shelved under rock when I bought it. Indeed, the only song I'd heard was "If I Had a Boat", which isn't country any more than Gordon Lightfoot is, so I didn't even think of Lyle as a country musician.

But he is, and most of this album doesn't appeal to me at all. The three songs I do like, though, are *great*. "If I Had a Boat" is a classic; it's hard to improve on a chorus like "If I had a boat / I'd go out on the ocean, / And if I had a pony / I'd ride him on my boat". "Walk Through the Bottomland" and "L.A. County" are similar songs, and I like them both a lot. The slow music and Emmylou Harris' backing vocals on these two songs are much more to my taste than the jokey honky-tonk of "Give Back My Heart" or "M-O-N-E-Y".

### *Joshua Judges Ruth, 1992 CD*

After more obsessing reviews extolling this album, I allowed my fondness for Lyle in his quieter mode to justify buying another of his albums. Unfortunately, this one escapes Lovett's earlier country and big-band phases by entering a *gospel* phase, and I am even less fond of gospel than I am of big-band or country. I'll pass on describing it.

## Leslie Spit Treeo

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### *Don't Cry Too Hard, 1990 CD*

Moving from Country into rock with country influences, we find this odd Canadian band that I discovered when they opened for the Alarm on the *Raw* tour (both were on IRS, which is the only connection I can identify). There is nobody named Leslie Spit in the band, and although they began as a trio, busking on the streets of Toronto, they are a five-piece on this album (six if you count the dog, which *they* do).

In concert they were irrepressible, singer Laura Hubert jumping around the stage in an outfit the only feature of which I can remember is that it was hilarious. They convinced me to search out their album early in their set when they played "Angel from Montgomery", a John Prine composition that I remember fondly from my youth as my favorite John Denver song.

The other 11 songs are originals, and they vary from some jokey tracks left over from busking days to several hauntingly beautiful songs that a noisy street

wouldn't be the best place for at all. The most gimmicky is the a cappella "One Thought Too Long", whose first six lines are accurately rendered on the lyric sheet as "Just when ya think that ya got it, / Vrrrrrrrrmm, / Like a semi goin' the other way. / Just when ya think that ya got it, / Pfffffftchk! / It blows up in your face".

The other two humorous ones are just funny songs, not gimmicky ones. "Talkin'" gleefully treads an ambiguous line between meaning "talking" and using "talkin'" as a euphemism for sex. Is the problem with the song's relationship too much conversation and not enough sex, or vice versa? It's hard to say. (What an awful pun.) "U.F.O.s (Catch the Highway)", or "Catch the Highway (U.F.O.s)", depending on whether you believe the back of the CD or the lyric sheet, explores the tabloid-ish way that some people hope aliens will arrive to solve all our problems. "Talkin'" and "U.F.O.s" are the only two songs I can think of whose lyrics actually contain footnotes.

At the slower, more serious extreme, in songs like "Like Yesterday", the Leslie Spit Treeo begins to resemble Knots and Crosses, with tight harmony, every phrase loaded with emotional weight, to the point where "The drummer puts a stick / right through a brand new skin" becomes tragic almost to the point of tears. Leslie Spit Treeo is rougher and less atmospheric than Knots and Crosses, but the principle is similar.

## Knots and Crosses

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### *Creatures of Habit, 1991 CD*

Knots and Crosses are another band I came across when they opened for someone else. In this case, I saw them opening for School of Fish, at T.T. the Bears Place in Cambridge, one of those small clubs where local bands open for visiting acts. Knots and Crosses are actually from somewhere in Maine, but that's close enough to Boston to qualify as local. Anyway, I was impressed with them right away for having the nerve to bring a synthesizer with them, the Boston club scene being notoriously biased towards guitar/bass/drums rock. I was even further impressed with them once they started playing, because they had the courage (or foolishness, depending) to play sophisticated, folky music that relied heavily on soaring, multi-part vocal harmonies, in a tiny club more accustomed to a mosh pit than not. The School of Fish audience was a little more receptive than most T.T.'s crowds would have been, but only a little.

Under my firm policy of buying albums by any opening act I like, on the grounds that if you don't sell

albums that way how the hell will you, I picked up *Creatures of Habit* the next day. On the way home from the record store, I stopped into Urban Outfitters to look for shorts that fit my personal clothing idiom so I wouldn't have to spend yet another summer wearing black jeans, wool socks and combat boots, and ran into the band's bass player. "Hey," said I, figuring his interest level in knowing they'd sold a CD might be close enough to his desire to be left alone to justify such an intrusion, "I just bought your CD." "Uh, no, I don't think so", he said, looking confused. I must have thought that he'd simply forgotten that he was in the band, because I pulled the CD out to refresh his memory. "Oh," he said. "I'm not in the band, I just play bass for their shows every once in a while. I didn't have anything to do with the album. But I'll tell them you got it."

I didn't ask him to autograph it.

The album is just as impressive as Knots and Crosses were live. They play quiet, pretty music, with Carol Noonan's acoustic guitar, Rick Harris' electric, and Alan Williams' smooth, airy keyboards, all providing an appropriate musical setting for Carol and Alan's dramatic duets. Richard and Linda Thompson are obvious influences, even without the cover of "Walking on a Wire" here, but Knots and Crosses have none of the dark side of the Thompsons that was really what made them most interesting, so I can't guarantee that Thompsons fans will like this band. On the other hand, they write good songs and sing great duets, and there's plenty of room in the world for more of those.

### *Curve of the Earth*, 1993 CD

Knots and Crosses' second album, in my opinion, adds a lot or very little, depending on whether you are talking about quantity or quality. With 15 songs, stretching to over 70 minutes, it's not a short record. And I don't mean to say that it's a *bad* record, either. Quite the contrary, this album has every bit of the appeal of the first one. The problem, though, is that it has *exactly* the same appeal as the first one. I don't hear anything to distinguish these songs from the ones on the first album. It's as if the band had a huge vat of songs that are basically the same, and chose 12 at random for the first album, and another 15 at random for this one.

Whether this is good or bad is a very subjective judgment. There are plenty of bands in this book who basically do the same thing over and over again (Magnum, in particular, comes to mind), and I keep buying records and loving them, and there are others that either change or I get instantly weary of them. Which category Knots and Crosses will fall in, for you, I can't guess, but for me one of these two albums is

basically plenty. I'll pick the first one, solely on the basis of familiarity, but if I'd heard this one first I imagine I'd prefer it. Either one is definitely worth a listen.

## various

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### *On a Winter's Night*, 1990 CD

My reintroduction to folk music, which up until about 1993 I'd left entirely to its own devices, came in the form of three important compilations. This was the one I bought first. It wasn't the one I *intended* to buy first, actually. A friend at work had described a compilation to me, and the details that had stuck in my mind were 1) it was done by either Christine Lavin or Patty Larkin (one of those women whose names began with "La", and 2) it had lots of names that I'd heard, but knew nothing about. At the first record store I checked, I came across this album, and it fit the description, so I got it. At the second store, I came across *Big Times in a Small Town*, and remembered that the other detail was 3) it was recorded live in some coffeehouse on Martha's Vineyard. *On a Winter's Night* still looked like it had a decent selection, though, so I didn't bother returning it.

I was right, this *is* a good selection. These are studio tracks, almost all of which are taken from previously released albums, so it doesn't have the same coherence or live vitality that *Big Times in a Small Town* does, but on the other hand these songs are more representative of what the artists' own albums actually sound like, so the tradeoff isn't all bad by any means. The prejudice here is toward gentle love songs, too, so this is the mellowest of the three collections. Perhaps for this last reason more than the others, there aren't that many songs here that strike me as standouts. Julie Gold's "Heaven" was a big hit for somebody other than her, compiler (and spiritual new-folk godmother) Christine Lavin's own "The Kind of Love You Never Recover" is charming (though *very* low-key for her), Buskin & Batteau's "Words That Bring the Tear" reminds me in places of Gordon Lightfoot's "Race Among the Ruins", and the concluding a cappella song "Stars", sung by Anne Hills, Priscilla Herdman, Cindy Mangsen and Steve Gillette, is notable just due to being a cappella. Otherwise, though, the songs all sort of blend together to me. From the point of view of the collection, this is fine, and this is definitely a disc suited to winter nights under warm blankets, but as a teaser for the individual artists' own releases (which Christine's affectionate liner notes detail), it's not nearly as successful.

The other artists, for your reference: Willie Nininger, David Wilcox, Patty Larkin, David Roth, Bill Morrissey (with Shawn Colvin), John Gorka, Cheryl Wheeler, Hugh Blumenfeld, David Mallett, Sally Fingerett and Megon McDonough.

### ***When October Goes, 1991 CD***

The sequel, subtitled "Autumn Love Songs" (presumably there are two more coming, dedicated to Summer and Spring), I like quite a bit better. Perhaps Fall is simply more inspirational than Winter, but this album has *lots* of standouts for me. Cheryl Wheeler's "When Fall Comes to New England" is a beautiful opening, Raymond Gonzalez and Amy Malkoff's "Locked Away" is a nice duet, Julie Gold's "Southbound Train" is another trademark Julie Gold song, Patty Larkin's "Island of Time" has a remarkable atmosphere, John Gorka's sly "Out of My Mind" has the brilliant lines "But really sheriff sir, / I wasn't doing more than fifty. / Oh, you mean it was your car / I took from Merle's grill and bar.", Christine's "Getting Used to Leaving" is more her charming self than her track on the first set and Sally Fingerett's "The Return" is spellbinding. Other performers are Susie Burke, David Buskin, Gail Rundlett, Frank Christian, Megon McDonough, Cliff Eberhardt and Richie Havens, and Rod MacDonald.

My favorite song here, though, and one of the coolest folk songs I've ever heard, is Richard Shindell's "Are You Happy Now?", a bitter, beautiful, barbed break-up song with Lucy Kaplansky on backing vocals. As of the time of this compilation, his own album wasn't even out yet, but by the time I tuned in it was, and this song is the one that ensured a return trip to the folk section, and so is indirectly responsible for several of the following entries.

### ***Big Times in a Small Town, 1993 CD***

For her third compilation, Christine Lavin abandoned the sampler format and invited every singer/songwriter she could think of to come to Martha's Vineyard and play at the Wintertide Coffeehouse. Thirty hours of tape were quickly amassed, and from that seventeen exemplary performances were extracted to form this representative selection of what went on. Many of the names are familiar from the other two compilations, but several aren't, and the live angle injects an impromptu freshness into the proceedings that the other two, as good as they are, simply can't match. The list, this time: James Mee, Jonatha Brooke (from the Story), Cliff Eberhardt, John Forster, Pierce Pettis, Cheryl Wheeler, Peter Nelson, Hilary Field, David Roth, David Buskin, Electric Bonsai Band, Patty Larkin, Greg Greenway,

Barbara Kessler, David Wilcox, Chuck Pyle and Kristina Olsen.

Many of these are particularly delightful. John Forster's "Entering Marion" is hilarious, Cheryl Wheeler's "Further and Further Away" is gorgeous, Peter Nelson's long piano-narrative "Summer of Love" is a more-personal "American Pie"-like epic, David Roth's "The Star-Spangled Banner and Me" is an inspired a cappella saga of his trip to sing the national anthem before a Bulls-Knicks game, David Buskin's also-a-cappella "A Folksinger Earns Every Dime" features an impromptu segue into "We will, we will, folk you". Andrew Ratshin (Electric Bonsai Band, though in this context he is neither electric nor a band) does my favorite song here, the chirpy age-confessional "I Am My Dad", Patty Larkin turns in a spellbinding "Chained to These Lovin' Arms", Barbara Kessler's silky voice carries her "The Date (Making Mountains out of Molehills)", and the album ends with everybody available romping through "Shivering/Tight Jeans Round/Nursery Rhyme Round/Round and Round Round", a glorious cooperative ending to an album that probably does the best job of capturing the spirit of folk music of any I own.

## **Four Bitchin' Babes**

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### **Volume 1, 1991 CD**

The full citation for this CD ought to be "*Buy Me Bring Me Take Me: Don't Mess My Hair...*" *Life According to Four Bitchin' Babes*, by Christine Lavin, Patty Larkin, Megon McDonough, Sally Fingerett. But that's just too long and too confusing.

What this actually *is* is a cooperative live album, a record of a little more than an hour of a 1990 performance in Alexandria, VA, by the four women concerned, sharing the stage and occasionally helping each other out. They take turns, and though the album isn't an unabridged rendering of the event (the intermission, for example, is omitted entirely), enough of the between-song banter is included to give you a feel for the experience. You end up with something midway between Lavin's usual compilations and solo albums, a way not only to get a feel for the skills and styles of the individual performers, but to be introduced to *four* of them at once, with the additional novelty of their synergy as purchase-incentive.

On close inspection, it's a wonder that the combination of these four women works so well. At one extreme, Christine Lavin herself is a musical stand-up comic. Her three songs, "Prisoners of Their Hairdos", "Good Thing He Can't Read My Mind" and "Sensitive

New Age Guys", are all inspired whimsy, delivered in her impish voice with basic acoustic-guitar accompaniment. I don't think I'd want a whole album of these songs (and in fact, I haven't bought one), but sprinkled through this range of approaches they are marvelous.

Patty Larkin takes a smallish step towards seriousness. Of her four songs, "Not Bad for a Broad", "Dave's Holiday", "Junk Food" and "I'm Fine", the first three are humorous. The fourth, though, is an achingly beautiful love song that shows Patty's stylistic range to be quite wide. Patty is also a remarkable guitarist (this is what "Not Bad for a Broad" refers to), and even the a cappella novelty song "Junk Food" shows a *musical* sophistication that I'd have to place at least a couple levels above Christine's. Folk music doesn't insist on musical sophistication, of course, but having it certainly doesn't hurt, either.

Megon McDonough is a *much* more serious performer. Her songs, "Wake Up and Dream", "Painless Love", "She Moved Through the Fair" and "Every Living Thing", aren't even remotely humorous. I actually find Megon the least remarkable of these four, though given the company that's hardly a severe criticism. Her voice is pretty, and she sings pretty songs, but I find them little *beyond* pretty. "Painless Love", the one I like the most, is the one she wrote herself, so perhaps if she had more confidence in her own material she'd appeal to me more.

Sally Fingerett is at the other end of the folk spectrum. She's a pianist, not a guitar player, and her three songs, "Ladies Lunch", "Home Is Where the Heart Is" and "But Still He Loved Her So (The Ballad of Harry and Esther)", are not only not meant to be funny, but they're a step even past Megon's pretty songs, into the treacherous territory of the genuinely emotionally affecting. "Ladies Lunch" confronts the confusion inside the lives of women trying to be independent. "Home Is Where the Heart Is" is a brilliant piece about a mother explaining to her young daughter about the two homosexual couples that live near them. When Martin's lover leaves him and he contracts AIDS (order unspecified, and the second of these is only implied, though I'm pretty sure it was meant), the mother and her daughter bring him toys and water colors. The daughter wonders "who will care for him", and the way I picture this scene in my mind, a perfectly naïve child asking the eminently sensible question of who will care for this sad, dying man, a question asked not rhetorically, but with the *assumption* that of course *somebody* will care for him, a perfectly rational assumption for someone who knows people but not their world to make-this scene in my mind is completely devastating, to the extent that I've now broken down, crying uncontrollably, three times in the

course of trying to write these last three sentences. People *need* companionship. After thousands of years in which this fact could have sunk in, how is it that we still have a society that, as a whole, can't provide this fundamental comfort? Why is it that the only strongly knit communities I know of are centered on religions?

I hit this review at a time when I'm particularly attuned to these issues, I'll admit. On one side of my mind, I've just read Orson Scott Card's book of theological essays, *A Storyteller in Zion*, and the book I'm *currently* reading, Judith Moffett's *Pennterra*, also features a strong religious community (this one Quaker). On the other side, my job at the moment involves trying to understand the virtual communities that develop on online services, Usenet discussion groups and Internet mailing lists, and I'm feeling extremely frustrated and disillusioned by the frequency and ease with which discussions in these communities can (and do) explode into juvenile bickering and bare rage. Combining these two observations offers the obvious conclusion that I ought to forget about virtual communities and join a real one, but I can't do that because I can't find one that doesn't couple aspects that to me are *self-justifying*, with arbitrary, logically-unconnected religious baggage that I can't possibly support. Is fear of eternal damnation the only force that can persuade people to be as kind to each other? I don't need to refer to gods to conclude that we *should* care about each other, so why should we need the threat of them to get us to *do* something? I *refuse* to believe that Zion without faith is impossible, but the counterexamples are keeping themselves alarmingly well hidden.

Yes, I know, that didn't have much to do with Sally Fingerett, but I included it anyway by way of explanation for how it is that "Home Is Where the Heart Is" affects me so deeply at the moment. You, if you hear it, may just think it's nice, or might even find it cloying, or you might find that it makes you think about health-care-system politics. Me, it makes me want to save the world. *Somehow*.

Anyway, getting back to the album, Sally's third song, "But Still He Loved Her So", is another sad one about True Love. She reminds me quite a bit of Beth Nielsen Chapman, actually, another woman who can make me cry. Powerful stuff, music, or else I'm currently *way* too highly strung. I bet Confucius would handle this better. Then again, I doubt he'd like Celtic Frost.

Solo songs account for only 14 of the nominal 22 tracks here. Seven of the others are between-song banter, introductions and miscellaneous stories. The last track is the four women stomping through "These Boots are Made for Walkin'". They don't quite rock, but they folk quite convincingly.

## Volume 2, 1993 CD

The second Four Bitchin' Babes album is much less interesting than the first one. I say this for two reasons. First, this one is *not* live, and so while the four participants help each other out, the spark of live spontaneity is missing, and this record is closer to just being a normal compilation whose songs simply happen to not have been released before. Second, Patty Larkin departed for her major-label solo career between albums, and is here replaced by Julie Gold. As I observed with Lavin's other compilations that she appeared on, I don't find Gold that compelling a *performer*, and her songs have a dangerous potential for runaway saccharine sentimentality, which she herself doesn't defuse as effectively as, say, Nanci Griffith did with "From a Distance". The fact that she has four songs here to the others' three each makes *sense* given that she didn't, as of this album, have any solo records, but I'd rather have heard another from Sally or Christine.

At any rate, there's still quite a bit of good music on this album. Christine and Sally trade places (actually, it's not a complete trade—more like castling, really), with Christine doing a serious song called "As Close to Flying" about figure skating, and Sally doing the silly "Take Me Out to Eat". Christine does one of her trademark songs, "Bald-Headed Men", and a cover of Peter Udell and Gary Geld's "Sealed with a Kiss". Sally does an elegy for a friend, "Save Me a Seat (Homeward Bound)", and a song about the grace of the signing of a deaf man, "Graceful Man".

Megon McDonough has three songs, "Oh Great Spirit", "Butter" and "The Choice". They're okay. Julie's four are "From a Distance", "Try Love", "(Fun to Be) Perfect" and "Good Night, New York".

The coolest part of this album, though, has to be the unbilled fourteenth track, a short a cappella piece accurately described in the liner notes as "If the Theme Song From Final 'Jeopardy!' Had Lyrics They Might Sound Something Like This...".

## Patty Larkin

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### *Angels Running*, 1993 CD

I liked Patty's songs on *On a Winter's Night* and *When October Goes*, and she was a good quarter of the first Four Bitchin' Babes album. The thing that made me actually buy this record, though, was that my parents got it and liked it, and I'm determined not to let them get ahead of me *this* time.

*Angels Running*, frequently mis-cited as *Running Angels*, leaves room for little doubt as to how Patty

escaped the relative commercial obscurity of the Rounder-level folk labels for High Street/Windham Hill/BMG. She's a fabulous guitarist and a delightful songwriter, and though her voice is a little thin, I think, she knows how to show it to its best effect. Her backing band provides a nicely restrained accompaniment to her own playing, and harmony vocals from Mary-Chapin Carpenter, Jonatha Brooke and Jennifer Kimball provide a nice depth to several songs. Folk purists may not appreciate the carefully produced soft-country-rockish arrangement given most of these songs, but I can report that they sound just as good played live with only a guitar, so I think it's okay to like them *despite* the bass and drums and keyboards, if that's your preference.

I find this album pleasant throughout, but swaths of it I'm not much more into than that. There's not a song I don't like, but there aren't many I *love*. In fact, there are *two*. One is "Good Thing", the song the title comes from. Slow, atmospheric, quiet, *graceful*, I find myself humming it. The other is "Helen", a detailed small-town portrait of a poor but proud native who hates to see the "new people" move into the bleak coastal town she loves. It's not that I have any love for small towns; quite the opposite, I'd go crazy in a place like this in under a month. The story has the ring of Truth, though, and I'll take True stories about just about anything.

The album also has a particularly good two-track epilogue, labeled "The Other Side". The first track is a short, hilarious accent-exercise called "Channeling Marlene", and the actual song is "Video", Patty's daydream about having her own rock video. When I saw Patty on tour with Cheryl Wheeler, Cliff Eberhardt and John Gorka (an "On a Winter's Night" tour), all four singers donned sunglasses to perform it (and Cheryl thanked Patty for playing it, since it meant they all got to "dress up"). Folk music often attempts to maintain the appearance of knowing nothing about a wider rock world, but I think it's more interesting to know that a folksinger *is* in touch with the rest of the musical world, and *chooses* to play folk music anyway.

## The Story

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### *Grace in Gravity*, 1991 CD

Jonatha Brooke and Jennifer Kimball, who sang backup on several of Patty's songs on *Angels Running*, are a group themselves. I picked up their second album on the basis of many good reviews, and liked it, and so got this first one, too. This one I'm not quite as fond of. The music sounds like a cross between

Suzanne Vega and the Indigo Girls, with the odd occasional Latin infusion, and Jonatha's penchant for complicated harmony structures and polyrhythmic vocal stresses sounds over-thought and somewhat cold to me. I'm *impressed*, but not involved. Their setting of e e cummings' poem "love is thicker than forget" to music strikes me exactly the same way. I admire the thought, and I *want* to like it, but it doesn't inspire any of the requisite emotions.

On the subject of harmony style, I should say that I *dislike* the Indigo Girls for *their* harmonies, so if you like them you might like this album a lot more than I did.

A release note: this album was originally released on folk label Green Linnet, and was reissued with new artwork but the same music by Elektra when they picked up the Story.

### *The Angel in the House*, 1993 CD

I like the Story's second album *much* better than their first one. I can't exactly pinpoint why. The participants are almost all the same, they haven't *changed* styles drastically, but this album doesn't feel nearly as cold as the first one did. More reverb? Different equalization? It's probably some ridiculously trivial detail like that. It can't be anything obvious like musical maturation, fuller arrangements, louder drums, or the fact that this is the one I bought first.

Whatever the cause, on this album Jonatha and Jennifer begin to sound to me like they could be a Simon and Garfunkel for the next century. The pattern fits, as Jonatha writes all the songs and plays guitar and sings, does the vocal arrangements, appears solo, gets her own "special thanks" section in the credits, etc. Jennifer shows up just to sing, but manages to be integral to the duo's sound through just that. Jonatha seems to have Paul's level of talent and intelligence, too, which is saying something, but not necessarily as much as you might think (I've only got the one Paul Simon solo album, after all). The Story even have this Brazilian fascination that matches Paul's *Rhythm of the Saints*.

Of course, the Story don't sound anything *like* Simon and Garfunkel. Broadly characterized, this album fits into about the same genre as Patty Larkin's *Angels Running*. There are enough drums and keyboards and bass to make this more than just a folk album, but it's still too essentially acoustic to really be rock. There are some country tinges, though the Latin ones are more prevalent. The harmonies aren't as obsessed with sevenths and ninths and the like as they seemed to be on *Grace in Gravity*, but you're aren't likely to mistake them for the Everlys and you'd have a hard time replacing Jennifer with anything that Digitech makes. With quotations from Horton Foote,

Harold Pinter, Germaine Greer, Phillip Larkin and Virginia Woolf, this is an even more literate album than the first one, but using the quotes as inspiration for lyrics, rather than as the lyrics themselves, seems to me to work much better.

The songwriting here is enviably consistent, but the album is also bolstered by at least four songs that I am *really* taken with. The chorus of "The Gilded Cage" ("But when I saw the father, shaken, spent like spare change, / On his knees and under the gun, / Then I wondered what would become of me") is sung with what feels like barely-controlled dismay. "The Angel in the House" is a fascinating portrait of a woman living with a spirit that is partly her departed husband, partly her own loneliness, and partly the house her loneliness inhabits, and begins with the arresting couplet "My mother moved the furniture when / She no longer moved the man". "Fatso" is a sly rumba (or a samba, or one of those thing-I can't tell them apart) about anorexia, with the hilarious and yet chilling chorus "Because someone will adore me when my ribs show clearly / And I'm thin even when I sit down. / Someone will admire my gorgeous arms and legs / When I'm only one hundred pounds." The last track, the CD bonus, is "Fatso, Part 2: Yo Estoy Bien Asi", a completely demented Latin call-and-response rejoinder to "Fatso" that, in translation, says such things as "Just let me live, man, chubby but yummy". Jonatha and Jennifer don't even appear on this song, as Alex Alvear, who played bass on "Fatso", takes over. I don't know how this track ended up on the album, but I think it's inclusion is inspired.

## Disappear Fear

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### *Deep Soul Diver*, 1989 CD

Disappear Fear as another vocal duo where one member writes all the music and plays guitar, and the other just sings. They have some strong supporters, and have some Indigo Girls connection apparently, but I include them mostly as a point of reference, since I don't really care for this album very much. I can't decide if Sonia and Cindy are supposed to be feminist folk heroes, a vegetarian honky-tonk band, or a Kirsty MacColl tribute revue. Whatever Disappear Fear has done to gather a cult-following, either I'm missing it, or it's not on this album.

## Electric Bonsai Band

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### *But I'm Happy Now*, 1992 CD

"I Am My Dad" was my favorite song on *Big Times in a Small Town*, and I didn't waste much time going back out to get this album, which is where it originally appeared. Andrew Ratshin's voice is, well, Chipmunk-like, and I have this weakness for preposterously high and nasal voices that don't sound like they could possibly originate in an adult male. I'm also a big fan of the one-man-and-robots approach to being a "band", which Ratshin exemplifies. I still don't understand why HMV had Electric Bonsai Band shelved under Jazz, but it sure isn't due to having listened to *this* album.

I confess to being disappointed in this record. The studio version of "I Am My Dad" is missing a chunk of the exuberance that the live version had, especially around the chorus, which seems to die completely here. The bass and drums here ought to enhance the song's dynamics, but instead I find that the guitar work Andrew did in concert to *compensate* for their absence was actually far more effective. In the live version the song also has an irresistible Bobs-like melody to it which doesn't come across as clearly here. Worse, there aren't many *other* songs on the album that seem even as catchy as *this* version of "I Am My Dad". "Creatures of Habit" and "Puberty Wars" are close, and I bet I'd like *them* live, too, but here they're still missing something. I think it's that these songs strike me as pop songs by nature, and I don't understand why they're being given this thin folkly arrangement. This album sounds like the *demo* for itself to me. Get the band in, turn up the amps, and run through this stuff again with *enthusiasm*, and I bet you'd really have something.

## 10,000 Maniacs

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### *The Wishing Chair*, 1985 LP

There was a moment, once, when I liked 10,000 Maniacs. This wasn't it. The jittery folk-pop on this, the band's major label debut, reminds me of a wimpy Feelies, or the Chipmunks doing early REM, or Harry Belafonte trying to find a way to pay the rent after somebody steals his accent. The guitars sound like banjos, the banjos like ukuleles and the ukuleles like something Fisher Price would make for four-year-olds. Actually, there *aren't* any banjos or ukuleles, but that's what they *would* sound like on this album if there were any. The music is thin and busy, and most songs seem utterly lacking in focus to me. Why critics who assail

Nanci Griffith's voice as reedy and weak didn't promptly drum Natalie Merchant out the business, I'm sure I don't know.

Uh, OK, this album isn't *that* bad. If you found Natalie and her band charming later on, this is certainly worth checking out. "Scorpio Rising" is noisy enough that even I like it, and the rest of the material is in keeping the band's overall style. At the time, though, when I liked *In My Tribe*, this album didn't have any of the hooks I liked about the latter record, and in the time since 10,000 Maniacs have only fallen farther out of my favor, to the point where I considered leaving them out of the book entirely.

And for this record maybe that would have been better. Tell you what: if you have any feeling you might like 10,000 Maniacs, pretend you didn't read this entry.

### *In My Tribe*, 1987 LP

I have grown to abhor Natalie Merchant's voice, and prolonged association with REM has turned 10,000 Maniacs into a band whose presence I find unbearably cloying. My instinct is to instantly renounce any cause Stipe and Merchant endorse, just to eliminate the vanishingly small chance that I, too, will become famous and one day will have to shake one of their hands on some insipid benefit concert / awards program without giving away that hearing them *pains* me.

It wasn't always that way, though. When *In My Tribe* came out I was buried in the basement of the Harvard Lampoon, painstakingly assembling our occasional output with spray-mount, line-tape and the world's largest collection of glue-encrusted exacto knives (this was the dark ages, you see, just before the last wax machines in the publishing business were finally traded for Macintoshes). WFNX played "What's the Matter Here?", "Don't Talk" and "Like the Weather" incessantly, and under the influence of gallons of Dr. Pepper and boxes of chocolate donuts (standard layout-session fuel), they seemed like pretty cool songs.

When I bought the album, "Hey Jack Kerouac", "Gun Shy", "My Sister Rose" and "Verdi Cries" seemed even cooler. Between *The Wishing Chair* and *In My Tribe*, 10,000 Maniacs jettisoned a member and a lot of extra instruments, and this album is much less busy than the previous one. This leaves the songs' melodies as the primary elements, and Natalie's quirky voice and thoughtful lyrics as the strengths. "Gun Shy", sung to a brother (?) who has just joined the army by a sister (?) who is afraid this means he will never learn to face the world any other way, and "My Sister Rose", sung about an older sister's wedding, are two of the

most notable, affectingly personal songs of the sort not often essayed in rock music. In fact, the only song I didn't like on this album was the cover of Cat Stevens' "Peace Train". After Cat, in his new life as Mohammed Islam, came out in support of the death warrant on Salman Rushdie, the band had the album reprinted *without* "Peace Train"; they should have had that thought *before*. Cat's version is way better.

## Melissa Etheridge

If I'd've stopped to think about it, I would have realized that Melissa Manchester and Melissa Etheridge were, in fact, different people, and that there was no particular reason why I should be biased against the latter. Without a good reason to examine the subject, however, I labored under this subconscious delusion for a few years, until my sister, whose name is also Melissa, graduated from Tufts in 1991.

That sounds like a non sequitur, but it was while helping Melissa pack up her dorm room and load it into a rented truck for transportation back to my parents' house in New York, that I first paid any conscious attention to Melissa Etheridge. The last thing to get packed (and this ordering shows a good McDonald-family sense of priorities) was the little boom-box that served as Melissa's stereo system, and the selection that accompanied most of the moving process was Melissa Etheridge's second album, *Brave and Crazy*. As we manœuvred Melissa's rickety rocking-chair out of Wilkins, or Willis or Wilson or whatever that house was called, I remember hearing "No Souvenirs", and deciding that a short break was in order so I could "catch my breath" and listen to the song.

### Melissa Etheridge, 1988 CD

After buying and liking *Brave and Crazy*, I backed up and bought Melissa Etheridge's eponymous first album. (Am I the only one who thinks that "eponymous" sounds like it means "it has elephants doing backing vocals"? Never mind.) This album, too, is excellent.

If only because of a slight facial resemblance in some photos and a relative lack of other similar female guitar-playing mainstream singer-songwriters to compare her to, Melissa Etheridge often gets likened to Bonnie Raitt. There is some sense in this, as both can be loosely described as playing rock music with country flavors, both actually play guitars, and neither conform to any of the various standards for female market-acceptance, such as the subdued folk-singer style of Suzanne Vega or Joan Armatrading, the trashy sex-appeal of Pat Benetar or Terri Nunn's Berlin, or the

glossily-produced top-40 approach of Fiona and Patty Smyth (all of which, you should note, I like and have included in this book).

The differences between Melissa and Bonnie, though, are more important to me than the similarities. Where Bonnie Raitt is fond of blues, relies heavily on songs by other people, and tends more towards VH-1 soft-rock accessibility than emotional intensity, Melissa Etheridge refuses to fall back on other musical forms, rely on other writers, or tone down her emotive abrasiveness.

The first result, then, is an album of rock songs that blends acoustic and electric guitars as if that's how all rock is supposed to be. Combining the Alarm and Lone Justice gives some idea both of the band's music and Melissa's voice. The country twang is still there, but it is much less evident than Maria McKee's. In its place is a raspiness and willingness to push herself all the way to the limit of her singing range that is part of what made Mike Peters most appealing.

"Similar Features" and "Bring Me Some Water" are strong rockers, Melissa belting out heartfelt words while the band crashes along behind her. At the other extreme, "The Late September Dogs" and "Occasionally" have a slow, quiet grace. In between, the rest of the album simply relies on Melissa's songwriting and arresting sincerity.

### *Brave and Crazy*, 1989 CD

Melissa's second album, the first one I bought, is even better than her debut. The basic strengths are the same: Melissa's dynamic voice, her rhythmic acoustic guitar, solid support from the rest of her band, honest relationship songs that manage to achieve a poetic sense of perspective without letting the craft of the words put distance between the songs and the emotions that bred them, and another set of wonderful melodies.

Musically, Melissa is clearly maturing. Compared to the relatively straightforward arrangements of her debut, this album starts to venture in some other interesting directions. "Brave and Crazy" and "Let Me Go", with their edgy, syncopated percussion and popping bass backing up Melissa's acoustic guitar, have decidedly un-folky cadences that foreshadow the industrial cant of *Never Enough's* "2001". "You Can Sleep While I Drive" takes the quiet sparseness of "The Late September Dogs" a step further, spinning a gorgeous song that barely feels accompanied at all.

And even the songs that are the same *sort* as on *Melissa Etheridge* are better here. "Testify" is in the same basic mold as "Similar Features" or "Bring Me Some Water", but rises above them for me on the powerful way slashing electric guitar and low, throbbing bass join Melissa's jangling 12-string on the



chorus. "Royal Station 4/16" alternates between clear acoustic guitar and a "Chrome-Plated Heart"-like chorus that features Bono, of all people, playing harmonica.

It's "No Souvenirs", though, that remains the focal point of the album. A fascinating song about ending relationships, "No Souvenirs" shows a masterful control over dynamics, the music standing back, almost invisible, out of the way during the verses, and then looming breathtakingly out of the shadows when it is needed, sinking away again at an instant's gesture before the chorus' last echoes have even died. I know a number of *people* who would do well to learn this trick.

### *Never Enough*, 1992 CD

I was favorably disposed toward Melissa's third album before even hearing it, because it shares titles with Patty Smyth's terrific solo debut. The cover, which features a black and white picture of Melissa, from the back, standing in jeans and no shirt, with an *electric* guitar hanging behind her, boded well, too, I thought, hinting both at personal revelation and electric energy awaiting inside.

The album is even cooler than I'd anticipated, and it made #8 on my top ten list for 1992, right between Megadeth and Think Tree.

Feeling, I guess, that two albums with Niko Bolas' help were enough experience for them to do the job on their own, Melissa and bassist Kevin McCormick co-produce this album by themselves. Melissa does play electric guitar on a couple songs, and piano on one, but she reverts to acoustic 6- and 12-strings for the bulk of the record. *Brave and Crazy* drummer Mauricio Fritz Lewak returns, as does keyboard player Scott Thurston, and guitarists Stewart Smith and Mark Goldenberg take the place of Waddy Wachtel and Bernie Larsen, who performed this duty on the previous record. On the first two albums the credits differentiate between "the ME band" and "additional musicians", but here the players are listed song-by-song, with no attempt to identify one subset of them as "the band".

And this is fine, because Melissa's own personality is definitely the key presence here, even more than on the first two records. She performs one song ("The Letting Go", the one she plays piano on) without any help at all, and "Place Your Hand" is just her voice, her guitar, and a cello.

The song that stands out instantly from this album is "2001", the second track. Laced with samples, "industrial percussion" and killer distorted electric guitar from Melissa herself, "2001" combines hard rock, techno and Melissa's voice for a bizarre hybrid that I think is completely cool. It didn't do much as a single, I don't think, but at a time when the American charts are dominated by Garth Brooks, Billy Ray Cyrus, Boyz-2-

Men and Whitney Houston, creativity isn't exactly at a commercial premium, especially if it doesn't fit into a neat pre-existing trend-genre.

As with *Brave and Crazy*, the bulk of this album just improves on the sort of songs that Melissa does best. The rock songs, like "Must Be Crazy for Me" and "It's For You", are heavier than their precursors; the sweeping mid-tempo songs like "Ain't It Heavy" and "Keep It Precious" are even better than "No Souvenirs" or "Precious Pain"; and the slow songs, like "The Boy Feels Strange" and "Dance Without Sleeping" are awesome. Not only has Melissa Etheridge found her niche in the rock world, but she's starting to spread out and infiltrate the rest of the neighborhood. Personally, I welcome her.

## Kimm Rogers

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### *Soundtrack of My Life*, 1990 CD

Who is Kimm Rogers? I have no idea. Nobody seems to have heard of her before "Will Work for Food", the single from *Two Sides*, suddenly appeared in rotation on WFNX here in Boston. I liked it and the album well enough, though, that I tracked down this first one. Circa *Soundtrack of My Life*, Kimm is a singer, songwriter and guitarist who produces music a bit like a combination of Juice Newton, Maria McKee, Joni Mitchell and Melissa Etheridge.

And a bit not. The first thing you will notice about Kimm Rogers is her voice. It's just high and nasal enough that it seems more comfortable with drums and guitar behind it than sitting on a stool with just an acoustic guitar. It's just strained enough that though she sounds partly like a poetess just trying to deliver her stories, she also sounds partly like a singer caught up in the energy of the music. It's the voice of a rock singer doing folk, or perhaps a folk singer doing rock, but neither precisely.

On the basis of this album it's a particularly close call. Melissa Etheridge is definitely the closest point of comparison, and the fact that they are label-mates seems like just too much of a coincidence. Melissa has "Bring Me Some Water", Kimm has "Walk on Water". Melissa has "Brave and Crazy", Kimm has "Desperate". "My Back Door" and "On My Street". "2001" and "2-0-19". They both play acoustic guitar, but have a full band that can kick into high gear when they want it to. "Just Like a Seed" and "2-0-19" are countrified rock songs very much in the mold of "No Souvenirs".

But there is room enough for two in this niche, in my opinion, and the differences between Melissa and

Kimm's voices are enough to keep them separate in my mind.

### *Two Sides*, 1992 CD

Kimm's second album moves much closer to rock. Where the cover of *Soundtrack* has Kimm in a cotton dress in a sunny meadow, the cover of *Two Sides* finds her in jeans and a leather jacket, on a busy city street, playing an electric guitar. Point of fact, Kimm isn't actually credited with playing electric guitar anywhere on the album, but the *spirit* of the picture is accurate.

The single, and song that got me interested, "Will Work for Food", is as good as anything here. Heavy bass, loud drums and grinding electric guitar duel in your ears with Kimm's high, almost squeaky voice. The verses are catchy, the chorus just syncopated enough to hold your attention until Kimm's voice either comes to fascinate you, or drives you to switch stations. The song was #10 on my top ten song list for 1992, and I commented at the time that it seemed as much a summary of the world's mood that year as Jesus Jones' "Right Here, Right Now" seemed the year before. This is a pretty sad commentary on the state of the world, but I think it's accurate. In 1991 the attention of the world was on political changes, with the Berlin Wall falling, Russia disintegrating, white-ruled South Africa starting to unravel, and so forth. In 1992, at least in the US, the presidential campaign jerked heads back around to less picturesque concerns, and this made for a year as gloomy, if determined, as the previous one was inspired, if frightened. "Will Work for Food" isn't the first song to recognize this, by any means, but it was the one that stuck most squarely in my mind as emblematic of the way social problems once again forced themselves into the public's awareness.

Many of the other songs, especially slow ones like "Troubled Inside" and "Hard to Find", show similarities with *Soundtrack*, but the energy of "Will Work for Food" never completely drains away. Heavier bass permeates the album, as do louder drums and electric guitars. It's possible that this is due more to the differing styles of producer Matt Wallace, who oversees this album, and J. Steven Soles, who produced and arranged *Soundtrack*, but this doesn't make the difference any less real. "Just to Have Fun", "Two Sides" and "Temporary Insanity" all twitch with guitar feedback, distortion and crunch.

It doesn't *always* work. The honky-tonk swing of "Washing Dishes" I find basically annoying, as much because Kimm's voice fits so poorly with it as because I don't like the style itself. "Personal Page" bothers me lyrically, especially when it slips into a litany of acronyms. The fact that the lyric sheet includes trademarks after MTV and BMW, and footnotes

explaining who owns the trademarks, is a corporate detail that further mars the song. (Elsewhere there is a similar credit for the Jockey trademark that mystified me until I finally located their billboard, just visible behind Kimm (you can only see the "JOC"), on the cover. This is, in my opinion, pretty pathetic. MTV, BMWs and Jockey billboards are part of life now, whether they like it or not, and they're fair artistic game just as much as the Grand Canyon, Loni Anderson or the Mona Lisa are. Fuck 'em if they can't take a joke.)

Getting back to the subject, Kimm Rogers still remains mostly an enigma to me. I like this album, but I'm not sure exactly how to take it. I've placed her in a context, but it's pretty hard to tell if it's the context *she* considers herself in. Maybe she'll have another album that will make things clearer. I *hope* so, and I guess that summarizes my feelings about her pretty neatly.

## Lone Justice

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### *Lone Justice*, 1985 CD

Take a serviceable country-rock band, get Benmont Tench to drop by and play piano and organ, and give it solid rock production by Jimmy Iovine, and you'd get a lifeless shadow of Lone Justice. The factor that elevates this competent, but unremarkable, band above a minor fate is the explosive singing and songwriting of lead vocalist Maria McKee. Featuring a voice that sounds like the result of a transporter accident that merged Dolly Parton and Pat Benetar into one body (a reasonably alarming analogy, I realize, but try to put aside the physical ramifications), McKee breathes life into this record like a wind tunnel giving you CPR. The three songs by bassist Marvin Etzioni are decent ("Working Late" is good), and Tom Petty's "Ways to be Wicked", which was one of the band's two hits, is a great song, but it is only on the five songs that McKee had a hand in that the band rises completely above rockabilly/cowpunk clichés.

"Sweet, Sweet Baby" is the other hit, and features cowriting and guitar from Little Steven. "After the Flood", "Pass It On" and "Wait 'til We Get Home" are strained, powerful and intense. My favorite, though, is "Soap, Soup and Salvation", which always seems to remind me of Hüsker Dü's "Charity, Chastity, Prudence and Hope", partly because of the list-title, I admit, but also because both songs have a spiritual desperation to them that ends up lending itself surprisingly well to both country and punk treatments. The element of gospel passion in McKee's voice merges with her country twang, and thought the net effect is

neither, exactly, the combination of urgency and plaintiveness is thoroughly rousing.

Sadly for me, in later work Maria evidently decided that this fiery style wasn't what she was after, and she has sanded her voice down to move it into a smoother, more ethereal style. Neither subsequent Lone Justice records nor Maria's solo work have ever really appealed to me, as a result, but make up your own mind about them, by all means.

## Rubber Rodeo

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### *Scenic Views*, 1984 LP

First of all, lead singer Trish Milliken is not the same person as *Hitchhiker's Guide's* Tricia McMillan. This is important to note, since if you thought they were the same you would expect this album to be wildly bizarre, which it most definitely isn't. You'd also expect the band to be fictional, and for at least one of the members to have more than one head.

What you actually find, on this album, is a somewhat stiff New England version of In Tua Nua, or perhaps the Motels after trading their horns for a pedal-steel guitar. The music is very standard middle-of-the-road rock fare, spiced with dobro and pedal-steel just enough that you notice them, but not enough to really enliven the music as much as it needs. Trish is a fine singer, but guitarist Bob Holmes shares lead vocal chores, and doesn't impress me very much.

I bought this album *after* getting *Heartbreak Highway*, and was pretty disappointed. For reasons that escape me, *this* record was reissued on CD, while the much better successor doesn't seem to have been.

### *Heartbreak Highway*, 1986 LP

On Rubber Rodeo's second major-label album, things improve considerably. The country influences are still there, and still relatively minor; it's the *rest* of the music that has improved substantially. It's still somewhat standard fare, and at times reminds me of Berlin (without the trashiness or cold-metal intensity) and Mark Knopfler's *Local Hero* soundtrack (without ever quite breaking free like Mark does, as my sophomore-year roommate Henry used to point out), but while this doesn't make the album sound wildly original, it makes it pretty pleasant. Bob and Trish take more duets, which work well, and Trish sounds even better than on *Scenic Views*. The country flavor is mostly of the high, lonesome wail variety (rather than two-step stomp), and serves to lend the music a sense of emotional drama that it wouldn't have as much of otherwise. This *isn't* what the album-cover's desert,

battered RV and cheesy cowboy-outfit band photos would lead you to expect, but Rubber Rodeo's metallic synthesizers and processed drums would look just as *out* of place in the jacket's surroundings as they sound *in* place on the album. This is one of those albums that I like a lot more than I can really logically justify, though, so weigh that in along with this rather mild description.

The title track is the most important to me, for it is one of the songs that kept me sane the summer after my first year of college. (See the intro to Pop Art's entry, in Boylan Heights, for the others.) I vividly remember hearing this song for the first time. My parents were living in a huge, rambling three-story Victorian that was not only more space than they needed (it had a 10-car garage, and that's only reckoning by the number of full-size garage doors it had), but frankly was beyond their ability to control. They moved again that summer. But before they did, I had the entire third floor to myself, three bedrooms, a huge fourth room that would have been a living room if there had been any living room furniture left over, two bathrooms, and a landing big enough for team sports (I speak from experience). I had next to no furniture, so nearly the only fixtures in the room I staked out as my *main* bedroom were my foam chair/flip-bed, my stereo, and the speakers sitting on top of two stacks of record boxes (ah, the old days when my whole music collection fit in four boxes...).

The whole house was hardwood, which meant that any sound in my room instantly propagated throughout the entire structure (not including the garage, which was connected to the two-story "guest cottage", rather than the house itself), so I had to keep the music quiet, which I maintain is absolutely inimical to the nature of rock music. I obliged, though, and centered my bed between the speakers to compensate. WXCI, Western Connecticut University's school station, came in clear there, and the sound of the music creeping timidly out of the speakers and then echoing mutedly around the room, which had no rugs, bookshelves, or anything else to baffle it, had a quality that no other space in my experience has shared, not that this is a bad thing. "Heartbreak Highway" would come on regularly, usually around eight or nine at night, and lying there on my strange bed, listening to the song bounce around, mingling with the night insects' sounds and the darkness outside the unshaded windows, it seemed to be both overpowering and understated. Trish's charged vocals and the song's blaring guitars provided the former, but the environment imbued it with a simultaneous subtle richness that made it much more than just another good rock song with a sharp hook.

Listening to it in more normal circumstances, seven years later, I can pick out those subtler qualities

yet, if I want to. I can also listen without the filter of memory, and hear a song that is really good, but not very unusual, like a lower-key Lone Justice. Even as I downgrade it intellectually, though, its emotional effect persists. The rest of the album approximates “Heartbreak Highway”, but never equals it. And I’m sure that the fact that I only bought the album the following fall, and never heard the other songs in the same setting as the first one, is a big part of why the rest of them don’t thrill me like the one, and is perhaps part of why I like the album so much anyway.

## Map of the World

Map of the World’s song “Big Business” was another of those five songs I credit with carrying me through the summer of 1986. I associate this band with Rubber Rodeo both for that reason, and because their musical styles have some vague similarities as well. By this I mostly mean that they have both male and female singers, and that Sophia Hanifi’s voice is of the same very general type as Trish Milliken’s. Map of the World uses a simpler arrangement (guitar, bass, drums, matter of fact), so the keyboard-driven top 40 rock polish is missing, as are the steel-guitars and other overt country instrumentalisms that Rubber Rodeo worked in. Sophia’s voice is enough, though.

### *Natural Disasters*, 1985 EP

“Big Business” is the opening track of this six-song EP, and it’s a catchy guitar-pop song, for the most part not too much different from what you might expect out of Winter Hours, or perhaps Translator. Khalid Hanifi sings lead, so Sophia’s presence is only heard sparingly. Her backing-vocal stabs are definitely part of what caught my attention about the song, but I definitely didn’t know that I would later come to feel that the songs like this one that Khalid sings are a notch below the ones she handles. Actually, the other thing that got me hooked on “Big Business” was Khalid’s slightly odd lyrical cadence. He has a capable, if ordinary, voice, but the flow of the chorus of this song has a mind of its own, and always sounds to me like the vocals are somehow a beat behind the music, or ahead of it, in a way that I find irresistibly catchy. I can’t listen to this song without breaking absently into a subvocalized “I begin again, / The models for big business, / Tied up with a ribbon / And kept secret for framing and fitness.” And no, I don’t have any idea what that means.

“Make Your Decision Now” is another song in the vein of “Big Business”, but the two undisputed killer tracks on this EP are “Natural Disasters” and

“Hiroshima Girls”. Sophia takes lead on both, and her voice has the intensity and some of the *sound* of a police siren. She has an incredible talent for constructing a melody by sliding into a drone note *from the direction of* the implicit melodic note. She also holds notes *into* modulations and downbeats, not just out of them (which fits with my feeling that the vocals feel like they are ahead of the music), which produces a great roller-coaster-like musical tension. “Natural Disasters” is my favorite of the two, by a slight margin. The chorus is ecstatic, and the revved up duet that forms the song’s coda would, in a perfect world, have a troop of berserk Russian squat-dancers kicking madly in time with it.

### *Hiroshima Girls*, 1985 12”

The single of “Hiroshima Girls” adds a cover of Patsy Cline’s “Crazy” (actually, Willie Nelson *wrote* it), which Map of the World play pretty straight (strengthening my claim that they show country influences), and an original called “Great Days”, which doesn’t strike me as one of their better songs. I was so surprised to actually *find* such a thing as a Map of the World single, though, that I didn’t much care *what* the songs sounded like. Leastways, not for the \$.99 I bought it for.

### *An Inch Equals a Thousand Miles*, 1989 CD

Being prolific isn’t one of Map of the World’s apparent handicaps, so I’d pretty much written them off by the time this CD appeared, four years after the only other release of theirs I’m aware of. And what do they have to show for four years? Six songs, clocking in at just over twenty minutes. The disc is on Atlantic, so for the longest time I kept thinking that it was just a sampler, and that the full album would come along later.

I believe I have given up waiting. I will have to be content with what there is. So never mind that Map of the World’s entire output (to my knowledge, anyway) over the last eight years would fit on one side of a 90-minute tape. Quality, not quantity, etc.

The really frustrating thing, though, is that only about half of the band’s songs *really* display their potential, by which I mean that Sophia is singing. On this album, Khalid’s vocal turns are actually distasteful to me, where on *Natural Disasters* I just thought they weren’t *as* good as Sophia. “The Wall of Least Resistance”, the lead track, could be by the Pursuit of Happiness, or some other generic male band whose greatest ambition would be to get to do a beer commercial. “Stop Thinking Now” is even worse, with a toneless Dylan-esque rant that alternates with some aimless spoken bits. “Steps” is a sappy acoustic ballad laden with cicada samples that I *wish* would drown

Khalid out. Sophia gets to sing a note or two toward the end, but this song is downright embarrassing.

The three that Sophia sings, though, are mesmerizing. "Impenetrable You" is the heir to "Natural Disasters", drawn out syllables and quartz-lock microtuning slides and all. "Necessity" is closer to "Big Business", terser, with more open spaces. The rhythm section (all new for this record; perhaps the old ones reached retirement age in between releases) is tight, clean and crisp, and the song clicks along with impressive grace.

Sophia's showpiece, though, is "I Fight for my Life". The song begins with her singing a slow, deliberate melody that glides from note to note like a nature documentary's slow-motion tracking of a panther in full sprint. The coiled power in her voice is awesome, and the yearning I feel for her to cut loose and just *wail* is almost sexual. Then, just when the song gets to a plausible concluding point, it jumps a few keys up, kicks the metronome over a few bpm's, and does the whole thing again. For the first few seconds the transposition and the faster tempo feel like release, but before very long I realize that Sophia and the band have charted their second course right at the *edge* of her break-loose point, and that they are going to ride this line laser-straight to the end of the song, a hand's breadth from explosion, but rivetingly restrained. When the song ends, my *body* hits repeat, without any intervention from my mind at all. It ends again and I play it again. This loops for a while until finally one time around I'm too incapacitated to punch the button, and the CD slips into "Stop Thinking Now", which wrenches me rudely out of my trance.

Sophia, won't you please make another album?

## Cowboy Mouth

### *Cowboys and Indians*, 1986 LP

Cowboy Mouth are yet another band from the summer that brought me *Map of the World*. I don't know anything about them. They're on Boston label Throbbing Lobster, so I guess they might be from around here themselves, but the album doesn't say.

The song that I bought this album for is "Hurricane", a tune that is made up of very close to the minimum number of different measures required to qualify as a rock and roll song. I don't think the drums vary once in the whole course of the song. The bass plays some different pitches at times, but doesn't diverge from eighth notes for even a moment. Dave Laredo's guitar and vocals have at least three different parts, but each of them is only a measure long, and he

repeats them several hundred times apiece. And the keyboards, which sound like a Muzak transcription of Tarzan's yodel, played on something made by Casio with keys smaller than your thumb, have exactly one riff.

But, as it happens I *like* all these repeated elements, and so I find the song an agreeable ride. The repetition isn't as complex and studied as Tirez Tirez's, so I don't find it fascinating *because* of the repetition, I just like the hooks, and thus like the song in *spite* of the repetition (I feel similarly about Heretix's "Heart Attack").

The rest of the album is a washout, though. The songs are limp, and they use that same cheesy synth patch for every damn song. "Living Off the Land" is palatable, but "Mr. Wilson", "Son of a Gun", "Ki Yi Yea" and the rest of them are the epitome of forgettable.

## Gin Blossoms

### *New Miserable Experience*, 1992 CD

The Gin Blossoms are another pop-rock guitar band with slight country leanings. I discovered them when they opened up for Del Amitri (label-mates, you see), and they turned in a good set, so I bought the album. Georgia thought they were obnoxious, but that was more due to their stage presence than their musical style.

Since I got it, this album has picked up a decent amount of buzz (partly due to the suicide of songwriter Douglas Hopkins, who had been kicked out of the band by the time of this album's release), and has sold a lot more copies than I would have expected before or after hearing it. I've read a number of reviews of it, and each time had to go back and check to make sure it *really* wasn't the Connells they were talking about. Sweet harmonies, jangling guitars, smooth memorable melodies, those are the sort of things they get cited for, and it's not that I don't think you can find those things on *New Miserable Experience*, but the Connells do them so much better than this that the Gin Blossoms aren't even in the same *chapter*.

Besides, none of those things are what comes first to mind to describe this album. Mainly I find it unassuming. "Hey Jealousy" is a bona fide hit, but the rest left almost no immediate impression beyond "pleasant". After the first few listenings, my assessment was a bleak "Well, there's nothing *wrong* with this stuff, but if every copy of it in the world vaporized tomorrow, I wouldn't let it worry me." It

was listenable, but I'd have sold it without a second thought if I sold CDs.

Having kept it, I don't feel so bad about it any more. Now that it's just another CD on my shelf, and I'm not focused intently on it expecting great things because it's new, it no longer bothers me that it's basically the aural equivalent of vanilla ice cream in my mind. After all, sometimes vanilla is just what you want.

The Gin Blossoms' sound comes off pretty generic to me, but I do think they *arrive* at it a little differently. Imagine starting with the acoustic sort of country music that is usually the purview of sensitive solo artists, the love songs or the folkier edges of country, where long bottleneck guitar solos rarely intrude and the singers don't make quite as much of a big deal about southern drawl, huge belt-buckles and pickup trucks. Now, give that sort of music to a bunch of young men with electric guitars. Now, and this is the hard part, say that they basically *like* it. Have them try to reproduce it, but give them only rock instrumentation. The strummed twelve-strings become fuzzed electrics, the drums get louder and realign around the backbeats, the whole thing gets louder and faster. The singer knows what they're *trying* to sound like, though, so he sings prettily, and makes sure that the band doesn't lose track of their melodies. Well, that's about what the Gin Blossoms sound like. Mind you, it's also what a million *other* American guitar-based pop and rock bands sound like these days, but you don't *have* to hold that against them.

## Scruffy the Cat

The second semester of the first-year filmmaking class at Harvard is centered around a group documentary that all dozen-or-so students collaborate on. We made ours about Scruffy the Cat. It wasn't that we particularly idolized the band, but we wanted to film a rock band, and someone knew one of the members, or their manager, or something like that, and so Scruffy the Cat it was.

This was in 1987, so *Tiny Days* came out while we were filming, and in my mind both records are heavy with associations from the project. We tagged along after the band at gigs, at their day jobs, at rehearsal, at a high school reunion where they played at one end of the gym and the attendees cowered at the other end until they started playing "Louie, Louie". I can't hear these songs without seeing the scenes of the film, or remembering sitting in the stockroom of the BU bookstore, interviewing bassist Mac Paul Stanfield while he unpacked and priced cartons of backpacks. I can't listen to these records without remembering how

Randall got himself beaten up about halfway through, and I especially can't play them without remembering how, just after we thought we were done shooting, the band sacked Stona Fitch, our favorite member, and we had to rush back out and shoot a frantic coda to avoid having the film be obsolete before we even started editing it. We bonded more strongly with Stona than the others for some obvious reasons. First, he was the only college graduate in the band, and he was a Princeton graduate at that, a writing major. He was also the only one whose day job was a real career, and not just a minimum-wage time-filler. This made him a natural focal point for a bunch of Harvard students, and perhaps was part of why he *didn't* end up getting along with the rest of the band (or at least *they* didn't get along with *him*). Not only that, but his office was just half a block from Adams House, where I lived, so we could take gear back and forth easily, which is not a trivial concern when the gear is 16mm film cameras, tripods, and full light kits.

All these associations also explain why I didn't follow the band after *Tiny Days*. The relationship was just too complex, and Stona's firing wrote the end to it, and it wouldn't have made any sense to try to recreate things. Beside the personal detritus around Stona's removal, he is to me the *musical* factor that rescues Scruffy the Cat from mediocrity on their first two records, and Scruffy without Stona was a sad, dull thing. This is especially ironic since the ostensible reason the band gave for firing him was that he was holding them back musically. As Stona himself put it after telling us this, "How well do you have to play to be in a rock band?"

### *High Octane Revival*, 1986 EP

Scruffy the Cat's six-song vinyl debut is a delightful, unassuming gem. They play cheerful, fast, country-twanged garage-pop, the kind that seems to waft out of a party, no matter where you play it. Singer Charlie Chesterman has a very plain voice, but delivers the simple lyrics with a good-natured charm. Lead guitarist Stephen Fredette provides the boogie licks, and Mac Paul and drummer Randall Gibson keep the beat solidly. Gibson is a particularly good drummer, even though he doesn't get to do anything particularly flashy. Producer David Minehan, of the Neighborhoods, keeps the band's sound appropriately punchy and clean. The touches that transform Scruffy's music from run-of-the-mill to interesting are Stona's collection of odd instruments, including piano, organ, accordion and most importantly, electric banjo.

Five of these songs are Scruffy's upbeat norm. "40 Days and 40 Nights" and "Happiness to Go!" are my favorites, charming and agreeable songs that take a

good mood and make it better. The coolest song, though (and my favorite Scruffy song), is “Land of 1,000 Girls”, a slower, more melancholy tune, filled with Stona’s organ, that became the centerpiece of our film. In fact, we ended up calling the thing “Take Me Away”, which is the first line of “Land of 1,000 Girls”’s chorus. It, better than the more-typical fast songs, expressed what we felt were the members’ real feelings about their lives, trying to balance their rock-band goals with the mundanity of their day jobs, and also better reflected our own mixed feelings about our subjects.

### ***Tiny Days*, 1987 LP**

Scruffy the Cat’s first full album is, to me, a somewhat unsuccessful effort that tries for more than the EP did, and ends up achieving less. The fast songs here, like “Mybabyshe’sallright” and “Upside Down”, don’t have the punch of *High Octane Revival*’s “40 Days and 40 Nights”, or “Buy a Car”, and feel forced even so. “Thomas Doubter” starts off like “Tiger Tiger”, another EP track, but veers off into an odd minor key, and isn’t helped by a meandering vocal melody that seems to *follow* the instruments rather than leading them.

The slow ones, like “Time Never Forgets” and “Hello Angel”, never match the sad grace of “Land of 1,000 Girls”. “Hello Angel” comes closest, and reminds me a little of REM’s version of the Velvet Underground’s “Pale Blue Eyes”. Rockabilly urges mar it, though, and Chesterman’s singing seems more artless than usual, drowning out some potentially nice harmony vocals.

The clichéd lyrics, which just seemed fun in small doses on *High Octane Revival*, here wear on my nerves. Part of this, no doubt, is that the band decided to print them on the liner, a decision that I’m not sure was wise, as most of them don’t read particularly well. Sentiments like “She’s a long tall drink of water”, “My four walls drive me crazy” and “When your ship comes in, and my luck runs out, / Then we’ll know what our love’s about” are inoffensive at best, and embarrassing at worst, depending on your mood and tolerance level.

There are some songs here, most notably the Los Lobos-like “Shadow Boy”, where the band don’t seem to know *what* they’re trying to accomplish. You can also feel, if you’re looking for it with hindsight, the tension between Stona and the rest of the band, as his parts are not given near as much prominence as Fredette and Chesterman’s corny squalling guitars. Examining the songwriting credits also reveals that the other four members collaborate in various combinations, while Stona’s two songs are both only his, and his only writing credits.

The album seems to kick into gear only at the very end. “My Fate Was Sealed with a Kiss” and “Tiny Days” are the most spirited songs here, and an album with these two and the six from the EP would have been pretty impressive. “My Fate Was Sealed with a Kiss” is a hilarious relationship song that opens with the lines “She looked at me and I looked out the window. / She reached for my hand and I reached for a brick.” Both musically and lyrically, the band manages finally to relocate the sly exuberance that made the EP so much fun. “Tiny Days” then stomps into a climax that could do justice to many albums better than this one, a manic, tempo-changing, abruptly-stopping rave-up that has the whole band playing like energy alone will save them, which in fact it probably could have if all their songs showed as much of it as this one.

## **True Believers**

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### ***True Believers*, 1986 LP**

Austin, Texas’s True Believers seem to me like what Scruffy the Cat was *trying* to be. They play a similar brand of high-energy rock with country and rockabilly tendencies, but they make it sound coherent and intentional. Part of this, no doubt, is the fact that they are actually from the South. The rest of it, though, is that they seem to understand what kind of music they *want* to make, and that’s what they play.

Of course, what Scruffy was *trying* to be *wasn’t* what I liked them for, and in a fit of consistency, I don’t much like the True Believers, either. One song, “The Rain Won’t Help You When It’s Over”, caught my attention, and I really like it, but like Los Lobos’ “Will the Wolf Survive”, it finds a hook that I don’t hear in the rest of their music.

## **Reivers**

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### ***Saturday*, 1987 LP**

While I’m on the subject of Austin bands that I didn’t quite connect with, but who deserve a mention anyway... The Reivers, formerly Zeitgeist, also show some country influences, but more in the mold of the dB’s and Guadalcanal Diary’s southern pop than the True Believers traditional Hispanic leanings. Don Dixon produced this album, and I *wanted* it to be along the lines of his other productions, like REM and Let’s Active, but it just doesn’t strike me that way. Singer John Croslin’s deep, twangy voice and the band’s penchant for dark, noisy arrangements edge them out

of Boylan Heights' pure pop territory for me, and I never found a replacement appeal to endear them to me.

They're definitely talented, though, and worth your making up your own mind about if your wanderings through this book lead you here. You should be especially interested if the dB's/Let's Active/REM wing of southern guitar-pop seems insubstantial to you, too polished or too light or too quiet. The Reivers rendition of the form is noisier, louder and more sinister, with allegiances to punk like the Pixies-esque background dialogue on the instrumental "Karate Party", and they may be just what you're looking for. Even when they do go quiet and pretty ("Electra" reminds me of U2's "Trip Through Your Wires"), they do it in a way closer to X's "See How We Are" than the dB's "On the Battlefront" (for example). The presence of two women in the band, who both sing, provides another point of interest (and probably explains the X comparison, as well as why they remind me of city-mates Timbuk 3), and though neither women are overpowering singers like Maria McKee or In Tua Nua's Leslie Dowdall, they complement Croslin and each other well.

So, judge for yourself.

## Thin White Rope

If you want a band with a *really* dark and disturbing perspective on country influences, who make music that sounds like a soundtrack to a Sam Raimi remake of High Noon, where the zombies are cowboys, or vice versa, Thin White Rope is a gift especially for you. I'd heard the name, but they only really came to my attention when their then-ex-drummer Jozef Becker joined Game Theory (and stuck around to be in the Loud Family). Sometime thereafter, on a binge of buying CDs by bands I'd only heard of, I picked up *The Ruby Sea*.

The first few times I listened to it, it *frightened* me, and I didn't know quite what to do with it. Lead singer and songwriter Guy Kyser was clearly inspired, but his unsteady voice sounded like a cross between Michael Stipe and Bela Lugosi, or between Roy Rogers and Tom Waits, and both combinations sent me to stand, puzzled, in front of my stereo trying to decipher what control I'd unintentionally dislodged. The band's stylistic debt to Western music was clear, but I had a feeling that if you tried to run this stuff through CMT the whole neighborhood's cable hookups would fuse. Sure, it was *fascinating*, but so is being in an automobile accident.

Unable to assimilate *The Ruby Sea*, I put it on the shelf and mostly forgot about it for quite a while.

Along came this book, and a few months into writing it I hit this section and dusted the CD off to review it. Maybe I hadn't concentrated hard enough on it before, but *this* time everything snapped into place, and I couldn't turn the thing off. This led, as all good musical obsessions do with me, to a quick annexation of the band's back catalog.

### *Exploring the Axis*, 1985 CD

The first Thin White Rope album, occupied by songs such as "Dead Grammas on a Train", "Atomic Imagery", "The Real West" and "Rocket USA", is as appropriate an introduction to the band as anything. There isn't *that* much difference between Thin White Rope albums, frankly, and the fact that the band's style is so wildly original either makes this acceptable, or explains why I might fail to notice differences even if there were many, as the space between TWR and everybody else is so wide as to dwarf the stylistic gaps among their albums.

*Exploring the Axis* is startlingly fully-formed for a debut. The production is a bit boxy, with Jozef Becker's drums seemingly a mattress or two away from their microphone (albeit in a *very* small room), and a persistent trebly spring-reverb effect gives the whole album a sinister lingering hiss, but the music is chilling and dynamic. Songs speed up and slow down as if Kyser has somehow wired a metronome directly into his brain to allow the band to follow along with his every demented whim. His and Roger Kunkel's guitars surge, howl and bay. Becker's drumming is relentless, and Stephen Tesluk's bass keeps pace with it. If the dB's had an evil twin, they might sound a lot like this.

Kyser's singing is creepy enough, but the closer you pay attention to the lyrics, the *more* unnerved you will get. "Down in the Desert", the opening track, is a portrait of a man who left his small hometown searching for some sort of excitement or validation in Mexico, and returned without it. What he *did* find isn't specified, "but if you look closely there's still something scared in his eyes". "Dead Grammas on a Train", for all the apparent gory whimsy in its title and the boisterous music, is actually excruciatingly bleak, the narrator only *imagining* that the dead women would have gone *on* to become grandmothers, and that their deaths thus prevented his "perfect one" from ever being born. The leap from personal loneliness to a fixation on railroad fatalities is simultaneously inspired and pathological. "Atomic Imagery"'s tag line, "I pictured something clean and dry", is somehow even more sinister to me. "Exploring the Axis" begins with the evocative "The axis buried is a pivot in your head", and perhaps the most telling admission is in "Eleven":



"I start to feel the strain, I rise and flex my evil brain oh oh".

Evil is certainly the mood of choice here. In a culture where evil is no longer very well understood, this would probably have resulted in a significant fraction of the few records Thin White Rope sold being confiscated by alarmed parents, except that kids don't really understand evil, either, and so aren't likely to appreciate how much more frightening Thin White Rope is than Slayer or Napalm Death or any of their brethren. The metal bands, you see, tend to define themselves almost entirely by opposition to their communities' conventional mores. True evil isn't *opposed* to "good" so much as it operates *without any reference* to it. The scariest evil is one that seems to act according to some set of rules that you not only don't share, but that you can't even fathom, and aren't sure you ever could. This music does that. Amazing stuff. Either you'll love it or you won't even want to talk about it.

### ***Moonhead*, 1987 CD**

John Von Feldt replaces Stephen Tesluk on bass in time for the liner photo, but not before Tesluk plays on most of the songs on this album. Not a lot has changed, although the production, by the band and Paul McKenna, is significantly improved this time around, with Becker's drumming sounding a lot more like drumming and not nearly as much like mortar fire.

Otherwise, *Moonhead* is a continuation of *Exploring the Axis*. "Wire Animals" translates fear and depression into the realm of the information age ("I dial networks that ripen slowly"), "Come Around" is another vividly morbid stomp ("Dave I saw your tiny fist around a leper's tit"), and "If Those Tears" is brilliantly cold ("Your girl and I thought of you. / We promised no emotion, / We quit when we were through."). "Crawl Piss Freeze" is Thin White Rope's version of those endless improvised songs you learn at summer camp. "Atomic Imagery" must not have been quite dark and dreary enough the first time through, as they do it again here, with Von Feldt. The cutting edge of Thin White Rope mania circa *Moonhead* is the epic last song, "Take It Home (Long Version)". I don't honestly know what became of the "normal" version, but this one is brutal, Kyser leaning into the chorus with a surprising amount of vocal control given how unstable he sounds.

My protestations of stylistic homogeneity aside, there *are* a couple new elements introduced here. "Thing" is a compassionate track with Kyser accompanied only by acoustic guitar, singing to a friend whose relationship has just ended, and gets much closer to conventional old-style gathered-around-the-frontier-campfire Western country music than the band's usual

fare. "Moonhead", the title song, is among the band's most musically-ambitious, one of the first TWR songs *not* centered on Kyser's voice.

Still, the overall mood isn't swayed by these infusions even a fraction of a degree. "You never lose what you don't extend, / So curl up and let the wind bury you" sings Kyser on "Mother". Aren't you glad he's not *your* son?

### ***In the Spanish Cave*, 1988 CD**

Von Feldt is aboard full-time for the third album, and Paul McKenna co-produces again, so this time there are no personnel changes. Fittingly, then, there are almost no stylistic changes, either. There are, perhaps, more slower songs here than on *Moonhead*, songs like "It's OK" that sound like Country in slow-motion. There's one of Thin White Rope's signature songs, "Red Sun", which finds Roger Kunkel's sliding solo weaving menacingly around Von Feldt's rumbling bass and Becker's careful drums. There's "Munich Eunich", the CD bonus track, an urgent strangled song that has nothing pleasant in mind, I assure you. There's the slam-square-dance soundtrack "Elsie Crashed the Party", with the eerily cryptic chorus line "Yeah we've chosen to stay out of the war". There's the straight-ahead rock anthem "Ring". There's the lullaby "Astronomy". There's "Wand", which would be another acoustic-guitar number if it weren't for that whipcrack snare drum and the fact that the rest of the band kicks back in after about the first minute. And there's one of Thin White Rope's catchiest melodic songs, the near-pop-ballad "July".

Other than all that, though, *In the Spanish Cave* is merely another incremental improvement along the same course the first two albums charted. If you have to be stuck with a "merely", I recommend this one heartily.

### ***Red Sun*, 1988 CD5**

This six-song EP in promotion of "Red Sun" serves as a podium from which to introduce several changes to the band. The first is the departure of Jozef Becker, who plays on a couple tracks before leaving. The second is the arrival and quick exit of stand-in drummer Frank French, who played on the *rest* of the tracks here but didn't make the band roster. The third is the new full-time drummer, Matthew Abourezk, who doesn't play on *anything* on this disc, but whose name does keep the "z" count even. The fourth is new producer Tom Mallon, known previously to me for his work with American Music Club, another often-harrowing band with a few country-ish influences of their own.

Other than ringing in these changes, this record is a novelty, however worthwhile. Besides the album version of "Red Sun" and a quite different rattling acoustic "original version" of it, the other four songs here are all covers of old standards: "Town Without Pity", "They're Hanging My Tonight", "Some Velvet Morning" and "The Man with the Golden Gun". All four are hilariously warped in the usual Thin White Rope ways. "They're Hanging Me Tonight", with its ticking stick-hits and Kyser's deadpan narration, is the standout for me, and the plodding "Some Velvet Morning" the low point, but there's more than enough here to delight the fan and perplex the neophyte.

### *Sack Full of Silver, 1990 CD*

With Abourezk and Mallon aboard, and Steve Siegrist sharing bass time with Von Feldt, Thin White Rope takes a surprise leap forward with their fourth album. The rut that they were threatening to eventually sink into (though they had a good deal of mileage left even so) gets paved over afresh, and the band sets out to record an even more perverse, chaotic and ambitious album. The liner notes explain that this the first album that came together on the road, and I don't know what that implies about Thin White Rope's home life, but this is their most brilliantly unhinged record yet.

The ten songs here veer wildly from mood to mood. "Hidden Lands" begins the album in a familiar vein, but "Sack Full of Silver" slips quickly into a bongo-and-harmonica gypsy monologue with the great half-nonsense verse "When psychologists write a book on this / And sell it, it becomes / A cartoon animated broken wire model / Of pterodactyl bones". That lasts barely two minutes before the band leans into a six-minute cover of, of all things, Can's "Yoo Doo Right". This leads into the brief mumbled stream-of-consciousness piece "The Napkin Song", and from there they quickly move on to the bitter country breakup song "Americana" ("I gained an hour when I moved out here with you", "You'll get what you expected from your 18-dollar home"), which blends seamlessly into "The Ghost" (indeed they are listed as sharing the track on the cover, even though there turns out to be a CD track-break in between them), which sounds like a drunken late night rendition of "Amazing Grace" by someone who couldn't remember the real words and so made up better ones ("I felt like a widower stoned and watching / A film of his wedding day").

Kyser credits inspiration for "Whirling Dervish" to a 1930's Daffy Duck cartoon soundtrack, and it *would* probably take animation to follow the band through their sudden shifts from bouncy show-tune glee to dark surging guitar-grind. "Δ", and that *is* its title, is then

quiet and slow (until it gets loud and slow), and nothing at all like "Diesel Man", a noisy, pulsing experiment in abstract mixing. And, to conclude the album, "On the Floe" is a lilting country slow-dance allegory. "There is a song so hard to steer / I thought it would capsize in bitterness and fear. / I look to the sky when I'm tired of the sea. / Constellations are moving, they're useless to me." This captures the Thin White Rope gestalt perfectly.

It's hard to know for sure what factors are responsible in what proportions for *A Sack Full of Silver*. Matthew Abourezk's drumming isn't precisely like Jozef Becker's, but it's not different enough in personality to make much difference to me in this context. Kyser's explanation of these as road songs means something, I supposed, but my guess is that it's Tom Mallon's production that makes the biggest difference. From his experience with AMC and Toiling Midgets, Mallon has certainly learned to have no fear of sonic chaos, and this is what I think liberates Thin White Rope here, and prods them to stray outside of their prior narrow focus. The results are extraordinary, but I would recommend getting here by working your way up through the albums in order, as without the first three for context this one probably won't make the sense that I've decided it should.

### *The Ruby Sea, 1991 CD*

And so we've worked our way back to where I began with Thin White Rope. My judgment is suspect for that reason, but even after living with the other four TWR albums for a while, I still think this one is their masterpiece.

The players change one last time. Stooert Odom takes over on bass for the duration, and Bill Noland produces. Tom Mallon's departure means that a semblance of order is restored to this album, but the lessons he taught the band about the possible virtues of *disorder* were not lost on them, this time around they just apply them at a higher level. *The Ruby Sea* has the same general organization as *Sack Full of Silver* (i.e. none), but each track is tighter, and the composite effect of unprovoked jumps from mood to mood is all the more alarming when each one is more carefully constructed.

The songs here vary from compelling poetry like the title track to fragmentary thoughts like the 1:30 "Dinosaur", whose entire lyrics are "I was watching T.V. / The announcer said they'd found your bones. / I'm too sad to be horrified / But I'm glad you're coming home", which Kyser delivers almost under his breath, while a background synth wash and slow, crashing snare-hits form essentially all the accompaniment. "Bartender's Rag" reminds me a lot of American Music

Club. "Tina and Glen" gets the award for fewest words, specifically "When worlds collide I'll see you again. / When worlds collide, Tina and Glen". It's as if Kyser's mind can no longer hold still for longer than a single thought without some outside assistance, and so perforce this album becomes a collection of short, disconnected thoughts and a few more-controlled ones that aren't necessarily any more comforting.

Every detail gets a trademark macabre twist on this album. Johanna Galos-Dopkins' guest vocals on "Up to Midnight" I expect to provide a counterweight to Kyser's singing, but in fact she sounds positively wraith-like, and makes Kyser's voice sound comforting by comparison. Much of the music here approaches the atmospheric, waves of sound that seem to just evolve more often than they actually switch chords in the conventional fashion. Abourezk's drumming provides a rhythm that at times seems only tenuously connected with what the other members are playing, both sonically and musically. That, too, feels ghoul-like, as if the rest of the band are shuffling blankly along, oblivious to the martial exhortations of golem drill sergeants.

Thin White Rope is most bizarre when they get most traditional. "Christmas Skies", if you looked at sheet music for it, could be a Jerry Jeff Walker song, but after Thin White Rope get through with it it sounds like a Wyoming serial-killer's death-row last request. They follow it with "The Fish Song", which sounds like an undead soccer team doing Neil Young's "Cinnamon Girl", and doesn't help matters. The album then ends with a short acoustic track called "The Clown Song". Listening to it I imagine myself held hostage by a deranged terrorist who decides to ease tensions during the siege by singing some songs he wrote while still in the asylum. As he plays and sings, I'm thinking "Hey, this guy's actually a pretty good guitarist", but the other thought I can't lose is "And I don't think I'm ever getting out of here alive."

### *The One That Got Away, 1993 CD*

Thin White Rope collapsed in 1992, I am sorry to report. They left us this farewell present, a double live album recorded in a tiny club in Gent, Belgium, on an oppressive summer night. Guy Kyser earns a permanent place of honor in my heart (and my book) for this incomparable bit of liner-note honesty: "I had a dream that we were mastering the live album and on the tape I could hear a little girl standing near the sound board. During some loud guitar squeaking at the end of 'Yoo Doo Right' she said, 'Mommy, this part sounds like goats.' One more thanks to anyone who has ever actually said we sound like goats."

The album evidently records the concert in its entirety. The band charges at full force through 26 songs, and at the end don't even sound winded. Or, to be more accurate, they don't sound any *more* winded than they do at the beginning. The selection covers all five albums, and thus also serves as an ersatz best-of. From *Exploring the Axis* come "Down in the Desert", "Disney Girl" and "Eleven"; from *Moonhead* come "Not Your Fault", "Wire Animals" and "Take It Home"; from *In the Spanish Cave* come "Mr. Limpet", "Elsie Crashed the Party", "Red Sun", "Astronomy", "It's OK" and "Munich Eunich"; from *Red Sun* comes "Some Velvet Morning"; from *Sack Full of Silver* come "Yoo Doo Right", "The Napkin Song", and "Δ" (here called "The Triangle Song"); from *The Ruby Sea* come "Tina and Glen", "Bartender's Rag", "Hunter's Moon", "The Fish Song" and "The Clown Song". The bonuses are the noisy "Ants are Cavemen", the goofy "Outlaw Blues", the even goofier "Wreck of the Ol' 97", and demented covers of "Roadrunner" (not Jonathan Richman's, the *other* one) and "Silver Machine" (by Hawkwind, lest anybody think that covering Can was just a joke).

The sound quality throughout is impeccable. As unnerving as Guy's singing is on studio albums, hearing him sing that way *live* is even *more* disturbing. That the differences between albums get even further ironed out in their live treatment here seems only fitting; I get the strong impression that what differences the albums had were largely artifacts of outside forces encroaching on Kyser's mental image of Thin White Rope's music, and that inside his head their career really was a seven-year continuum. I've heard nothing about his movements since, but I hope and imagine he'll be back. It seems inconceivable to me that such a unique, impressive and independent artist would be able to bear not continuing to make music.

# Hull

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from the Housemartins album *London 0, Hull 4*

## Soundtrack

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The Icicle Works: "Understanding Jane"

Joe Jackson: "Is She Really Going Out With Him? (A Cappella)"

Housemartins: "The People Who Grinned Themselves to Death"

The Beautiful South: "Let Love Speak Up Itself"

The Smiths: "Ask"

Echo and the Bunnymen: "Never Stop"

The Chameleons: "Up the Down Escalator"

The Comsat Angels: "Independence Day"

The Wonder Stuff: "Caught in my Shadow"

Jesus Jones: "Right Here, Right Now"

## Introduction

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Hull, Boylan Heights and The Suburbs, the next three chapters, are in a sense *all* suburbs, as well as places in their own right. All of them are defined, to some extent, by contrast with each other, and which one, if any, is the center of the structure is very much a matter of how (and when) you look at it. Hull is the British suburb. That's an oversimplification, and isn't the *reason* I grouped these artists together, but that's how it worked out. A number of the areas I construct in this book tend toward one side of the Atlantic, but I'm pretty sure that this one is the most homogeneously British.

The real reason for this grouping is musical, not geographic. Hull represents a continuum of approaches to pop music that are derived from such things as cynicism, theatricality, jazz, sarcasm, subtlety, sophistication, atmosphere, grandeur, and pomp. This is, in a sense, High Culture Pop (in the same sense that Mega Therion would be Low Culture Rock, Underground would be Low Culture Pop, The Suburbs might be Mid-Culture Pop, The Western Skyline would be Mid-Culture Rock and Eden could be High Culture Rock, though I think I've made the right decision in *not* organizing the book this way). The lineages of these artists descend more often from Cole Porter and classical music than from Chuck Berry or James Brown. Reserve replaces sweat, oblique critiques supplant open anger, and crisp, delicate, complex musical structures take the place of simplicity and drive, often with lighter drums,

less-distorted guitars, and many fewer sleeve comments to the effect of "this album was produced without using anything made by Roland or Korg". This music is rarely flashy, but it tends to reward inspection richly in much less obvious ways.

Not much of it *requires* close investigation to appreciate, though, and catchy, agreeable pop sparkle is prevalent. In fact, to me this is the music that *first* got called New Wave, back when New Wave was vague and new, before people latched onto equating that term with synthesizers. By now, this stuff has essentially been assimilated into the British mainstream and the American "college" scene, and New Wave has become a derisive term reserved for stock critical targets like A Flock of Seagulls and Duran Duran, but there was a time when it was still exciting...

## Joe Jackson

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### *Night and Day*, 1982 CD

I've followed Joe Jackson somewhat warily, since his frequent side-trips into retro-fascination tended not to be to my taste. Several years after this album came out I happened to hear "Real Men" on the radio and really liked it, so the next time I was in record store I flipped through Joe's albums to find out which one it was on. I found it on this one and, looking over the other tracks on it I realized that both "Steppin' Out" and "Breaking Us in Two", had sort of grown on me over time, and that where either had used to be enough to get me to switch radio stations, the thought of listening to them again seemed strangely appealing. Quickly, before I could change my mind, I bought the album.

This particular phase of Joe's career is well summarized by the Thurber-esque line-drawing portrait on the front cover, the Duke Ellington quote at the end of liner notes, and the great photograph of Joe and the band's amazingly cluttered studio setup. I don't know how much of the studio photo is planned for the shot and how much accurately represents the band's chaotic arrangement of instruments, debris and assorted lollipops, but either way it's a very revealing picture. Unusual percussion instruments line every surface: vibes, a xylophone, bongo drums, congas, tambourines, cymbals, triangles and cowbells. Most of these "surfaces" are keyboards of one sort or another, and these are in turn surrounded by a forest of microphones that appear to have been stolen from a 1950's radio soap opera in a daring time-machine raid, no two even remotely alike. These are plugged into a motley assortment of small mysterious boxes that, I assume, are

converters of some sort. There's a sax and two bass guitars. Ashtrays, empties, sheet music, pencils, screwdrivers, crackers, honey and some small plastic toys fill in most of what little empty space remains.

There are also several details telling enough to suspect they were planted: an I♥NY matchbook, a beat-up copy of a Marvin Gaye album called *Super Hits*, a "Psychology Today" sticker and an ashtray with "Missouri" printed on it.

The core musicians credited on this album are a bassist/percussionist, a drummer/percussionist and a percussionist/percussionist, with Joe himself on sax and eight varieties of keyboard. Guests are credited with violin, backing vocals, some synth programming and, of course, more percussion. The complete lack of guitars is notable and audible. The music that arises from this heap of equipment is jazzy and more than once sounds like it might be the sort of thing you hear drifting out of lounges, though the quality of lounge varies.

The topics of the songs heavily reflect the album having been recorded in New York. "Target" is about the randomness of urban violence. "Cancer" makes disease seem just as capricious. "Steppin' Out" and "Breaking Us in Two", the hits, are both piquant relationship songs with distinctly urban ambivalence, as if the lovers would like to be angry but can't bear to drop their stylishly apathetic social personas long enough to scream.

The last two are the coolest, in my opinion. "Real Men" examines sexual ambiguity and sexual tension, the last verse ending "And if there's war between the sexes / Then there'll be no people left". And "A Slow Song" could easily be the album's thesis, its narrator explaining that his life has enough tension, and what he wants from music is not more tension but less. "Am I the only one / To want a strong and silent sound / To pick me up and undress me, / Lay me down and caress me?" The song (and the rest of the album) answers its own entreaty.

### *Live 1980/86, 1988 CD*

I'm a confessed sucker for big packages. I linger over \$100 boxed sets by artists I wouldn't buy a \$3.99 cut-out from. Multiple versions, unreleased tracks, acoustic live renditions, all these absolutely enthrall me. So when an artist I'm interested in but don't have much of puts out a double-live album, I'll cheerfully pay almost as much for it as all the individual albums would have cost me put together.

In this case, my fetish serves me well, as this 2 CD, 22 song overview of four different Joe Jackson tours is thoroughly phenomenal. I usually describe compilations by detailing the albums the songs come

from, but in this case that is neither feasible (I don't have the albums to refer to) nor particularly appropriate, since the style of the music on this album is much more dependent on the tour it was recorded on than the album it originally came from. The differing composition of the bands on each tour is enough to explain this, but as Joe explains in the liner notes, he went out of his way in selecting songs for the live set to pick the reworkings and unique moments that make live shows *different* from the studio versions of the songs.

The first era represented is 1980's *Beat Crazy* tour. The band is the original Joe Jackson group, with bass, guitar and drums behind Joe, who plays piano and some organ. The music is punchy, energetic, loud and noisy. "One to One" and "Is She Really Going Out With Him" have their slow moments, but they are surrounded by full-throttle versions of "I'm the Man", "Beat Crazy", "Don't Wanna Be Like That" and "Got the Time", which was later covered by Anthrax. The lead-in to "Is She Really Going Out With Him" finds Joe admonishing the crowd "Now that is probably the *worst* singing I've ever heard in my life", as they try to start the first verse without him. Towards the end of the song, as the band erupts into a frenzied discord, he yells, triumphantly, "You know the trouble with the music scene today? There's not enough chaos!", and then slams into the next song.

For the 1982-83 *Night and Day* tour Joe takes the role of dedicated front man, only contributing piano to the version of "Cancer" here. Bass player Graham Maby is the only player left over from the *Beat Crazy* tour. He, drummer Larry Tolfree and percussionist Sue Hadjopoulos, the band from the album, are all present, and keyboard players Joy Askew and Ed Roynesdal pick up Joe's piano and synthesizer parts, as well as singing backing vocals. The exotic-percussion-heavy feel of the album is even more pronounced here, as the increased presence of a live show shifts the emphasis away from the album's moody distance.

This tour also features the highlight of the whole set, an absolutely stunning a cappella (well, virtually—as Joe explains, one of the players can't sing and so is allowed to play tambourine) rendition of "Is She Really Going Out With Him?", the second of three very different versions of the song on the album. "On Your Radio", "Fools in Love", "Cancer" and "Look Sharp!" fill out the rest of this tour's sample.

The second CD picks up with 1984's *Body and Soul* tour. Graham and Ed Roynesdal remain, reinforced by a guitarist, a sax/piccolo player, a trumpeter and a new drummer. Joe himself plays sax and some piano. As this line-up would make you think, the sound is brass-centric. Only "Sunday Papers" and "Memphis" feature the band in force, though. "Real Men" is mostly just

Joe on piano, with some extra synthesizer and a few well-placed drums. "Slow Song" starts the same way, and builds slowly but inexorably to sweeping string-pad-filled climaxes, the second of which gives way to a stirring saxophone solo, after which everything fades away to just piano again. This tour also contributes the third version of "Is She Really Going Out With Him?", an acoustic version that features an accordion, piccolo and some tambourine. It loses a little of its impact in the shadow of the incredible a cappella version earlier on the album, but there's no doubt in my mind that including all three versions of this song was a masterstroke.

The *Big World* tour, from 1986, finishes off the album. For this tour the band has been stripped back to guitar, bass and drums, with Joe on piano and some synthesizer. Gary Burke, the drummer, is a return member from *Body and Soul*, as is guitarist Vinnie Zummo, though he is replaced by Tom Teeley by the time the tour reaches Japan. Despite the appearance of having gone back to rock basics, the sound of this band is quieter and more acoustic than the other three. Piano and acoustic guitar carry "Be My Number Two", "Breaking Us in Two" and "It's Different for Girls". The whole band checks in for "You Can't Get What You Want ("Till You Know What You Want)" and "Jumpin' Jive" (which confirms my guess that I would have hated that album), and then steps back a bit again for "Steppin' Out".

As an overview of Jackson's many styles, then, this album does a superb job. As an overview of his specific albums it isn't quite as complete (there is nothing from the album *The Big World*, and only the one song from *Jumpin' Jive*), and more importantly, the renditions of the songs here are often quite different from their album versions. Its real value to me is as a document all its own, of Jackson's impeccable songwriting and changing but always-awesome live presence.

## XTC

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### *English Settlement*, 1982 CD

XTC and I have an odd relationship. I am very album-centric, but XTC appeals to me on a song level, not an album level. This album is a good example. It has three songs I adore: "Senses Working Overtime", "No Thugs in Our House" and "Melt the Guns". The rest I find almost uniformly forgettable. And there is a pretty *good* yield for an XTC album.

XTC personifies the term "quirky". Most of these songs tend to wriggle and twitch in all sorts of odd directions, refusing to settle into steady rhythms,

melodies or anything else. Chirpy guitars, shuffling nervous drums, noodling bass and Andy Partridge's erratic vocals do their best to avoid turning in any more catchy pop songs than are absolutely necessary, despite the fact that the band is obviously capable of delivering lots of them.

This isn't XTC's *fault*, per se. They evidently *like* the psychedelic ramble their songs often fall into, so much that they've also recorded as the Dukes of Stratosphere, who eschew accessible pop entirely. From that point of view, then, this long, rambling album is a resounding success. From my point of view it is just frustrating.

### *Oranges and Lemons*, 1989 LP

This was actually the first XTC album I bought, and they were lucky to get a second chance from me. "Mayor of Simpleton", the single, was a great song, and seemed to represent a return to pop form after the Dukes period. Against my better judgment I shelled out for this double album. I hate it. Aside from "Mayor of Simpleton" there isn't a single song I can stand to listen to any more. This is only *my* opinion, remember, but I consider this four sides of pointless garbage. What I *resent*, though, is not that they made an album that doesn't appeal to me, but that they promoted it using the one song that is least representative of the rest.

### *Rag and Bone Buffet*, 1990 CD

I am much more comfortable with this compilation of b-sides, alternate versions, rarities and other odds and ends. Without the space of an album to wallow around in, XTC turns in a number of great songs. "Respectable Street", my favorite XTC song, is here, along with several other memorable ones, such as "Extrovert", the great Christmas novelty-song "Thanks for Christmas" and its hilarious disco flipside "Countdown to Christmas Party Time" (released under the name The Three Wise Men), "Another Satellite", "Scissor Man" and the informative 22-second finale, "History of Rock 'n' Roll".

The rest aren't as memorable, but they have the virtue of being bizarre, rather than simply undirected, and thus I find they fill the spaces between good songs more agreeably than the filler songs on the usual XTC records.

### *Nonsuch*, 1992 CD

As if I never learn, I let the marvelous single "The Ballad of Peter Pumpkinhead", which slipped into a tie for #10 on my top ten song list for 1992, lure me into buying another XTC album. It being the first of the

album's 17 songs (editing isn't a skill XTC cultivates), I listened to the album apprehensively, wondering how far through I would make it.

To my surprise, this one is quite good. It could probably shed five songs or so without much damage, but the moments that hold my interest are spread liberally through the course of the album.

"The Ballad of Peter Pumpkinhead" itself is a terrific bit of conspiratorial paranoia, an allegorical retelling of every political assassination you can think of, or perhaps none of them. Huge, crashing drums drive it along, with a blaring guitar and some insidious melodica or recorder or something, and Partridge plays it straight to good effect.

"My Bird Performs" is precisely the sort of song that would probably have driven me crazy on previous XTC albums. It is short on hooks, short on danceable rhythms, big on odd chords and oblique lyrics. For once, though, they keep the drums, guitar and bass turned up, and don't let the odd noises become the song's focus, and as a result it holds together. "Dear Madam Barnum" follows with another steady rhythm. "The Smartest Monkeys" and "The Disappointed" both fake, at moments, as if they're going to trail off into doodling, but I think XTC is just toying with me, and both songs stick to the point.

There's a slow spell in the middle, and here's where I'd have cut out some filler, but things pick up again before the end. "War Dance" has a sinister techy flow a bit like ex-XTC member Barry Andrews's band Shriekback. "The Ugly Underneath" mixes a heavy beat and chanted verse with a dreamy chorus. And just when the awful "Bungalow" makes me think the album is going to trail off without a strong closing statement, "Books are Burning" comes along to offer a fitting endpiece to match "Peter Pumpkinhead", mellower but still cohesive.

I don't know how long-time XTC fans will like this album. There are enough of the songs I didn't mention that they may like it fine, and just disagree with me about which songs should have been tossed. On the other hand, the very focus that keeps this album appealing to me might seem like a selling out of XTC's usual psychedelic principles.

Oh well.

## Shriekback

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### *Oil and Gold*, 1985 LP

Barry Andrews, who was with XTC for their first couple albums, left to form Shriekback, a much louder, more energetic and less baffling band with

straightforward semi-industrial dance ambitions. I bought this album for the Bowie-esque "Faded Flowers", a muted and mournful song that was one of the set that kept me sane the summer between freshman and sophomore years in college (see Pop Art). Andrews performs this one almost entirely by himself, soft Fairlight and "ootbells" whirring behind a breathy double-tracked high/low vocal autoduet. The song is rather out of place amongst the strident, pounding company on this album, and so I never really warmed to most of the rest of it. The crashing "Nemesis", though, is a late-New Wave classic, a throbbing beat crashing against the charged chorus choir, who wail "Priests and cannibals, / Prehistoric animals, / Everybody happy as the dead come home. / Big black nemesis / Parthenogenesis / No one move a muscle as the dead come home." As shout-along nightclub fodder, this is marvelous. Any time you can get drunken club-goers to say a six-syllable word, you've accomplished something noteworthy.

## Squeeze

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### *Cosi Fan Tutti Frutti*, 1985 LP

Squeeze are a vitally important New Wave pop band who for some reason never really appealed to me. I enjoy "Pulling Mussels from a Shell" whenever it comes on the radio, but there are enough Squeeze songs I find plain annoying, like "Cool for Cats", that I never did break down and buy any of their original albums. They broke up, and I didn't miss them much. They reunited and that wasn't a big deal, either. About the time "Last Time Forever", the first single from *Cosi Fan Tutti Frutti*, came out, I was going through a phase of thinking that I *should* like Squeeze after all, and so I bought this album.

It's not bad. Difford and Tillbrook are a solid songwriting team, the band plays well, and the album's production is slick and shiny. When things click, as on "King George Street", the polish comes across as refined grace. When they don't, as on most of the rest of this album, it seems merely insubstantial.

Squeeze often gets compared to the Beatles. I guess I agree about the similarity, as both bands affect me the same way: I respect their obvious musical talents and recognize their positions of historical importance, but they don't *move* me.

## Split Enz

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### *History Never Repeats, 1987 CD*

Split Enz made yet another of the New Wave era's catchiest pop songs, "I Got You", for which I bought this compilation. As a band, Split Enz undoubtedly belong in some other chapter, but since only a few especially poppy songs appeal to me, this is where they belong in my mind. Many of the songs on this compilation remind me uncomfortably of Men at Work, and make me think again that there is something odd about the other side of the world that leads people there to a sort of warped musical sense just different enough from the one I'm used to that I and it don't quite mesh. At other times, as in "Hard Act to Follow" and "What's the Matter with You", they sound like a reverent Squeeze clone, which doesn't encourage fanaticism on my part, either. Worst of all, enough unmitigated schmaltz creeps into this album, mainly in the form of the awful "I Hope I Never", to make me have to double-check to be sure that the words Ronco and K-Tel do not appear anywhere on the cover.

There are moments, though, like "I Got You", "Six Months in a Leaky Boat" and "History Never Repeats", when the band seems to find a perfect groove and ride it for the length of a song, and since I bought the disc for one song, loving three makes it a bargain.

## Odds

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### *Neapolitan, 1991 CD*

The Odds are a Canadian band. There are a number of Canadian artists in this book, and often I don't even bother to mention it, but in this case the band actually *sounds* like they're from a foreign country. I don't necessarily mean that they play music with weird scales or sing with strange accents or anything, but rather that they don't appear to have internalized the genre divisions that characterize the American market, and this album veers through several of what you might think of as different styles, from hard, bluesy rockers to slow, gentle folksongs. The first band I think of to compare them to is Sloan, whose music theirs doesn't resemble in the least, because they show similar signs of having absorbed all different "kinds" of music and blended them together as if this was the most natural thing in the world, which it probably is. Squeeze is perhaps the closest point of stylistic reference, but that's probably only due to a slight vocal resemblance between Odds singers Steven

Drake and Craig Northey and Squeeze's Difford and Tillbrook.

Different songs remind me of different things. "No Warning No" could be a Primitives song, with its resonating vocal harmonies and driving guitars. "Evolution Time" reminds me of Squeeze. "Family Tree" has an Elvis Costello sort of stomp. "Truth or Dare" sways like a cross between a centuries-old revolutionary's drinking song and some unreleased Connells track (the French chorus explains the former reference, I think). "Love Is the Subject" sounds like Greg Kihn sitting in for a jam with Aerosmith. The verses of "Domesticated Blind" sound like XTC, but the chorus doesn't. And I can't figure out *who* "Eternal Ecstasy" reminds me of – perhaps it's just the Odds.

I think the slow, building, pretty "Wendy Under the Stars" could have been a sure single, the Odds answer to "American Pie" and ticket to mid-level stardom, except that "I was fucking Wendy under the stars the night that Elvis died" isn't what you'd call a "radio-friendly" chorus. People are sensitive about Elvis, and so that line sufficed to get the album stickered. That may have been the band's *motive*, in fact, but it kept the song off mainstream US radio, and so you pay an opportunity cost. *I like it the way it is...*

I tend to forget about this album, probably because it is understated, but possibly also because it was under-promoted. Its most effective moments, though, are really excellent. I like the Odds best in their quiet phases, like "Truth or Dare" and "Wendy Under the Stars", and in their mid-tempo moods, like "Eternal Ecstasy" and "Domesticated Blind". Their chugging blues-rock assays, like "Big White Wall", and space-trip interludes like "Horsehead Nebula", the last track, don't grab me as much. This album feels uneven and unfocused to me some listens, and just fine some others. Either way, it hits more than it misses, and the band shows lots of promise.

### *Bedbugs, 1993 CD*

I almost jumped to the conclusion that they weren't going to deliver on it, though. The advance single from their second album, "Heterosexual Man", the first track, "Jack Hammer", as well as "Car Crash Love" and "The Little Death", all have a Mojo Nixon-like mock-macho jokiness that I really hate for some reason. The second and fourth songs, "Sweetness and Love" and "Yes (Means It's Hard to Say No)" are more serious, but overcompensate and come off limp and over-sweetened. "Do You Know?" and "The Best Things" sound to me like reruns of "Love Is the Subject", which I didn't like that much the *first* time around. "What I Don't Want" sounds like a conscious Del Amitri rip-off (not a terribly bad one, but not up to Del Amitri's own standard).



The good moments here are still quite good, there are just *fewer* of them than on *Neapolitan*. “It Falls Apart”, “Love of Minds” and “Fingerprints” are very nice. They’re the only three I really care about, though, and none of them has the élan of “Wendy Under the Stars” or “Eternal Ecstasy”. I haven’t completely given up on the band, as they can still put together a nice song when they put their minds to it, but if their next album continues the trend developing with this one, I won’t like it very much.

## Prefab Sprout

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### *Two Wheels Good*, 1985 LP

I got interested in Prefab Sprout when I realized that, in fact, Thomas Dolby *was* up to something besides *Howard the Duck* during the long gap between *The Flat Earth* and *Aliens Ate My Buick*. He produced this album, and played whatever instruments the band themselves didn’t feel up to. Traces of his presence turn up in crevices and folds of many of the songs here, oddly natural synthesizer noises drifting by in the background, left over from the *Flat Earth* sessions, no doubt. In a way I think Dolby’s association with Prefab Sprout ended up actually *transferring* some important musical life-force from him to the band. It’s not insane to claim that his influence *made* Prefab Sprout what it became, and by the time Dolby returned to his own career to release *Astronauts and Heretics*, a chunk of the spark that had enlivened his earlier work had gone missing; it doesn’t take much creative attribution of cause and effect to cast the process as zero-sum.

In America, a band whose cover featured them on a motorcycle would be called Street Runner, would have titled this *Born to Burn Rubber*, or some such thing, and would make music that is loud, gritty and at least partially idiotic. In Britain, raw machismo isn’t as much of a rock inevitability, and so this album’s title is a H.G. Wells allusion (sure, it’s to the same book that Oingo Boingo also mined, but Oingo Boingo *looks* weird, and besides, California is different), the music on it is a sophisticated mixture of sweet pop and light jazz, and the band is called Prefab Sprout, one of the few band names even sillier than Fad Gadget.

Despite the band’s light touch, this album is a lot more energetic than, say, Everything But the Girl, who start from a similar stylistic intersection. Syncopated drums, changing meter, more-overt cynicism and more-intense vocals give these songs an immediacy that holds my attention in a way that Everything But the Girl’s soothing compositions do not. I still tend to listen to this album only when in search of a certain cool,

detached mood, but where Everything But the Girl serves to get me *into* that mood, Prefab Sprout hooks into the mood and pulls me out of it. “Appetite”, in particular, is a gloriously invigorating song. I’d love to hear Metallica cover it, as a response of sorts to the Aztec Camera version of Van Halen’s “Jump”.

### *Jordan: the Comeback*, 1990 CD

While I liked *Two Wheels Good*, “Appetite” was the only Prefab Sprout song I’d ever heard outside of my own room, so I didn’t pursue them any further until this new album came out, and I heard its first song, “Looking for Atlantis”.

Produced again by Thomas Dolby, *Jordan: the Comeback* is initially more impressive than *Two Wheels Good* by sheer expanse. The 19 songs on the album are not overlong any of them, but hearing them all in a row (especially uninterrupted on CD, where my copy of *Two Wheels Good* is an LP) makes this seem like a much more substantial accomplishment than the earlier album.

Beyond this superficial structural reason, the songs themselves are more muscular and propulsive. “Looking for Atlantis” gallops along at a brisk clip, with a wailing harmonica adding urgency. “Wild Horses” isn’t fast, but the firm, deliberate drumbeat plays against Paddy McAloon’s echoing jumps into and out of falsetto, maintaining a level of tension that is inescapable rather than just inviting. “Carnival 2000” uses a salsa-sounding rhythm and horns to depart slightly, and momentarily, from the band’s usual stylistic territory. “Jordan: the Comeback” has spoken verses that remind me of Robbie Robertson, but then breaks into a catchy, danceable chorus.

“Jesse James Symphony” and “Jesse James Bolero” form a diptych in the middle of what would be side two if this was a double album as the dividers on the song list seem to indicate. The first half is a ballad with minimal accompaniment, and the second brings in full instrumentation (including a choir and some synthetic church bells) and changes the words, but repeats the melody and structure.

Later on, “The Ice Maiden” sounds the most to me like a Thomas Dolby track of any of the Prefab Sprout songs I know. It’s got his clicks, croaks, chirps, wind sounds, Dopplered buzzes and whines, piano, extremely low bass and bright guitar. The delicate harmony between Paddy and Wendy Smith is all Prefab Sprout, though. Other reviewers seem to believe that this song is about one of the women in ABBA, and it may well be, but unless some of these lines are obscure ABBA lyric references that I’m just missing, you’d never guess the subject from the song.

"We Let the Stars Go" and "All the World Loves Lovers" are the most like *Two Wheels Good*, with "When Love Breaks Down" being what I have in mind in particular. This album also winds down to a soft finale that is very much in keeping with the style of *Two Wheels Good*, "Doo-Wop in Harlem", which has some angelic multi-part harmonies, and is much less pretentious than U2's "Angel in Harlem".

Also, in a strange bit of coincidence, the voiced-over "I want to have you"s on "Wild Horses" sound like Claudia Brücken to me, and just now, at the moment when, listening to this album, that thought occurred to me, I was looking at the CD liner and noticed that it credits sleeve photography to The Douglas Brothers, who also took the liner photos for Claudia's solo album *Love: And a Million Other Things*, which I got the same day I wrote this review. There, I bet you didn't read *that* in anybody else's music guide...

#### *A Life of Surprises (Best of), 1992 CD*

Liking Prefab Sprout, plus not really knowing much about them as a band, made buying this compilation a natural move. And after listening to it a few times I came to the provisional conclusion that sure enough, the albums I had were representative of Prefab Sprout's music. Upon studying the liner notes more carefully, though, I realized that the albums I had *were* most of this compilation. Of the 16 songs here, four are from *Jordan: the Comeback* ("Carnival 2000", "We Let the Stars Go", "Wild Horses" and "All the World Loves Lovers"), and four are from *Two Wheels Good* ("When Love Breaks Down", "Faron Young", "Goodbye Lucille #1" and "Appetite"). Of the other eight, four are from *Langley Park to Memphis*, the album between the two I have (these are "The King of Rock 'n' Roll", "I Remember That", "Cars and Girls" and "Hey Manhattan!"), two are new ("The Sound of Crying" and "If You Don't Love Me", the first of which is *really* good, though both are solidly in character), and there is only one song from each of *Swoon* (their first album) and the UK-only outtakes album *Protest Songs* ("Cruel" and "Life of Surprises", respectively).

On the one hand, as compilation distributions go this is pretty good. On the other hand (provided you have two), the two records it covers most inadequately are the two that were most mysterious to me, and so they remain so. On another hand, if available, the four songs from *Langley Park to Memphis* are good (I especially like "Cars and Girls"), but not different enough that just four of them don't satisfy my desire for the album. I would be more enthusiastic if there were more rarities, b-sides, live versions or any of those other things that stickers on these sorts of records always lure

me in with, but on one last hand, this is a very good overview to be your first experience of Prefab Sprout.

## Aztec Camera

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#### *Stray, 1990 CD*

Aztec Camera, best known in the US for their ingenious acoustic cover of Van Halen's "Jump", is *basically* akin to Prefab Sprout and the Bluebells, delicate British pop with jazz and soul influences, but to me they seem maddeningly erratic. This album contains listless jazz pastels like "Over My Head" and "Stray", roadhouse rockers like "How It Is" and "Get Out of London", mid-tempo Squeeze-esque pop like "The Gentle Kind", the acoustic folk of "Song for a Friend", and a Mick Jones collaboration called "Good Morning Britain" that sounds perversely like Joe Strummer's *post*-Jones Clash. It doesn't add up to anything for me, though. Any of these styles are veins potentially worth pursuing, but jumbled together like this they make the album seem merely confused.

#### *Dreamland, 1993 CD*

I decided to give Aztec Camera a second chance, though. This album is co-produced by Ryuichi Sakamoto, who also plays on it, and that more or less explains it. It sounds like Sakamoto had gotten jealous of the production job Thomas Dolby had done for Prefab Sprout, and set out to do the same for Roddy Frame's career. From my perspective, it doesn't work. The songs here cleave closely to the lighter, sweeter fare on *Stray*, and Sakamoto's production lends them a sparkling, brittle air, but there's nothing here that hits me as anything more than mood music. The fact that there's a song here called "Belle of the Ball", which is also a line in the Prefab Sprout song "Carnival 2000", just serves to remind me how much better I like Prefab Sprout than this.

## Ryuichi Sakamoto

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#### *Neo Geo, 1988 CD*

Of course, part of my impression of *Dreamland* may simply be due to my impression of Ryuichi Sakamoto's own work, of which I have only this album and his Thomas Dolby collaboration "Field Work" as examples. He is obviously a talented composer, a remarkable producer, and an accomplished synthesist, but as agreeable and intriguing as this album is, it is clearly

background music. Part of that, no doubt, is that there is only one song here with English vocals (by Iggy Pop, doing his best Bowie impersonation, making me wonder whether Bowie simply wasn't available), which makes the rest of it instrumental for all practical purposes, which isn't really my thing. Part of it, though, is that Sakamoto's style is incredibly precise and refined, like calligraphy, and while this produces a fascinating surface with a myriad pleasing details, it seems like a rather empty discipline to me.

## The Bluebells

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### *Second*, 1992 CD

If you spend enough time *reading* about music, you will end up taking chances on quite a few things that you have concluded you're probably going like, even though you've never heard anything from the band in question. At least, I hope you will, because *I'm* certainly not going to discover any new bands from this book. Anyway, I've followed deaf leads on faith to a number of artists that I've turned out to *really* like, a few to albums that I couldn't make it through the first song of without having to turn them off and toss them on my "not to be included in the book" pile, and a few to bands that I don't hate, but which aren't at all what I expected from descriptions.

The Bluebells are of this last class. The glowing critical accolades I'd run across over the years all made them sound very much in the vein of Prefab Sprout and Aztec Camera, only "purer pop". Utterly irresistible melodies, bouncy rhythms, intoxicating harmonies, etc. Unfortunately, I'd never heard any of their songs, and by the time I got around to trying to track them down, I discovered that none of their work was available on CD. It seemed like this omission would eventually be remedied by somebody, so I sat back to wait. Then one day, flipping through the B section at Newbury Comics, I came across a CD that I immediately snatched up because its cover illustration was of Highland Cattle, a particularly shaggy red-haired breed of Scottish bovine that is of special significance to me because they are the only animal I've ever seen who remind me of how I looked at one point in my life. Only after appreciating the hilarious bull did I notice that the album was *Second* by the Bluebells.

Now, I didn't know the Bluebells *had* more than one album, which lead me to wonder if this was *the* Bluebells. The names on the back were right, though: Hodgens, McCluskey and McCluskey. None of the song names looked familiar, but I bought it.

I still don't know a damn thing about this disk. The only record company credited on the sleeve is Vinyl Japan, and the liner (which has nothing printed "inside") looks very much like a simple reduction of an LP jacket. The date, 1992, is only printed on the CD itself. Nobody on Usenet had any useful information about it, either.

The music is certainly of the same *genre* as what I expected from descriptions of the band, but most of the particulars are wrong. The drums and bass here are much too heavy for this to be "pure pop", the melodies are okay but not mind-shatteringly brilliant, and the harmonies aren't at all remarkable. There's also a disturbingly religious thread in the lyrics that makes me uncomfortable.

It's a great cover-picture, though.

### *Young at Heart*, 1993 CD5

One of the most interesting facets of the British entertainment industry is that, because there are so few radio and TV stations, everybody pretty much watches and listens to the same stuff. This gives British music fans a shared-experience much more widespread than anything we get here on the radio (though MTV has changed this balance somewhat), and means that a long-forgotten song can experience a sudden revitalization by appearing in a TV commercial. The introduction to the Guinness Book of British Hit Singles mentions songs by the Righteous Brothers, Steve Miller and Bobby Vinton that have been re-released and scored more chart success in their commercial- or soundtrack-led second life than when they were originally released. More recently, sales of both Enya and Clannad have been boosted by VW ads.

VW, perhaps enjoying their newfound power, went on to use the Bluebells' 1984 hit "Young at Heart" in a commercial, and it went straight to #1 in the UK and only slowly bumped its way down as I was writing the first draft of this chapter. The CD-single re-release also features three other Bluebells singles, "Cath", "I'm Falling" and "The Patriot Game". I bought it both because "Cath" was the song people usually held up as their best, and because I didn't want to judge the band's earlier work on the basis of *Second*, which is wholly contextless.

The good news for those of you who like the Bluebells early work, then, is that I can now say that *Second* is the same sort of music as these songs, and you should look for it. The bad news, for me, is that these songs aren't any more what I was expecting than that album was. I'll dig the disc out again some day, once I've forgotten my expectations, and maybe I'll like it better. Second edition, perhaps.

## China Crisis

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### *Flaunt the Imperfection, 1985 LP*

While we're on the subject of bands I didn't quite connect with, China Crisis is actually *more* like what I expected the Bluebells to be, at least instrumentally. They've got light, snappy drums, wispy sine-wave synth parts, some horns, burbling bass and crisp, clean guitar chords. They aren't big on hooks, luscious harmonies, or melodies that you wander around singing out loud without realizing it, causing people waiting for the same bus you are to decide that just because it's sleeting doesn't mean that this isn't actually a good day for *walking*, come to think of it.

Instead, China Crisis displays a sense of restraint that makes Everything But the Girl sound like Joan Jett. No matter how loud I turn this album up, it still sounds like it's on too quiet. Every individual musical element feels like it is somehow buried under the others, in a bizarre Escher-like circle. Still, I can intellectually recognize that their style is something like Prefab Sprout, Aztec Camera, the Bluebells and the Beautiful South, so I thought I'd at least mention them.

## Everything But the Girl

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### *Idlewild, 1988 CD*

This is an album I relate to almost exclusively as mood music. Tracey Thorn and Ben Watt are Everything But the Girl, recruiting other musicians as necessary. They produce light, snappy, jazzy pop songs, doing in music what Sprite will try to convince you they do in soft drinks. These songs are refreshing, leave no heavy aftertaste, soothe your stomach when you're ill, and can be used to get catsup stains out of rayon.

Tracey Thorn's vocals are sweet and pure, a her double-tracked harmonies angelic. Ben Watt's voice is less sure, but blends well with hers. Acoustic guitars, piano, light synthesizer and some legato horns provide a smooth, undulating backdrop, over delicate, percolating drum-machine rhythms. Musically, this may be the most *pleasant*, calming album I own. The only two reactions that make any sense are to sway softly, or to lie back and close your eyes, and let the music wash over you like a silk tide.

And although I don't know why this should matter, the songs' lyrics actually stand up to scrutiny. You won't pay much attention to them, beyond perhaps to note that they are never annoying or stupid, but if you force yourself to analyze them (say, for example,

you're writing a book about your records...) you'll find them up to the challenge. The fact that they are printed as paragraphs, rather than lines, is probably part of why I like them, but they read well, introspective and melancholy. "Then someone sat me down last night and I heard Caruso sing. He's almost as good as Presley, and if I only do one thing I'll sing songs to my father". "You're only two and the whole wide world revolves around you, and nothing's happened yet that you might ever wish to forget."

I apologize to the band for trivializing them, but I treat music like this, and especially this album, as a commodity item. I wouldn't buy another Everything But the Girl album, because, well, I've already got one. That's awful, unfair, and a very subjective peculiarity, but it's a very real visceral reaction. I'm certain, given the band's obvious talents, that there are many people out there as fanatical about Everything But the Girl as I am about any number of other bands.

## The Housemartins

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### *London 0, Hull 4, 1986 CD*

There are twelve tracks on the first Housemartins album, but there are basically only two songs. There is the fast song, which features a quick, snappy drum groove, four-chord strummed guitar part and a melodic bass line. There is also the slow song, which is like the fast song only it omits the drums and includes a piano or a cello. Both songs feature P.d. Heaton's enrapturing voice, which slides in and out of falsetto with ease, and quasi-barbershop harmonies from the rest of the band. Both songs' lyrics are caustic in clever ways.

Actually, I exaggerate slightly. There is a third song here, the gospel-like "Lean on Me", which is just Heaton singing and Pete Wingfield playing piano. The rest, though, are just variants of the fast song or the slow song (usually the fast song). On this album the Housemartins remind me a little of the Buzzcocks (the fast-song aspect), a little of the Jam (early and late, not mid), and much less of the other bands in *this* chapter than they and the Beautiful South would come to.

The fact that most of these tracks sound essentially alike, though, should not necessarily be construed as a criticism. Your tolerance for bouncy, upbeat, socio-critical pop songs would have to be pretty low for this album to wear out its welcome. "Happy Hour" is a delightful gem that lashes out at the thinness of yuppie-dom's facade of equality and fun. "Flag Day" (slow song) trashes the useless earnestness of many social activists, saying that there are "Too many Florence Nightingales, / Not enough Robin Hoods". This social

militancy shows up in the inscription on the back of the sleeve: "Don't try gate crashing a party full of bankers. Burn the house down! Take Jesus - Take Marx - Take Hope". This is an apt summary of the Housemartins' trademark Marxo-Christian-optimism, which they manage to manifest in both the music and the words of their songs.

***The People Who Grinned Themselves to Death, 1987*  
CD**

For the Housemartins' second album Dave Hemingway (who would go on to be in the Beautiful South with Paul Heaton) replaces Hugh Whittaker on drums, and Heaton himself takes up an extra guitar and occasional trombone. Pete Wingfield can be found loitering around contributing keyboards again, and there is also some trumpet and tuba scattered throughout. Norman Cook's bass is deeper and more rhythmic. The harmonies here are less of the close-formation barber-shop variety and more into rounds and lyrical counterpoint. The resulting sound is much richer and thicker than on *London 0, Hull 4*, though traces of the first album's two songs haven't been completely erased. There are still moments that make me think of the Buzzcocks, the two-note guitar solo in "Me and the Farmer" in particular, but this album calls my attention to the band's similarities with other artists less than the first album did.

"The People Who Grinned Themselves to Death" puts the new elements to work immediately. The second guitar is overdriven and churning, and the horn stabs add an additional kick that makes this song seem more energetic to me than several *faster* songs on the previous album. The lyrics of the song appear to be about economic and social class-politics in England, but I associate the song with Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which has this passage in its Third Part (page 294 of Penguin's *The Portable Nietzsche*):

For the old gods, after all, things came to an end long ago; and verily, they had a good gay godlike end. They did not end in a "twilight", though this lie is told. Instead: one day they *laughed* themselves to death. That happened when the most godless word issued from one of the gods themselves—the word: "There is one god. Thou shalt have no other god before me!" An old grim-beard of a god, a jealous one, thus forgot himself. And then all the gods laughed and rocked on their chairs and cried, "Is not just this godlike that there are gods but no God?"

Now, given the gospel leanings of the Housemartins, it seems pretty doubtful that this plainly anti-Christian passage is what they had in mind when choosing an album title, and Nietzsche hardly invented the idea of laughing to death (Bartlett's attributes it, literally speaking, to *The Tempest*, some ancient play), but I happened to be reading *Zarathustra* around the time I got this album, and the coincidental association lodged itself quite firmly in my mind.

Many of the lyrical themes on this album are more complex than on the first album, and my own philosophical impositions aren't, I don't think, responsible for the bulk of them. "Me and the Farmer" is an odd attack on farmers that seems to accuse them of animal genocide. Juxtaposed with "Sheep", from the first album, which uses sheep as a negative symbol, this song lamenting their extermination becomes even stranger.

"Five Get Over Excited" is even more bizarre. I don't have the slightest idea what it's supposed to be about, but it's a wonderful song and contains the classic verse "I am mad from Scandinavia. / I want a guy in the London area, / He must be crazy and Sagittarius, / 'Cause I am Leo and I'm hilarious." "Johannesburg", which follows, returns brutally to topicality with a slow, reverent song that sounds like a simple paean to steadfastness if you don't listen to it too closely or know the title. It's actually a bitter song addressed, by implication of the title, to South African racists, asking them to never compromise their principles, because the easiest way to deal with them is to give up on trying to convert them and instead simply wish them dead.

Elsewhere the album deals with over-development ("Build"), the adult insecurities of abused children ("Bow Down"), unreasoning hatred, especially between couples ("I Can't Put My Finger On It"), the idolization of brainless pop stars ("The Light Is Always Green"), the illusion of nostalgia ("We're Not Going Back") and the coming Apocalypse ("The World's On Fire"). Musically and lyrically, this album is neither as simple nor as charming as *London 0, Hull 4*, but I find it more than compensates with sophistication, and is for this reason much more satisfying.

***Now That's What I Call Quite Good, 1987* CD**

Two albums were all that the Housemartins could manage before enacting one of those "agony of defeat"-like crashes, smashing in half. On their way out, though, they assembled this marvelous 24-song, 79-minute compilation. You might think that a band who only put out two albums would be a bad choice for a compilation, but the Housemartins' sizable set of non-album tracks made the difference.

*London 0, Hull 4* is represented by “Think for a Minute”, “Sheep”, “Flag Day”, “Happy Hour”, “Freedom” (an early BBC recording, not the album version), “We’re Not Deep” and “Lean on Me”. *The People Who Grinned Themselves to Death*’s excerpts are “Bow Down”, “Five Get Over Excited”, “Build”, “The People...”, “The Light is Always Green” and “Me and the Farmer”.

The other 11 songs include 4 b-sides (the bouncy “I Smell Winter”, the harmonica jam “The Mighty Ship”, a proto-Beautiful South guitar-and-voice duet called “Step Outside”, and the typically early-Housemartins-esque “Hopelessly Devoted”), 3 BBC radio performances (the lurching “Always Something There To Remind Me”, an a cappella rendition of “He Ain’t Heavy”, and the slightly REM-like “Drop Down Dead”), 2 unreleased covers (Luther Ingram’s “I’ll Be Your Shelter” and Carole King’s “You’ve Got a Friend”), 1 otherwise unavailable Housemartins original (“Everyday’s the Same”, which Heaton proclaims their worst song, and nearly their last), and their big a cappella hit single “Caravan of Love”, which was distributed free with some copies of *The People...*, but which didn’t appear on an album until this one.

The non-album songs are a terrific set, and this album is worth paying import prices for for them alone. It’s purely a bonus, then, that the album has hilarious liner notes about each song (indicating how many copies each single sold in New Zealand, which is a good metric to know about) and effectively subsumes *London 0, Hull 4* (none of the five songs *not* included here—“Get Up Off Our Knees”, “Anxious”, the instrumental “Reverends Revenge”, “Sitting on a Fence” and “Over There”—are particularly essential, not that there’s anything *wrong* with them, either). The six songs from *The People...* are a good subset, but the omission of “Johannesburg”, “The World’s on Fire” and “I Can’t Put My Finger On It” mean that this collection can’t really replace the album.

Then again, buying all *three* Housemartins releases will hardly bankrupt you.

## The Beautiful South

### *Welcome to the Beautiful South, 1990 CD*

After the dissolution of the Housemartins, Paul Heaton and Dave Hemingway recruited Sean Welch, David Rotheray and David Stead and became the Beautiful South. Heaton’s distinctive voice and lyrical sensibility are the only prominent links between this group and the Housemartins. Otherwise, the Beautiful South firmly abandon the Housemartins’ attitude that if

you play fast enough it won’t matter that what you’re playing isn’t that hard. Quite the opposite, the Beautiful South’s songs are meticulous arranged and precisely performed with a delicate, jazz-influenced elegance. Guest performances by singer Brianna Corrigan and frequent Housemartins collaborator Pete Wingfield, and several horn players, accentuate this impressively realized album.

“Song For Whoever” opens the album, and announces the band’s arrival with lyrical cynicism, sliding through a parade of names of women, love songs to which have fueled the narrator’s hit-song career. “Have You Ever Been Away?” attacks the politicians who send soldiers off to fight wars they themselves will never see. This is an easy target, but it may never have been hit as squarely from the blind side as with this twitchy, seductive pop song that conceals such vitriolic lines as “I’ll crap into your Union Jack and wrap it round your head”.

“From Under the Covers” brings the drums back in for a more conventional-sounding pop song about a warm-hearted man who refuses to get up early and participate in the vicious business world (“But I have a friend who’s never up by 10:00, / He’s fast asleep with mouth open wide. / He’s lost a lot of jobs, but he’s won a lot of friends, / And he says to me, he cannot tell the time.”). “I’ll Sail This Ship Alone” rebounds to the other extreme for a piano-and-voice driven ballad about separation and resignation, with the eminently quotable passage “Well they said if I wrote the perfect love song / You would take me back. / Well I wrote it, but I lost it, / And now will you take me back anyway?”

“Girlfriend” jumps styles again, for a giddy bit of soul/funk, punctuated with brass stabs, that leads into the CD bonus track, “Straight in at 37”, a thoroughly silly anti-Top-40 song with a robotic drum-machine beat and snide references to Simon le Bon and Paul Young.

The Beautiful South’s own Top 40 hit, “You Keep It All In”, is next, a stunningly catchy duet between Heaton and Corrigan. There’s someone else singing in there, too, but what do you call a song with three people singing? “Triplet” doesn’t sound right. Bass horns on the chorus complement the spare, crisp verse arrangements.

The finale, after a few more excellent songs, is “I Love You (But You’re Boring)”, a very weird artifact with an acoustic guitar, tinny vocals and a sea of background noises, which chronicles a failed relationship that seems to revolve around Carousel, which must be a British TV program. I don’t quite understand it.

### *Choke*, 1990 CD

In a move specifically designed, I feel certain, to confuse my database, the Beautiful South managed to get their second album out during the same calendar year as their first one (at least in the US; I think *Welcome* came out in late 1989 in the UK). Incredibly, this one is even better than the first one. *Choke* and *Welcome* were #2 and #3 on my top ten album list for 1990, and *Choke's* "Let Love Speak Itself" was #2 on the song list. (The Connells had #1 on the album list, and #1 and #3 on the song list, so those two bands held 1-3 on both lists! This is probably only interesting to me...)

The biggest structural change from the first album is that Brianna Corrigan has been promoted from guest to full member. This is a good move in my opinion, since I love the way hers and Paul's voices sound together. Of course, she doesn't sing *that* much more on this album than the first one, but it's the principle of the thing.

What lifts this album above *Welcome*, in my opinion, is not any change of course, however, but just more, better songs. "Let Love Speak Up Itself" is the highlight, a stately, expansive ballad that is simultaneously sad, bitter and beautiful. "Should've Kept My Eyes Shut" is a harrowing tale of domestic abuse; combine it with "Woman in the Wall", from *Welcome*, and you have a pair of songs that makes "Luka" look like "Layla".

"I've Come for My Award" is a vicious, gloating song from a thief who is receiving an award for Industry and Free Enterprise. The line "Jesus was my greatest accomplice" is especially interesting given the way that the Housemartins flirted with gospel and Christianity. Maybe my Nietzschean interpretation of *The People Who Grinned Themselves to Death* wasn't so far off, after all. I think the question that "I Think the Answer's Yes" is answering is "Should the death penalty be reinstated?", and that's hardly a Christian sentiment, is it?

"Mother's Pride" is a short, stirring, martial anthem that quickly turns sour: "Here he comes-Father's Pride- / With a head filled up with devil dogs and genocide". This album, for contrast with *Welcome*, ends with "I Hate You (But You're Interesting)". It's got the same languid acoustic-guitar strumming and strange background noises, but decidedly more depressing lyrics, like "I went to see a doctor and she said 'Yes, go ahead' / 'Throw yourself into the sea'. / I wrote a will for my friends / And this is how it read: / 'Me, me, me, me, me, me, me'".

Along the way there are also several songs I didn't mention that continue in the vein of *Welcome to the Beautiful South*. "Tonight I Fancy Myself" (yes, this album *begins* with a song about masturbation), "My

Book", "A Little Time" and the CD bonus track "The Rising of Grafton Street" are all upbeat pop songs like "You Keep It All In" or "Song For Whoever" (sic?). For this reason, *Choke* seems like a richer place to start if you're interested in the Beautiful South.

### *My Book*, 1991 CD5

Since I liked the first two Beautiful South albums so much, I picked up this single for its three "unavailable on LP" tracks. Don't bother. "Big Beautiful South" and "Bigger Doesn't Mean Better" are two barely-different versions of a song for which the term "outtake" seems specifically formulated. "Speak to Me", the fourth track, is a directionless and forgettable acoustic ballad that the notes claim was recorded on a ferry. The sea noises sound faked. Towards the end Brianna reads an unexplained bit of somebody's autobiography that doesn't rescue the song from being dull.

I've come to believe that there is no close relationship between the quality of a band's albums and the quality of their b-sides. Some bands' b-sides are better than their albums (Anthrax, for instance), some bands' b-sides are just as excellent as their albums (Big Country catapults to mind, followed by Tori Amos, Del Amitri and the Manic Street Preachers), and some bands like this produce masterful albums and have b-sides that sound stillborn. Ah well.

### 0898, 1992 CD

This is another fine album. It's just as good as their first one. It's just *like* their first one. Same sleeve color scheme, same color disc itself, same moods and great songs. *Choke* is better than this one, too. Which is all a way of saying that the Beautiful South appear to be treading water on this album. *Welcome* was attention-grabbing because it was the band's first album and they have a unique sound. *Choke* was notable because it had even better songs than *Welcome*. This one, on the other hand, is just "another fine album".

I will say that it has one of the nicest liner booklets of any CD, as each song has a separate semi-surreal illustration facing its lyrics. The paintings do an excellent job of being *in the spirit* of the songs, without trying to explain them or represent them literally.

The Beautiful South, I am reminded a few more times, are one of the consummate masters of the art of making the most horrifying lyrics seem absolutely innocuous and innocent if you aren't listening too closely. They get you singing along phonetically with catchy melodies, and it's only when you really pay attention to what you're saying, or realize that what you *thought* they were saying doesn't actually make any sense, and you go look the lyrics in questions up in the booklet, that you realize just how much pain and

anger is hiding in these songs. "The perfect kiss is with the boy that you've just stabbed to death." ("Something That You Said") "No dribbling or incontinence, / No longing for the old sixpence, / Just smoking weed till age makes sense." ("When I'm 84") "And before you do just what you do, / Here's one thought for you to chew: / the men who run the business that you sell, / They screw you too." ("36D")

As Douglas Adams said, this is like getting hit with a slice of lemon wrapped around a large brick. Of course, he was talking about something else.

## The Proclaimers

### *Sunshine on Leith*, 1988 CD

This album came out in 1988, went nowhere in the US, and vanished into virtual oblivion. Five years later, Mary Stuart Masterson got the lead-off song "I'm Gonna Be (500 Miles)" included on the soundtrack to *Benny and Joon*, and for some reason the second time around people decided to pay attention to it. Me included. It's hard to believe that this song got missed the first time. It's charming, romantic, irresistible, upbeat, invigorating, and features thick Scottish accents engaging in spotless harmony. What more could you ask for?

The Proclaimers are two clean-cut twin brothers with a Housemartins-like sensitivity for harmony, tight pop songs, gospel tinges and telltale bulges in their cheeks from their tongues having been poked there so often. Housemartins-accomplice Pete Wingfield produces this album, and plays some keyboards on it, and though the Proclaimers work around folky acoustic guitars rather than the Housemartins' sprints or the Beautiful South's jazzy tang, the feel of this album is strikingly similar to *The People Who Grinned Themselves to Death*. Fairport Convention and sometimes-Richard-Thompson drummer Dave Matthews drops by to play on a song, and erstwhile Thompson producers Gerry Rafferty and Hugh Murphy get a nod on the thanks list, too, increasing the duo's Celtic credibility.

There's nothing half as good as "I'm Gonna Be", of course, but it would be foolish to expect that. "I'm Gonna Be" is one of those songs occasionally granted a band by beneficent aliens with impeccable taste but only a small warehouse, and it's a rare band that gets more than one of them. The rest of the album is eminently worthwhile on its own, though. The songs span the range from the rollicking "Come on Nature" and "I'm on My Way" to the biting pro-Scotland ballad "What Do You Do?" The Proclaimers' gimmick, though, is their marriage of stunning traditional

harmonies with their pronounced Scottish accents, which they play up rather than trying to conceal. Either you like this, in which case you'll like it all the way through, or you tire of it *real* quickly, in which case you'll be glad to know that "I'm Gonna Be" is the first song on the album, so you can shut it off whenever your patience runs out.

## The Smiths

The budget-conscious Smiths fan (as I was back in '85-'86) has a difficult set of decisions awaiting them. The band's output has one of the highest ratios of compilations to studio releases of anybody who didn't die in a plane crash. Their first best-of (*Hatful of Hollow*) comes after only one studio album (*The Smiths*). They then manage two studio albums (*Meat Is Murder* and *The Queen Is Dead*) before releasing *two more* compilations (*The World Won't Listen* and *Louder Than Bombs*), squeezed out a fourth, and last studio album (*Strangeways, Here We Come*), and then dissolved in a final flurry of collections (the live *Rank*, a Peel Sessions EP, and, recently, a fresh two-volume best-of).

The amount of overlap between these releases is substantial, especially since *Hatful of Hollow* and *The World Won't Listen* were nominally UK-only releases, and *Louder Than Bombs* was US-only. With the exceptions of the two newest best-ofs, however, each release has some things that the others don't. A Smiths completist will want all of them. I've settled for a representative selection that covers the bulk of the songs that I was interested in.

### *Hatful of Hollow*, 1984 CD

This compilation features seven recordings from the John Peel show ("What Difference Does It Make?", "This Charming Man", "Handsome Devil", "Still Ill", "This Night Has Opened My Eyes", "Back to the Old House" and "Reel Around the Fountain"), three from the David Jensen show ("These Things Take Time", "You've Got Everything Now" and "Accept Yourself"), and six other singles and miscellaneous studio tracks ("William It Was Really Nothing", "How Soon Is Now?", "Hand In Glove", "Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now", "Girl Afraid" and "Please Please Please Let Me Get What I Want").

Misery and pathos are the Smiths' stocks in trade. They are a band that you could decide are the most unappealing thing to happen to pop music in decades, and not worry that people will think this is a sign of mental instability. Morrissey's singing and lyrics are to self-pitying depression what Disneyland is to cartoon characters: both places turn what were intended to be



simple ciphers into armies of identical, surreal, eight-foot-tall replicas that will come up to you, shake your hand, patronize your children, and try to convince you to sign up for an additional cable channel. The main differences are that 1) listening to Smiths records doesn't make the food around you more expensive, and 2) the Smiths have a much better soundtrack.

For behind Morrissey, you see, is guitarist Johnny Marr, who wrote essentially all of the Smiths' music. Marr has become quite a prominent figure in the music business in recent years, working with Kirsty MacColl and Electronic before joining The The. He and the Edge probably have the two most-distinctive guitar styles to survive the New Wave era. Marr's playing is a gauzy, shifting tapestry of chords and picked notes, more like a harpsichord than the usual electric guitar, both in phrasing and timbre. Clear, sparkling melodies arise out of this wash of tones in a way that is easy to perceive as a whole but hard to analyze in detail, like Impressionist painting. Bassist Andy Rourke and drummer Mike Joyce provide a sturdy rhythm that prevents Marr's intricate guitar music and Morrissey's musical-theater crooning from turning into a sort of baroque Wayne Newton.

The most interesting distinction this album holds in my life is that it contains the song ("How Soon Is Now?") that first made me confront my societally conditioned prejudice against homosexuality. Where I grew up, in the Dallas inurbs of the Park Cities, there were no homosexuals. That is to say, no *open* ones that I knew of. Not having any around meant that nobody spent a lot of time in *overt* gay-bashing. Instead, "homo" and "fag" were simply casual insults that one learned like any other insidious bit of teenage argot. It wasn't that the people were complete moral imbeciles (racism, at least, got *discussed*, though not having any black students in our large public school tended to put a *theoretical* spin on the whole debate), but it just didn't seem to occur to anybody that homosexuality was something to think about.

"How Soon Is Now?" changed this for me with just two lines: "I am human and I need to be loved / Just like everybody else does". This simple, emotional rebuttal to all anti-gay prejudice seemed completely self-evident to me as soon as it was pointed out, and even today I am occasionally baffled as to why arguments about sexuality *all* don't just end with this observation. *People get lonely*. You can *make* the issue more complicated, but why bother?

Anyway, beyond my own personal cultural epiphany, this album is packed with seminal Smiths masterpieces. "William, It Was Really Nothing" asks "How can you stay with a fat girl who'll say: / 'Would you like to marry me / And if you like you can buy the ring? / She doesn't care about anything'". "What

Difference Does It Make?" has the inimitable Morrissey chorus "I'm feeling very sick and ill today". "This Charming Man" opens with the pained inquiry "Punctured bicycle / On a hillside desolate, / Will Nature make a man of me yet?" "Handsome Devil" has both the juicy question "And when we're in your scholarly room, / Who will swallow whom?" and the classic refrain "There's more to life than books, you know, / But not much more." Without this album (or these songs in one of their other forms), your understanding of pop music in the Eighties will be incomplete.

### *Meat is Murder*, 1985 LP

The Smiths second album isn't nearly as dense with great songs as *Hatful of Hollow*. Of the four Smiths records I have, the two compilations are definitely better than the two studio albums.

There are some essential songs here, though. The first one, "The Headmaster Ritual", is about the brutality of British public schools (These are "private schools" to us. We judge public and private as a money thing, so public schools are the ones you don't have to pay for and privates are the ones you do, while in Britain they distinguish between the two based on geography, so a private school is one that only the people that live near it can go to, while a public school is open to people who live anywhere. This says interesting things about the two countries' values and priorities, doesn't it?).

"I Want the One I Can't Have" opens with "On the day that your mentality / Catches up with your biology, / Come round", and ends with the seedy promise "And if you ever need self-validation, / Just meet me in the alley by the railway station. / It's written all over my face." "What She Said" has the quotable depressed gem "What she said: 'I smoke 'cause I'm hoping for an early death / And I need to cling to something!'" "That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore" takes another perspective on the difference between sex and love. "It was dark as I drove the point home, / And on cold leather seats, / Well, it suddenly stuck me, / I just might die with a smile on my face after all".

This album also has the Smiths' most painful moment, the militantly vegetarian title track, which is punctuated with the synthesized sounds of anguished cows, mooing. I defy anybody to listen to this song without cringing. I don't remember which of the subsequent compilations do or don't contain this song, but if you can avoid it, do.

The music on this album is much like on *Hatful of Hollow*, but somewhat murkier and drier at once. The radio session tracks on the other record have a

tremendous presence that this album's studio work doesn't quite match. The drums echo around a bit too much here, and Marr's guitar sounds thinner. This is still a good record, but it's not my favorite Smiths disk.

### *The World Won't Listen, 1986 CD*

I sat out *The Queen is Dead*, only to be confronted with the two subsequent compilations, *Louder Than Bombs* and this one. I went with this one because, as I recall, it contains the key tracks from *The Queen is Dead*, while *Louder Than Bombs* repeated some things I already had. As with *Hatful of Hollow*, this collection is a remarkable assemblage of great songs. Compared to the first two albums I have, this one sees the Smiths presenting a somewhat harder edge, emphasizing the rhythm-heavy danceable side of the band (like "How Soon Is Now?") over the shimmering, ruminative side (like "Reel Around the Fountain"). Of the eight songs on the LP's first side, six are true classics.

"Panic", with its demented chorus of "Hang the DJ", is tailor-made for irritated dance-club requests. "Ask" gives the DJs something else to play. It features Kirsty MacColl on backing vocals, is my favorite Smiths song, and contains the great image "Spending warm summer days indoors / Writing frightening verse / To a buck-toothed girl in Luxembourg", and the apocalyptic assertion "If it's not love / Then it's the bomb / That will bring us together". "Bigmouth Strikes Again", with the chilling line "Sweetness, sweetness I was only joking / When I said by rights you should be bludgeoned in your bed", and some eerie Chipmunk-like backing vocals, is another great dance-track.

"There Is a Light That Never Goes Out" is another important moment in the Smiths' history, as it is here, on the "to die" part of "And if a ten ton truck / Kills the both of us, / To die by your side- / The pleasure and the privilege is mine", that Morrissey actually hits a *brand new note*, not previously in his range. Exciting. "Shoplifters of the World Unite" provides an uncharacteristic brush with anthemic grandeur, including a rare Marr guitar solo. "The Boy With the Thorn in His Side" rounds out side one (it, "There is a Light..." and "Bigmouth..." are the three important inclusions from *The Queen Is Dead*) with, for the Smiths, a relatively upbeat, cheerful number.

The second side is less impressive. "Asleep", "Unlovable", "Stretch Out and Wait", "Oscillate Wildly" and "Rubber Ring" don't do a lot for me, and "That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore" I already had. The other two are great, though. "Half a Person" is a hilariously pathetic autobiography, complete with the disclaimer "If you have five seconds to spare / Then I'll tell you the story of my life". "You Just Haven't Earned

It Yet, Baby" is another excellent, upbeat dance-pop song, and would later be covered by Kirsty MacColl on *Kite*.

### *Ask, 1986 12"*

I actually liked "Ask" so much that I bought the single of it before getting *The World Won't Listen*. The two songs on the flip-side, "Cemetery Gates" and "Golden Lights", are both decent, but neither are stunning. "Cemetery Gates" is also on *The Queen is Dead*.

### *Strangeways, Here We Come, 1987 LP*

Released as the band disbanded, this final studio album is my least favorite of the Smiths records I have. If I'd been in charge of track selection, I'd have edited this down to a 12" single, as there are only three songs here that don't strike me as forgettable filler.

"A Rush and a Push and the Land Is Ours" is an agreeable pop song, though not their best by any means. "I Started Something I Couldn't Finish" uses saxophones, huge drums and some heavy guitar distortion to drive one of the band's most forceful songs. The Monty Python-like intonation of "And now eighteen months' hard-labour seems...fair enough!" is marvelously bizarre. "Girlfriend in a Coma" would be the last track on the single, merging another of the band's most upbeat-sounding songs with one of Morrissey's silliest depressing lyrics.

## Morrissey

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### *Viva Hate, 1988 LP*

Since the breakup of the Smiths, both Morrissey and Johnny Marr have wandered off in directions I don't much care for. Marr's new friends are people whose music I didn't care for *before*, and his presence hasn't changed that. Morrissey's new musical partners make music that tries to do the same things that the Smiths' did, but does them only half as well, if that. On his way out of my life, though, Morrissey recorded one masterful song on this otherwise uninteresting album. "Everyday Is Like Sunday", with a dramatic string section accompaniment, has a majestic sweep to it not unlike Echo and the Bunnymen, with Morrissey standing on the beach "In the seaside town / That they forgot to bomb", a chilly North Atlantic wind blowing salty mist in his eyes under overcast skies. This is a rare moment, for Morrissey, of poetic grace unencumbered by self-flagellation.

## Echo and the Bunnymen

My *earliest* encounter with New Wave music came in what must have been 1981, when on a trip to visit my grandmother in Connecticut, I saw MTV for the first time. I was appalled by how *strange* the music they played was. The two things that stuck in my mind, though I'm sure I saw more than two videos, were Duran Duran doing "Planet Earth", and some band with the preposterous name "Echo and the Bunnymen". I don't remember what song the video was, but the name stuck in my mind.

It wasn't until a couple years later that I heard an Echo and the Bunnymen song on the radio ("Never Stop"), and I was quite startled to find that I liked it. My enthusiasm buoyed by the ensuing album, *Ocean Rain*, I went out and bought the three I'd missed. Over the years since, my ardor for the band has cooled considerably, and their entry here is considerably shorter and less enthusiastic than it would have been if I'd written this book in 1984. You think this book is hard to read *now*, though, you haven't seen anything compared to what it would have been like if I'd written it when I was 17. The fact that it would have been exponentially shorter would *not* have compensated sufficiently, believe me.

Hull starts listing in the direction of increasing atmosphere with Echo and the Bunnymen, pure pop craftsmanship beginning to allow the introduction of more textured sound-processing and more processing-dependent musical elements. Writing this chapter has rekindled quite a bit of my enthusiasm for the band, and though I haven't bought any *additional* Echo albums as a result, I have at least replaced a few of the ones I have with CDs.

### *Crocodiles*, 1980 LP

Although I was never entirely able to embrace this first album, it has its moments. The second-side-opening trio of "Rescue", "Villiers Terrace" and "Read It In Books" is the high point of the album for me. The low point is the awful "Do It Clean", which drones on repetitively, in a sort of neo-psychedelic daze.

This is the driest, *smallest* Echo and the Bunnymen record, which are the opposite qualities from the ones that got me interested in them. Buy it last. I don't listen to it much, but you can't have my copy, and that's about all I have to say about it.

### *Heaven Up Here*, 1981 CD

For Echo and the Bunnymen's second album, *Crocodiles* engineer Hugh Jones takes over the production controls, and the band begins to sound like

themselves. Ian McCulloch goes from sounding like Jim Morrison (no wonder I don't like the first album very much) to sounding more like Mark Burgess (yes, I realize that the first Chameleons album wouldn't come around until 1983) or Richard Jobson. He has learned to vary the intensity of his delivery from almost a whisper to an anguished howl like a wounded animal, and more importantly, he has bought a decent reverb unit. Will Sergeant's guitar playing is also much more heavily processed, to excellent effect. Pete de Freitas' steady drum-pounding keeps the band moving forward, and keyboards, sound effects and lots of echoes and thick atmospheric sound shaping combine to begin to give Echo and the Bunnymen's music something of the sense of grandeur that endeared the band to me.

"A Promise" is probably the closest song here to the band's later work. The drums and bass establish a rhythm and hold tenaciously to it, while McCulloch's wailed vocals drift in and out, dueling with Sergeant's choppy guitar and other over-dubbed vocals parts, soaring in a huge aural space. This album is contemporaneous with U2's *October*, and I have no idea to what extent the two bands cared about each other, were influenced by each other, or even bothered to listen to the other band's music, but the slapback echoes on Sergeant's guitar parts sound a lot like the kind of effect that the Edge had grown very fond of by the time of *War*, U2's *next* album, in 1983. Coincidence? Sure, or maybe not.

### *Porcupine*, 1983 CD

Echo and co.'s third album continues the sonic progress of the first two. Instead of just layering on more reverb, though, this time they enlist the violin and miscellaneous-strings expertise of "Shankar", whose arrangements add a lush, eerie layer to the band's own style, which was already none too short on lush and eerie. The liner just says "Shankar", but I am guessing that this is Lakshminarayan Shankar, an Indian jazz violinist who the All-Music Guide lists as having also worked with Peter Gabriel, Phil Collins and Frank Zappa. The Indian flavor of his playing seems like an odd match to Echo and the Bunnymen on paper, but works marvelously in practice, his sawing violin lines weaving around Sergeant's shrieking guitar and McCulloch's wailing vocals. At times the strings take simple melodic roles, and at other times they become practically another sound effect.

Like *Heaven Up Here*, *Porcupine* is a very solid album. It gets overshadowed by "Never Stop" and *Ocean Rain*, however, and so doesn't occupy a very large, modern or particularly well-heated crevice in my mind.

### *Echo and the Bunnymen, 1983 EP*

There was a brief moment in American record-industry history when somebody thought that people who wouldn't buy full-length, full-price albums by strange unknown bands would suddenly erupt in an acquisitive frenzy if offered shorter, slightly cheaper EPs by the same artists. REM's *Chronic Town*, Let's Active's *Afoot* and the Alarm's first EP come immediately to mind, and were all from 1982 or '83. This experiment didn't turn out to be the panacea that somebody thought it would be, and although EPs haven't gone away, they're no longer used quite the same way.

At any rate, this 5-song record contains "Rescue" and a live version of "Do It Clean", from *Crocodiles*, "The Cutter" and "Back of Love", from *Porcupines*, and nothing at all from *Heaven Up Here*.

The fifth song, "Never Stop", is the only new one, and it's a masterpiece. It's much more synthetic than any of the band's previous work, with lots of drum-machine sounding percussion, sequenced synthesizers and string parts that *might* be real but seem to repeat phrases awfully precisely for humans. Wild, slashing guitar careens through the mix from time to time, and McCulloch's layered vocals chop in and out with the same sort of mechanical intensity as the music. It's a classic New Wave dance tape staple, and still a great song even now that New Wave is dead and I don't make dance tapes any more.

### *Ocean Rain, 1984 CD*

Echo and the Bunnymen's fourth album is their crowning ethereal masterwork. Taking everything they learned from all four previous releases, this album combines it all and produces a work of awesome transcendence. The two most immediately notable features of this album are the heavy presence of strings (not Indian this time, but clearly inspired by the band's experience with Shankar), and the emphasis of space over rhythm. There are a couple exceptions, like "Silver" and "Crystal Days", but for the most part these songs mix the bass and drums lower, the strings and vocals higher, and attempt to get you swaying, transfixed, rather than dancing maniacally. "Nocturnal Me", "Thorn of Crowns", "The Killing Moon", "Seven Seas" and "My Kingdom" all lead up to the climactic title track, which was for a time a strong contender for the dubious honor of being my favorite song.

"Ocean Rain" is that sort of song that is best heard in the moments just before dawn, while the rest of the world is asleep and the air is slightly cool and damp with the night's condensation. It's not for the sunrise, but for the minutes leading up to it, when the sun isn't visible but its light has begun creeping into the

atmosphere above you, lighting the world with what seems, for just a few moments, to be a glow that comes from nowhere specific, and could be emanating from the air itself, as if the calm had the power to dispel darkness on its own. Listened to at any other time, "Ocean Rain" transports you to such a morning. It rises slowly, at first just a few strings and Ian's soft voice. Gradually it builds, adding more strings, the vocals beginning to move around a bit. Guitar and bass come in, then drums, and Ian takes flight, singing from somewhere overhead, as if he has risen into the light while the rest of us, below, are still in darkness. And then, forced slowly downwards by the encroaching day, the song subsides again, as if performed by leprechauns or elves or some other ancient race of creature who disappear when the sun comes up, only the dying echoes of their laughter giving any indication that they were ever there.

I saw Echo and the Bunnymen on this tour, and all night I was waiting for the moment when they would play "Ocean Rain", and the shabby Bronco Bowl arena would be translated into another dimension, like a scene from *Brigadoon* or one of those Shakespeare plays with fauns and satyrs and fairies and things. Naturally, it didn't work at all. Playing a quiet song to a sweaty, adrenalized teenage rock-concert crowd is a futile passtime, and enough people took advantage of the quiet parts of the song to yell whatever inane observation came to what little mind remained to them that it sounded like the song's narrator's ship was surrounded by drunken, drowning sailors from some nearby troop transport, too inebriated to do anything about their plight other than disrupt the pilot's rapture.

A couple songs later people began jumping over the barricade and darting onto the stage to steal the stuffed rabbits off the amplifiers, and the band decided to call it an early, encore-less night. I went home, put headphones on, and listened to "Ocean Rain" two or three times, but I could never quite recapture the feeling it used to have. Echo and the Bunnymen began slipping out of their central position in my life, and by the time another album came out, in 1987, songs like "Lips Like Sugar" and "All in Your Mind" did nothing at all for me.

## **The Teardrop Explodes**

### *Wilder, 1981 LP*

Leader Julian Cope went on to be more successful on his own, but *The Teardrop Explodes* was an influential presence in the same corner of post-punk as Echo and The Bunnymen, and that would later produce

the Smiths and the Chameleons. Don't go back to this album expecting to hear music like those bands however, as Cope's band's influence was much more conceptual than strictly stylistic. I've lodged them here on the grounds that the two most notable features are his theatrical vocal delivery, which Morrissey would take even farther, and the band's off-center approach to pop music, which the Chameleons would find a more comfortable spot with.

The most important thing to know is that this is *not* dance music by any stretch of the imagination. Steady rhythms are nowhere to be found, and the instrumentation is often rather oblique. Heavy bass, brass, short understated guitar chords and some beepy synthesizers are the main musical elements, and these songs move in subtle, twisting ways, more like sonatas than pop songs. Like, say, early Pink Floyd, this is music you're supposed to immerse yourself in, letting it swirl around you. At times the atmospheric quality reminds me a little of This Mortal Coil, but Cope mostly shies away from letting any song descend completely into *mood*.

On some songs it all works. "The Culture Bunker", which reminds me of the Gang of Four album I have, gets a catchy motion going, with an edgy but persistent drum pattern and Talking Heads-like synthesizer pulses. The slow "...and The Fighting Takes Over" manages an artful flow that smooths out Cope's potentially abrasive voice. In the end, though, I don't find enough here that is actually *inviting*, and so while I recognize that there is a creative force at work, I don't feel like it and I have made any contact.

## The Lucy Show

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### *Mania*, 1986 CD

The Lucy Show don't actually have anything to do with the Teardrop Explodes, the Chameleons, or the Icicle Works, but this album *sounds* to me, despite history, like it could be an *early* album recorded by one of those bands with different singers. The Lucy Show don't produce the kind of wall of noise that the Chameleons do, relying more heavily on keyboards than the Chameleons' dual guitars, but there is a similar textural density here that reminds me of "Nostalgia" or "Intrigue in Tangiers" all the same. Plus, there's a song here called "Sun and Moon", and that's almost the same as the Sun and the Moon. They aren't as obtuse as the Teardrop Explodes, either, but their open-mouthed vocals remind me of Cope's, and "A Million Things" recalls Cope's solo hit

"Trampoline". Also, producer John Leckie would later work with the Icicle Works' Ian McNabb.

In a way this album also sounds like the one that the Jesus and Mary Chain might have made if they were actually *musical*. That sounds strange, I know, and I don't know what I think you're supposed to make of my saying it, but there's a certain insistent repetitiveness about some of these songs that reminds me of the Jesus and Mary Chain, even though I don't think the brassy keyboards and clean arrangements are anything that the Reids (can you believe that there are *two* bands from Scotland led by brothers named Reid? and that they're as different as the Jesus and Mary Chain and the Proclaimers?) *could* manage even if they wanted to.

My favorite songs here, "A Million Miles Away" (not the Plimsouls' song), "Part of Me Now" and "New Message", all have a muted smoothness to them that hardly vaults over hedges to get your attention, but which I find grows on me like the bit of ivy that seems intent on coming *through* the window of the room I wrote this book in. The Lucy Show seem to construct songs in layers, laying a steady rhythm down and then painting coats of synthesizers, guitar and vocals over them, with the result that none of the individual songs have a whole lot of dynamic variation in them. I find that in practice this works surprisingly well, and results in solid, well-balanced songs that I enjoy all the way through, rather than waiting impatiently for the chorus as is regrettably frequently the case in rock music. At the same time, it doesn't surprise me that the band was never wildly successful, as my fondness for this album built up only slowly. In fact, when I first bought it I listened to it a few times and then more or less forgot about it. A few weeks later, I was in Newbury Comics and they were playing a song I'd heard several times before and liked, and I was thinking how I'd been *meaning* to find out who did it. I wandered over to the counter to check what they were playing, and there sitting on the "Now Playing" stand was this album.

That was the first time I can *remember* going to buy something and discovering that I already had it, and hopefully writing this book will keep it from happening again. As penance, I went home and listened to *Mania* several more times, and liked it better each time. I think it's out of print, but I managed to track down a copy of the CD, used. There's an earlier album called *Undone* that I know of, as of yet, only by hearsay. I expect it's good, too. I'll keep looking.

## The Chameleons

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### *Script of the Bridge*, 1983 CD

I consider the Chameleons one of the most underrated bands available. They never achieved much commercial success on either side of the Atlantic, and disbanded after only three albums. Even I tend to underrate them, rarely remembering to include them on lists of my favorite bands. Every time I listen to their records, though, I'm reminded of what an amazingly awesome band they were. *Script of the Bridge* is a brilliant debut album, and firmly establishes their powerful tidal-waves-of-sound style. 1985 is the date on my CD copy, but Trouser Press dates this album as 1983 and I have no reason to doubt this figure.

The Chameleons pick up where Echo and the Bunnymen and the Teardrop Explodes left off, and flatten it under a crushing feedback-drenched stampede of guitar noise that makes the Jesus and Mary Chain sound like a fourteen-year-old playing an out-of-tune Sears Silvertone with some loose pickup connections and a torn speaker cone. Guitarists Reg Smithies and Dave Fielding play as if they aren't so much operating instruments as deftly directing the direction of a raging river roaring out of a two-foot hole in the middle of the Hoover Dam. Sergeant and Marr's atmospheric effects seem virtually transparent compared with the Chameleons' raging guitar cacophony. Reverbed, delayed, echoed, chorused, distorted and otherwise mangled though it is, they somehow manage to shape this noise into brilliantly *musical* form. John Lever's crashing drums and Mark Burgess' steady bass keep the storm roiling in the right directions. Occasional bits of keyboards and other odd noises poke out of the whirlwind at times, like the heads of fighting cartoon characters emerging from the tornado of their combat.

And riding on the crest of this gale are Burgess' vocals, ominous and dramatic. His singing is strong and confident, but not overly laden with sentiment, more like the Icicle Works' Ian McNabb than Cope, Morrissey or McCulloch, but with some of the latter trio's sense of staging and grandeur.

The impact of this first album tends to be more in the wash of sound than in individual songs, but that doesn't mean that there aren't several standouts. "Up the Down Escalator" is a classic epic, with the desperate chorus "There must be something wrong, boys". (Chameleons songs' titles almost never repeat phrases from the songs, and if you wrote down what you *thought* the titles of these songs were, you'd get a list that wouldn't have more than two entries in common with the one on the back of the album. For that matter,

the liner notes to this album contain only fragments of the songs' lyrics, which aren't always easy to locate within the songs themselves.) "Monkeyland" is also particularly good. It begins with a ghostly whirring sound that reminds me of the ones my father used to produce by whirling corrugated plastic tubes over his head at different speeds as a demonstration of acoustics for his freshman physics classes. A ticking hi-hat, bass and light guitar fade in with Burgess' eerie intro, "Send out an S.O.S. please, / I'm marooned in monkeyland". Then, with the cry of "To all you out there hearing me tonight, / It's just a trick of the light", the surge blasts in. "View from a Hill" restrains the torrent slightly, for a gentle, swirling eddy of a conclusion.

At an average length of nearly five minutes over twelve songs, this album can be more than a little exhausting, but if you react to it the way I do you'll end up more exhilarated than drained, as if you've been hit by a Mack truck with Tinkerbelle at the wheel. (Actually, that doesn't *sound* too exhilarating, does it? I like the image, though.)

### *What Does Anything Mean? Basically*, 1985 CD

This was actually the first Chameleons album I heard, and one of the most successful blind purchases I ever made. (Actually, *deaf purchase* would make more sense, since what I'm trying to say is that I hadn't *heard* anything from the album before I bought it, not that I purchased the album without *looking* at it. But we're a sight-centric culture, so even here in a book about music the idioms are mostly visual.) I bought this album (the *import* release, even) because a) I liked the cover illustration a lot (all three Chameleons covers were done by Reg Smithies), and b) I liked the implied cadence of the title "Singing Rule Britannia (While the Walls Close In)". If I'd known that Chameleons' titles had so little to do with the songs, I probably wouldn't have bought this record, which would have been a serious loss on my part, as I'm not sure I've ever heard the band on the radio.

This album is even better than the stunning debut. It gives up nothing in the way of intensity, but it shows a wider general dynamic range than *Script of the Bridge*, able to wipe away the storms of noise and bring them back again at any moment's notice. Keyboards and strings play a bigger role here, taking some of the burden of aural-space-creation away from the guitar processing (in much the same way that Shankar's violin did for Echo and Bunnymen going from *Heaven Up Here* to *Porcupine*).

Individual songs also stand out more on this album. "Intrigue in Tangiers", with the impassioned chorus "Brother can you hear my voice? / Brother can you hear my voice? / Every second that you cling to

life / You have to feel alive", is a powerful work of controlled fury. "Return of the Roughnecks" offers "'The soul is something they can buy / So softly step inside' / Says the spider to the fly. / 'Nice try'", the last line of which is screamed with enough force to turn the song from resigned to defiant. Burgess' lyrics are carefully crafted but extremely oblique, and so while it is a rare Chameleons song whose meaning I can easily identify, they each have distinct, complex moods. Reading the lyrics is interesting, but doesn't necessarily help, as Burgess' delivery is integral to the impact of the words. (This *isn't* true for *many* lyricists.)

"Looking Inwardly", "One Flesh" and "Home is Where the Heart Is" are every bit as good as "Intrigue in Tangiers" and "Return of the Roughnecks", and there are no songs on this album that I'd rate any lower than excellent. Even the instrumental opening "Silence, Sea and Sky" and the simple epilogue "P.S. Good-bye" click into place in the overall flow of the album and feel like they could have been no other way.

The version of the CD that I have appends "In Shreds" and "Nostalgia", but as these appear on *The Fan and the Bellows*, this doesn't mean much. The other odd thing about my CD is that the package graphics are badly mangled. The vertical lettering that should have appeared on the spines of the CD ends up on the back cover (on *both* sides, as if the whole image has been reduced) so that the spines turn out completely unmarked, and the spaces for the lyrics in the liner are completely blank, as if color-filtered out. This is definitely one of the sloppiest LP-to-CD conversions I've seen, and I'd suspect it of being a bootleg if it didn't have all the right label-imprints. *Sounds* fine, though.

#### ***Strange Times (+bonus album), 1986 CD***

When I began this book, the final Chameleons studio record was not even *available* on CD, for reasons which diligently escaped me. I suspected that some unpleasant label squabble was at the heart of it, as usual (although Geffen is supposed to be a good label to work with), but it seemed particularly odd given how much unreleased Chameleons material had appeared in recent years. Trouser Press cavalierly put a dot beside it, indicating that there *was* a CD issue, but the word on Usenet was that this was a cruel fiction. Midway through the book, though, somebody at Geffen finally thought to correct this deficiency (prompted by what, I'm not sure), and the long-awaited CD version actually appeared.

Having this album restored to circulation is a significant improvement in the world. *Strange Times* is less cohesive than the first two, but as the band's sonic center breaks apart, it fragments in enthralling ways.

The slow, pretty, acoustic-ballad version of "Tears" is bewitching. The two seven-minute-plus epics, "Caution" and "Soul in Isolation", are both brilliant. "Swamp Thing", with the cathartic chorus "The storm comes, / Or is it just another shower?", is probably my favorite Chameleons song (though not the most representative, which is why I put "Up the Down Escalator" on this chapter's soundtrack, rather than this).

This is actually the Chameleons' *least noisy* record. "Seriocity", with its thin, trebly drum-machine rhythm track and cheesy keyboard sound, sounds like a demo that was originally supposed to have layers of guitars applied as per the band's usual wont, but sounded so good this way that they decided not to bother. The wispy instrumental coda, "I'll Remember", offers a sad end to the band's short career, as if the whole thing had been a dream. ("Time" and "In Answer", on the other hand, are vintage Chameleons tumult.)

Early vinyl copies of *Strange Times* came with a six-song "bonus album". Its covers of the Beatles' "Tomorrow Never Knows" and Bowie's "John, I'm Only Dancing" are terrific, the "full arrangement" of "Tears" is intense, and the other three originals, "Ever After", "Inside Out" and "Paradiso" are of the same high quality as anything on the "real" album. It proved impossible to append all six songs to this album within the 74-minute conventional CD limit, though, with the result that "Ever After" was sacrificed in order that the other five songs could be included on the album's single disc. This is too bad, of course, but I think that was the right song to cut if one had to go, and I'd been quite afraid that this album would get reissued *without* the bonus album, so on the whole I'm inclined not to give Geffen a particularly hard time about it.

#### ***The Fan and the Bellows, 1986 CD***

The Chameleons career tidily concluded, the issuing of radio sessions, live tapes and demos began in earnest. This one is an absolute must, containing five Steve Lillywhite produced demo tracks from 1981, five more from the same year produced by the band themselves, and one song that is probably an outtake from the *Script of the Bridge* sessions.

Only one of these songs, "Less Than Human", would make it to a Chameleons album, but the rest form a very plausible album together. They are rawer, faster and closer to such punk ancestors as the Jam and the Buzzcocks than the three true Chameleons releases, and wouldn't have been as startling or original a debut as *Script of the Bridge*, but coming as unearthed archival footage of the band's early genesis they are thrilling.

The three best tracks, in my opinion, are the first two and the last. "The Fan and the Bellows" is a frantic

punk gem. "Nostalgia", included here in full and 7" versions, is easily one of the band's two or three best songs. The introspective "Nathan's Phase" begins to show signs of the dense texture the band would later develop.

The songs in between are worthy as well. The one 1983 track, "Prisoners of the Sun", is a conceptual piece that combines snatches of dialog with orchestral instrumentation, expanding on the quote that begins *Script of the Bridge*, but the others are strong material that most bands would have been ecstatic to have on a first album. Don't even *think* about stopping buying Chameleons albums until you have this one, too.

#### ***Peel Sessions, 1990 CD***

The number of brilliant recordings of great bands that have come from the archives of the BBC's John Peel show is enough to make us Americans forget that Britain only *has* two or three radio stations, and think momentarily that the UK radio waves are a forbidden paradise into which we are offered only these occasional glimpses.

Three sessions make up this twelve-song collection. The first session, from 1981, is comprised of "The Fan and the Bellows", "Here Today", "Looking Inwardly" and "Things I Wish I'd Said". "Here Today" would appear on the band's first album, and "Looking Inwardly" on their second, and the early versions heard here are fascinating. The rendition of "The Fan and the Bellows" is good, but not as good as on the Lillywhite demo version. "Things I Wish I'd Said" has a great chorus, but the verse seems underdeveloped, which is perhaps why it didn't make *The Fan and the Bellows* or any of the three studio albums.

The second session, from 1983, features "Don't Fall" and "Second Skin", both of which were on *Script of the Bridge*, "Perfume Garden", which would appear on *What Does Anything Mean? Basically?*, and "Nostalgia". This session's production is kind of cardboard-boxy, and I prefer the studio versions of all four of these songs, even if it is neat to hear these alternate takes.

The third session, from 1984, is all tracks from the second album: "Return of the Roughnecks", "One Flesh", "Intrigue in Tangiers" and "P.S. Good-bye". These rougher versions, compared to the carefully polished album instances, are in some ways more appealing initially, but I think this is like the Coke-Pepsi taste test (Pepsi is sweeter, and so people tend to pick it based on a comparison of only a sip or two. If they made people drink a whole can of each to do the test Coke would win a lot more.), and the more carefully-produced album versions are more satisfying in the long run.

Better yet, have both. This disc isn't essential, like *The Fan and the Bellows*, but it's a good midpoint between the four central albums and the morass of quasi-bootlegs that come after it.

#### ***Here Today... Gone Tomorrow, 1992 CD***

As I write there are at least three albums that have appeared in the last couple years with the Chameleons' name on them that are nothing but glorified bootlegs that have somehow wangled their way into legitimate distribution. Besides this one there is one recorded live in Toronto, one from a rehearsal, two more listed in Trouser Press that I've never seen, personally, and maybe another one or two whose justification I've forgotten.

My advice, which I developed one purchase too late, is not to bother with any of these suspicious ventures, as you're only encouraging every idiot with a clandestine Chameleons recording to get it slapped on CD and inserted into your record store's miscellaneous C section with an exorbitant "import" price tag. Buy the three studio albums and *The Fan and the Bellows*, get the Peel Sessions record if you must, and then move on. These simply dilute a brilliant career whose conciseness is actually one of its unintentional virtues.

## **The Sun and the Moon**

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#### ***The Sun and the Moon, 1988 LP***

The Sun and the Moon is the band that Mark Burgess and John Lever went on to form after the Chameleons split up. Taking over on guitar for Reg Smithies and Dave Fielding are Andy Clegg and Andy Whitaker, formerly with Music for Aborigines. I don't know what Music for Aborigines sounded like, but the two Andys don't seem to make any attempt to lead Burgess and Lever in any new musical directions. They seem content to take a stab at replicating the Chameleons' guitar sound, as if oblivious to the name change.

They are only partly successful at best, and despite Burgess himself being in fine form, I find this album essentially unsatisfying next to the Chameleons' records, and that is the only logical place to put it. It's certainly of historical interest to serious Chameleons fans, and not at all a bad album on its own, but I don't lose any sleep over the fact that the Sun and the Moon didn't make any others.



## The Icicle Works

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### *Icicle Works, 1983 LP*

From one underrated band to another. Icicle Works singer, songwriter, guitarist and keyboard player Ian McNabb is what the music business refers to as an erratic genius, which is someone who refuses to be brilliant in *exactly the same way* each time. He writes amazing songs, but has a perverse streak not unlike Big Star or Nirvana that tends to lead him away from proven success formulas, or even any single comfortably-pigeonholeable style. He also has a clearer, richer singing voice than the rock world is really comfortable with, and he and the rest of this trio make music that doesn't conform to either of the established three-player formats (power-trio, garage-trio).

This debut album is a prickly, explosive record, bristling with hailstorm drums, filled with gentle, lyrical passages that rear up without warning into blazingly anthemic aural spectacles. "Whisper to a Scream (Birds Fly)", the band's one hit, is actually the Icicle Works song I find *least* interesting, as it is the most homogenous in intensity level. Its rumbling drums rumble *throughout* the song, where in "In the Cauldron of Love", "A Factory in the Desert" or "As the Dragonfly Flies" Chris Sharrock's percussion frequently switches gears, giving these songs a more compelling dynamic energy. McNabb's vocal part is similarly single-minded on "Whisper to a Scream", and I find it much more interesting on songs like "Lovers' Day" when it moves from soft poetry to epic anguish.

The drums and voice are the sharpest instrumental foci of the album. Chris Layhe's bass is an important factor, and McNabb's many instruments (guitars, synthesized strings and other spacious noises) are essential to the songs' sonic spaces, but all the tonal instruments seem to fit together as a coherent underpinning, and it's the percussion and singing which stick out most as independent elements.

In a way, to revert to gene-splicing analogies, this album combines the sounds of Echo and the Bunnymen (say, *Heaven Up Here* era, with a little bit of *Ocean Rain*) and the Simple Minds (*Sparkle in the Rain* is what I had in mind), but with lyrics by Henry David Thoreau (in a rare concise mood, mind you). Unlike either of those bands, however, epic grandeur is just a tool for the Icicle Works, not an end. So, amidst ringing choruses like "The world is waiting for cohesion to come through", "We are architects of innocence, delinquents of prestige" and "We are, we are, we are but your children, finding our way around indecision. / We are, we are, we are ever helpless. / Take us forever, / A

whisper to a scream", we get quiet, descriptive passages like "Her father regards me with caution / As I wait in his library. / The scent of tobacco / And the silence of the room are inside me" and "My friend and I were talking one evening / Beside some burning wood".

Like Echo, the Teardrop Explodes, and the rest of the Icicle Works' predecessors in New Wave, though, the band is very willing to throw in odd sound effects, processing, or synthetic timbres if they seem appropriate. The *songs* at the heart of these tracks are songs in the truest sense, and you could sit around a campfire at night and sing them with an acoustic guitar and some enthusiasm (provided you have a good ear or could find sheet music, the second of which is probably less likely). Their presentation here is neither that simple, nor so dense as to conceal the underlying compositions. Great performances of great songs.

An interesting US/UK note: the American version of this album differs in several small ways from the original British release. First, in the UK the band is The Icicle Works, while in the US they are simply Icicle Works (no "The"). Second, the song "Whisper to a Scream (Birds Fly)" (the American title) is called "Birds Fly (Whisper to a Scream)" on the original. Thirdly, the UK version omits "Waterline", which was a b-side to the single of "Love is a Wonderful Color" in the UK, and instead has a song called "Reaping the Rich Harvest" which is not to be found on any US release. Lastly, as Beggars Banquet's stateside reps were evidently not yet satisfied that they'd done sufficient meddling, the track order of the two albums is about as different as two records could be with a nine-out-of-ten-song overlap. If the UK version is taken as base order, and "Waterline" is given "Reaping the Rich Harvest"'s number, the US version goes 9, 6, 10, 5, 8, 3, 1, 7, 4, 2. This manages to preserve *no* adjacent tracks, only three of nine *relative* orderings of pairs, and no relative orderings of any group of three or more. It does put the "hit" first, and the other single last, and produces an acrostic that spells "win law coal", but what that's supposed to mean I have no idea.

(It also ensures that my friend Marty will never buy this album. One of his rules of thumb for avoiding albums is never to buy a record where the hit is the first song. His theory is that if there is so little other good stuff on the album that it *has* to start with the hit, then it's a pretty weak record. There are a number of reasons why this theory can be misleading. Record-label re-ordering, as in this case, is one. Another is if the album sequence is chosen *before* the single is picked. The band's debut single could have been their big hit, and the subsequent album could be in chronological order. The songs could be in alphabetical

order. The track order printed on the outside of the album could be *wrong*. Wow, what a horrible rule.)

### *The Small Price of a Bicycle*, 1985 CD

The Icicle Works' second album begins with a song that could be their theme, "Hollow Horse", containing the defiant manifesto "We'll be as we are / When all the fools who doubt us fade away". McNabb's lyrics mix arrogance and brutal self-deprecation, resorting to the latter more often than not. "Hollow Horse" gets the album out to a faster, harder start than most of the debut. McNabb's guitar is louder, more central than the other miscellaneous instruments. Sharrock hits fewer drums, but hits them harder, and this gives the song better rhythmic definition.

"Perambulator", next, cranks the guitar up even more, and is really the first Icicle Works song to highlight the guitar part. Its distorted squall slides into and out of the "Savor every moment past, / I'm alive at your discretion" chorus, and there's even a double-tracked solo about two-thirds of the way through.

Lest you think that this is a hard rock album, though, "Seven Horses" supports its soaring melody with a light touch of piano, and the rolling ballad "Rapids" adds acoustic guitars and reedy synthetic strings. "Rapids" is the only song whose lyrics are included in the CD booklet (McNabb's clear singing tends to make printed lyrics mostly redundant), and the song contains two of the band's most resonant couplets for me: "A million miles between us, / Still we're heading the same way" and "I'm still deaf from the hydroplanes, / Blessed with a cynical gaze". The former I like simple as a nice, optimistic sentiment. The latter appeals to me for more mysterious reasons. Why "hydroplanes"? What do they symbolize? McNabb's ingenuous "I sing this song with my tongue in my cheek" doesn't deter me from wondering. Do they stand for the future's most preposterous attempts at "progress"? Does Ian see them as an attempt to rise out of the water from within it? Or was it originally "fighter planes" and he changed it because it's funnier this way?

"Windfall", with its thrashing, martial drums, is the song most like those on *Icicle Works*. McNabb's voice again rises over the music, and this song has *two different* powerful choruses. "Assumed Sundown" slows down again, and offers some of McNabb's most sinister lyrics, which go something like "We believe the gospel was unruly, / A picture house in every one-horse town. / You can't disown the dream you only borrowed. / Remember us to everyone you love." Lines like "Remember us to everyone you love", combined with McNabb's careful diction and storyteller's instincts, give the Icicle Works something of the feel of a band of

traveling minstrels, sharing cryptic wisdom with us as they pass from one distant, unknown land to another. Many of these songs have the feel of a Shakespearean soliloquy, or perhaps a scene out of *Jane Eyre* or *Pride and Prejudice*.

"Saint's Sojourn" begins to pick up the tempo again, leading to "All the Daughters (of Her Father's House)", which throws in brass stabs for a propulsive punch a bit like the Jam's "Beat Surrender". This is my favorite song on this album, and one of my favorite Icicle Works songs, period, even though it does have some of those "wocka-wocka" guitar noises that I hate because they sound like incidental music to a *Hawaii 5-0* episode.

"Book of Reason" kicks into ominous rumble again, combining the drum surges of "Windfall", the vocal passion of "Hollow Horse", the howling guitar of "Perambulator" and some backing-vocal "woo-woo" sounds all its own. "Conscience of Kings" then slows down one final time, for a stately concluding ballad. Chris Layhe's harmony vocals, which usually just blend into McNabb's round delivery like another overtone Ian somehow produces with the roof of his mouth, here stand apart just a bit. Actually, it might be McNabb, double-tracked, in either case; my point is that it is rare for a song to *sound* like it has two voices singing.

This album will forever stand in my mind for the summer after my senior year in college. I had a part-time job to pay for the sublet my then-girlfriend Nora and I were sharing, and I was trying to write songs, and I would come home in the afternoons, put this album on, and stand at the bedroom window, watching people come and go in the building across the alley from us, and let these songs catch me up in their labyrinthine narratives. My own songs went absolutely nowhere, and I think the only whole piece I produced all summer was a bizarre cover of Kate Bush's "Army Dreamers" that I lost when my sequencer crashed. At the end of the summer I gave up and got a computer job. Someday I'll try again, but for now, albums like this are consolation. And, I guess, so is this book.

### *Icicle Works (Seven Singles+6)*, 1986 CD

Two studio albums didn't really justify a whole singles compilation, and in fact this originally wasn't one. It was released on vinyl as an EP called *Seven Singles Deep*, a play on "Seven Horses", and contained just the band's seven singles through the end of 1985, "Nirvana", "Birds Fly", "Love is a Wonderful Color" (from *The Icicle Works*), "Hollow Horse", "All the Daughters", "Seven Horses" (from *The Small Price of a Bicycle*) and "When It All Comes Down". The CD re-issue, to justify its higher price, adds "Out of Season" and "Lover's Day" from the first album and

"Perambulator", "Rapids", "Saint's Sojourn" and "Conscience of Kings" from the second. This means that this CD covers all but three songs from *Small Price*, and it reflects this in the fact that the cover illustration is a reduction of the elaborately staged cover photo from *Small Price*.

The versions of "Hollow Horse" and "All the Daughters" here are each about a minute longer than the album versions, and "Seven Horses" is the "American Version", but none are significantly different from the originals. "When It All Comes Down" is an "Unabridged Version", but I haven't heard the original, so I don't know what this really means. "Birds Fly", however, is the "Frantic Mix", and this one is noticeably different than the original in a very typical mid-Eighties dance-remix sort of way, adding extra drums and vocal samples, and stuttering parts like mad. It may be marginally better to dance to this way, but it's not more interesting to listen to. The 1992 best-of compilation restores the original, so I guess Ian agrees with me.

The 1992 best-of also includes "When It All Comes Down", so there's no commanding reason to buy this collection, except that it's the only Icicle Works CD I've actually seen in a US record store in the last two or three years (and that in a cut-out bin), so it may be your only easy starting point. In that capacity it does a decent job, the lame remix of "Birds Fly" excepted, and it's certainly worth cut-out prices to me for historical reasons alone.

#### *If You Want to Defeat Your Enemy Sing His Song*, 1987 CD

The Icicle Works hit their peak, from my perspective, on this, their third studio album, a frequent contender for my periodic desert island disc lists. McNabb's songcraft would continue to improve, but *Blind* and *Permanent Damage* begin to fragment, and while I think the way they fragment is fascinating, the coherence of this album makes it fractionally preferable to me.

As you might guess from its title (one of my all-time favorites), this album stresses the *epic* aspect of the band's music. This time around, even the drums are subordinated to the flow of the music, and Ian's voice, words and melody are the uncontested focal points. He sounds better than ever, though again his combination of careful enunciation, vibrato and actually singing on-key may be startling to rock audiences who are used to people that sing like a rat being guillotined, or like the rat's bloodthirsty ex-acquaintances, *watching* him get guillotined. This is music that you could play for your parents to at least get them to shut up about not being able to *understand* anything "these singers today" are

saying, though depending on your age (and whether or not you still live at home) this might not be a notion you *want* to disabuse them of.

*If You Want to Defeat Your Enemy* begins with the suitably optimistic "Hope Springs Eternal". At least, the *title* is optimistic. The song is more ambivalent than the title would indicate, but it's still basically hopeful. The effectiveness of restraint on the drum part is heard here: my favorite moment is just after McNabb sings the title, when the other instruments pull back just enough for the subtle hiss of Sharrock's hi-hat to come through for a few beats.

"Traveling Chest", second, is a rambling, shuffling sort of ballad that has a banjo-like feel even in the parts where there *isn't* anything that sounds like a banjo. The synthesizer lines in this song, which often play in unison with the vocal melody, have an accordion/organ-grinder tone that gives the song a gypsy-like musical mood that goes well with the nomadic lyrics. It's somewhat off-topic for this album, but the traveling theme has a melancholy edge that keeps it at least partially connected.

"Sweet Thursday" compensates by turning on the sweeping, surging strings, orchestral bells and soaring choral epiphanies, and giving the guitar a thick pulsing tremolo treatment that completely conceals its attack, allowing it to blend seamlessly with the orchestral instrumentation. The lyrics are actually rather personal, but the tone is almost religious. It's easy to imagine that many people who were drawn to the Icicle Works by the insistent rhythmic pummeling of "Birds Fly" might feel like this song is a bizarre intruder from some original-cast album, or a Burt Bacharach aspirant who wandered in from the studio next door, even though neither of those would have guitar or drums like this does. If you're able to make the transition, though, this is a beautiful, *poised* song.

"Up Here in the North of England" retains some of "Sweet Thursday"'s strings, and adds a guitar that sounds like a harp (at least, it *sounds* like a guitar that sounds like a harp). It also adds a howling, distorted, feedback guitar, and pointed topical lyrics about the state of life in Liverpool, which make it an odd and very striking blend of symphonic epic and strident folk song. Ian's portrayal of Liverpool makes it seem alternately self-important, insecure, defiant, derelict, defensive, hopeful, dispirited, exploited and scared. The song also contains one of his most self-effacing lines, "I'm only in a band because I failed my own audition", which would take on interesting significance later, when the band disintegrated and McNabb did go solo.

"Who Do You Want For Your Love?" backs off from the topicality of the previous song, and instead combines the strings of "Sweet Thursday" with the accordion-ish sounds of "Traveling Chest", and

somehow comes out again with a song that feels like it is about traveling, even though it isn't (at least, not in a physical sense). The whole album, in fact, has a distinct air of the voyager, of which titles like "Traveling Chest", "Truck Driver's Lament" and "I Never Saw My Home Town 'Til I Went Around the World" are only the surface. "Who Do You Want For Your Love?" also foreshadows, musically, "Evangeline".

There are a few songs to go before we get *there*, though. Actually, on the vinyl version of this album, which was all I had until I found the CD on my '93 trip to Amsterdam, only *one* song separates "Who Do You Want For Your Love?" from "Evangeline", but the CD adds four extra tracks, and two of them surround what used to be the sixth song. The first, "Everybody Loves to Play the Fool", I'll confess I'm not particularly crazy about. It is uncharacteristically light on lyrics for an Icicle Works song, and the repetition of "Fool, fool, fool, / Everybody loves to play the fool" doesn't do much for me. The other, "Don't Let It Rain on My Parade", also sounds a little out of place on this album, but I like it a lot. It's a little like a slower "All the Daughters (Of Her Father's House)". The synthetic handclaps, buzzy synth lines and dueling electric and acoustic guitars at the beginning also make it sound like it would have fit in better on *The Small Price of a Bicycle*, but I guess it was too late for that, so I'd rather have it here than miss it.

In between these, "When You Were Mine" has one of the coolest bass sounds I've ever heard. It's like a brassy, elastic low end of a piano with a touch of saw-wave synthetic buzzing. This track also mixes in a few moments of a noisy guitar part that prefigures *Achtung, Baby*-era U2, a high synth line that could almost pass for Yaz except that it uses more than one note at once, and some rare backing vocals that are sung when McNabb's lead *isn't* being sung. Not as epic as "Who Do You Want for Your Love?", "When You Were Mine" sounds like it is rebuilding energy for "Evangeline".

"Evangeline", next, is a stunning pop masterpiece that would have certainly transformed the Icicle Works into worldwide superstars overnight if it weren't for the fact that this album also contains "Understanding Jane", which is even better. "Evangeline" begins with a synth vibe line that is probably the most perfect keyboard riff since "Rainbow in the Dark". After a few bars, a squalling guitar breaks in, and then the drums rumble in, circling the other two instruments for a few moments before finding the groove and swinging into a cadence that you *can't help* but start to dance to, even if you're lying down with a picnic table on top of you. It's definitely one of the greatest first fifteen seconds of any song ever recorded. Definitely. The rest of the song, happily, plays out the opening's potential. "Evangeline" is the name of a half-mythical hitchhiker

whom the narrator picks up, so this is another traveling song. From the opening verse ("It was sometime after midnight, / I was looking for a friend. / My headlights lit her body by some pine trees on a bend. / I slowed down right beside her, / I turned the music down. / She looked around then climbed inside. / She didn't make a sound") you might expect some sordid tale of illicit anonymous sex or violent seduction. At least, you might expect that if this was the first Icicle Works song you ever heard. In McNabb's care, however, this encounter is carefully innocent, a simple enigmatic moment captured.

"Truck Driver's Lament" comes between "Evangeline" and "Understanding Jane", which makes it almost impossible to focus on it. Thanks to the convenient ability of CD players to isolate tracks, though, I have managed to give it my undivided attention, and it's pretty cool. Hank Williams quotes, a chorus that goes "You've gotta get high to understand the blues", a glassy synthetic marimba part and a rare guitar solo only sound like an odd combination here, written down.

Listening to the album straight through, though, the 5:18 of "Truck Driver's Lament" gives way before you know it to the raw, sustained guitar chord that begins "Understanding Jane". I can't say enough about this song, so I won't try. McNabb, in the liner notes to the *Best Of* compilation, claims that this was written as a joke. Indeed, it's one of the band's simplest songs, relying on loud, distorted guitar, solid bass, square, pounding drums, and uncomplicated lyrics and vocals. There are several rock songs in this book that may be almost this good, but there are none that are significantly better.

On the original LP "Understanding Jane" gives way to the finale, "Walking with a Mountain". On the CD, though, there are two more bonus tracks to be dealt with. The first, "I Never Saw My Home Town 'Til I Went Around the World", is a thoroughly bizarre band-on-the-road song that sounds like what you might get if you gave Frankenstein a text-book chapter on "boogie" and told him to write some. It's very interesting, but it fits in much better on the *Best Kept Secrets* half of the *Best of* collection than here. The final CD track is a cover of Van Morrison's "Into the Mystic". I don't know the original, but the performance here, with acoustic guitar, organ and soft, ticking drums, would sound like a country ballad if it weren't that Ian's voice has about the lowest twang quotient measurable by modern science. The foghorn is a nice touch.

The finale, "Walking with a Mountain", begins with a drum-machine beat and sequenced synth part that sounds for a few seconds like A-ha or Tears for Fears. The song quickly recovers, though, with a

scaling bass line and a quiet string fill accompanying the verse. By the time the chorus comes around, and Ian starts to cut loose, real drums come in over the machine, and guitar and synthetic brass stabs fill in some of the musical space, and the song takes on a wonderfully conclusive feeling, like the final scene should be taking place in the background, just fading out and being replaced with the credits as the song and album end.

### ***Blind*, 1988 CD**

After the majestic sweep of *If You Want to Defeat Your Enemy Sing His Song*, *Blind* comes as quite a shock. The difference in covers between the two albums tells the story as well as anything. *If You Want's* cover is done in subtle shades of dark purple and muted gold, and the illustration is a gray, grainy photograph of the band members, looking pensively into the distance. The song list on the back is carefully designed, with the titles centered and the song numbers and times in narrow columns on each side. The type is set very loosely (that is, the spaces between letters are relatively large), and the whole effect is quite elegant. *Blind*, conversely, features a dark black and white photo of an unshaven man (Ian, presumably, but it doesn't say) with dead fish in front of his eyes, their mouths meeting at the bridge of his nose so that their eyes are over his, and they look like very uncomfortable sunglasses. The song list is in tight white type on a plain black background, and the titles are nothing like the ones on the prior album: "The Kiss Off", "Shit Creek", "Hot Profit Gospel", "Tin Can". Well, okay, some of them are, like "Starry Blue Eyed Wonder", "Stood Before St. Peter" and "Walk a While with Me". But the set is pretty forbidding.

The irony of this brilliant explication, of course, is that the UK edition is nothing like this. It's cover is a colorful woodcut-looking thing, which isn't anything like *If You Want*, either, but isn't nearly as forbidding as the US cover. As with the first album, the track order on the two releases differs for no immediately apparent reason. Ignoring the track deletions and insertions, the only changes are that "The Kiss Off" is moved from 11th to first, and "High Time" is pushed back from third to eighth. The UK edition contains four songs ("Intro", "One True Love", "Two Two Three" and "What Do You Want Me To Do?") that aren't on the US edition, which replaces them with the UK single b-sides "Sure Thing", "Tin Can" and "Hot Profit Gospel". This wouldn't be so annoying to me if it weren't that *Best Kept Secrets* includes the US-only tracks, not the UK ones, so I have two copies of those and none of the four UK songs. Someday, hopefully, I'll find a CD copy of the UK version.

Anyway, "The Kiss Off", which begins the album, is Icicle Works doing Prince. It's not a cover, mind you, but it sounds like it. Ian admits to this on *Best of*, but you don't need him to point out the resemblance, believe me. As with the Van Morrison cover, McNabb's voice is wildly out of place with this style, which makes the song incredibly strange and kind of wonderful.

"Shit Creek"'s note in *Best of* is "You could always tell which tapes we had been playing in the van", but I can't, at least not specifically. The song is a wild guitar ride, though, with crashing drums and pyrotechnic slide-chords, as much out of character in one direction as "The Kiss Off" was in the other. Some people are bound to think I'm just too tolerant, but I think both are great.

Just when they've got you off guard, the band calms down suddenly for "Little Girl Lost", a slow ballad that switches back to organ and stick-on-rim percussion for the verses, strings and guitars on the chorus. It's deliberately slower and *smaller* than something like "Sweet Thursday", and although the occasional surprise orchestra-hits keep it from getting too mellow, it's one of the band's most gentle songs.

"Starry Blue Eyed Wonder" follows suit, at least at the beginning, where it is just Ian and an organ. After a couple of minutes of that, though, the rest of the band shows up for a rousing jam, and then they run through the chorus a few more times with full band. "Blind" starts out with big drums like it's going to keep up the energy, and then shifts back to organ for a bluesy protest song that sounds like something you'd hear drifting out of a smoky, dimly lit bar late on a quiet night. "Sure Thing" completes the transition back to weirdness with a jittery funk song that sounds like the band had spent a little too much time in that bar before returning to the studio, and were suffering under a temporary delusion that they were somebody else. This goes well with "The Kiss Off".

"Hot Profit Gospel" then sounds like *that* band covering an *old* Icicle Works song. The chattering drums are there, but McNabb half-shouts the lyrics and breaks into machine-gun guitar riffs where the usual choral manœuvres would be. This is a very bizarre and unsettling song. The big-band horns don't help.

"High Time" slips back into an unexpected straight-ahead rock song with a Celtic guitar riff. "Stood Before St. Peter" adds piano and some string fills, but otherwise continues to play pretty straight. In yet *another* uncharacteristic move for McNabb, the "chorus" of this song is instrumental-only. Some stray church bells and church organ at the end complement the religious theme.

"Here Comes Trouble" sounds more like Icicle Works' usual material (whatever *that* is). Some honky-

tonk piano provides the inevitable new touch, but the surging strings on the chorus are very familiar. It's in 3/4, too, which didn't occur to me until I started air-conducting the orchestra.

"Walk a While with Me" slows down yet again, and McNabb sings softly over a slow keyboard part and a melodic bass line. More keyboards join, venturing into minor chords, then give way to a legato guitar solo like the theme to *Local Hero* with a fuzzbox on. After all the mood changes on this album, I expect the drums to come smashing in at any point, but they don't.

Or rather, they wait until the next song, "Tin Can", the album's last. The UK order, with "Walk a While with Me" at the end, makes a lot more sense than ending on this raucous, shouted, self-consciously inane rock song. But in a way that makes this ending all the more appropriate. It's hard to argue that *Blind* is not erratic, chaotic, scattered and unfocused. On the other hand, people like roller coasters, and that's what this record is a lot like. It keeps you continually off-balance, but once you come to terms with all the far-flung territory it ranges through (this may be a slow process; the album barely captured tenth when I made my top ten list for 1988), you can discern that it brings the Icicle Works' own distinctive style and biases with it everywhere. "Perverse" is far more appropriate than "ambitious", but "exhilarating" is also more appropriate than "misguided", so if this album shows up in the analogy section of a standardized test, answer carefully. In fact, you should probably buy a copy and study it, just in case.

A final note on this album: on the credits, Chris Layhe steals an idea I once had, and credits himself with "Bass Guitar, Voice, Robots". How he found out about my idea for the "Robots" part I'll never know. I've got to be more careful who I tell these things to.

### *Here Comes Trouble, 1988 12"*

The single for "Here Comes Trouble" adds three live tracks recorded at the Astoria in London to the album version of the title track. The rendition of "Starry Blue Eyed Wonder" is a little ragged, but spirited nonetheless. "For What It's Worth" is a cover medley that detours from the Buffalo Springfield song through the Stones' "You Can't Always Get What You Want", and Lou Reed's "Walk on the Wild Side" (and some song called "Soul Kitchen", which I can't isolate). This sounds even stranger than it reads, with the band meanderingly through the melodies as if killing time until the stage crew gets the lights fixed, an extra guitar re-strung, or perhaps just a bite to eat. The last track is another cover, this time of Led Zeppelin's "Rock and Roll", and the Icicle Works rendition is, for once, oddly

plausible-sounding. This is a very interesting single for those who manage to attune themselves to the band's elusive *Blind*-era wavelength, but won't do anything for those who don't.

### *Permanent Damage, 1990 CD*

*Here Comes Trouble* was the last release by the original incarnation of the Icicle Works. Two years later, re-formed by McNabb with new help (Paul Burgess on drums, Roy Corkhill on bass, with vocal assistance from Mark Revell and extra keyboards by Dave Baldwin), on a different label, the Icicle Works put out one more album. I've only heard fragments of the grisly story around this, to the effect of the label going belly up just after releasing it. Whatever the story is, I've never seen a copy on sale in the US in any format, and I had difficulty finding one in London (but did). The album didn't make the UK album chart at all, and the single for "Motorcycle Rider" appeared on the singles chart, at #73, for exactly one week.

All this is a shame, because the album is quite remarkable. It isn't quite as scattershot as *Blind*, but it can definitely be infuriating in its own way. For one, the departure of Layhe and Sharrock leaves holes that Corkhill and Burgess fill as players but not as creators. McNabb is solely credited with almost all the songs on the first four albums, but the *performances*, at least, sound like the work of a band. On *Permanent Damage* there is a much stronger sense that McNabb's creative force is in complete control, and the other players are just helping out and trying to stay out of the way. The rhythm section is competent but not very remarkable on its own, and McNabb's guitar is more prominent than on any previous album.

Accordingly, "I Still Want You", which starts off the album, is a propulsive anthemic love song that resembles the energy of parts of "Evangeline". Unlike the earlier song, though, this one basically holds to one tempo and intensity level the entire way through. "Motorcycle Rider" clicks the metronome down a few bpm's, but again sticks with a single pace all the way through. The relatively simple lyrics of both songs also contribute to their straightforwardness. Both are excellent songs, but they may take a few listens to get used to, precisely because they *aren't* inaccessible.

"Melanie Still Hurts" is more familiar, a mid-tempo ballad on the order of "Starry Blue Eyed Wonder" or "Blind". Again, though, the lyrics are surprisingly minimal. "Hope Street Rag" rights the balance partway, alternating between verses of acoustic guitar, lithe synthetic bass and slinky percussion and a full-speed chorus. And a flanged guitar solo!

"I Think I'm Gonna Be Okay" starts to show this album's perverse side a little more clearly. Over a

string and guitar accompaniment, McNabb sings “I think I’m gonna be okay” over and over again. And when the music picks up and you think you’re going to get something else, instead the chorus is just *another* single line repeated. “Baby Don’t Burn” is similar, but adds a couple Beatle-esque melodic turns toward the end. “What She Did to My Mind” reminds me of Dramarama.

Things start to get strange in earnest with “One Good Eye”, which sounds for all the world like a parody of something that I can’t quite place. The raspy guitar sounds like it is being played back at half the speed it was recorded at. McNabb’s vocals stagger around the melody unstably, tossing off clichés like “Yeah” and “Watch Out” as if throwing out a hand to keep their balance. The words are nonsensical. What we’re supposed to make of this I couldn’t tell you.

“Permanent Damage” is countrified folk with a cheesy drum-machine beat. “Woman on my Mind” switches gears grindingly, to a track that sounds like it might have made some sense mixed some other way, but with the drums pummeling down on you like you’re trapped in a high-school gym with them, and McNabb back in the unsteady, clichéd-lyric vocal domain of “One Good Eye”, I feel like the band has gone as far out of their way as possible to *prevent* this song from being any good. Of course, that very insistence makes it interesting, but not in the way that it might have been without the intentionally bizarre production.

“Looks Like Rain” is another repetitive acoustic-guitar ballad, if you can call these things ballads. Slow-motion slide-guitar riffs drift by murkily in the background. It’s over in about two minutes.

And don’t look to “Dumb Angel” to come through and restore direction to this disintegrating album. The instrumentation, everything except Ian’s lead vocals and a single guitar part I think, is recorded and then played back in reverse. A purely conceptual end to the album, which I guess is appropriate enough.

So, do I *like* this album? Well, yes. I do. I gave it an honorable mention in 1992 in the “records I discovered this year that might have been on my top ten list if I’d heard them during the year they were released” section of my annual best-of-the-year lists. If the album existed in isolation, and I’d never heard any other music by the Icicle Works, I’d feel very differently, but in context the way it chronicles McNabb going through some sort of bizarre mental/aesthetic nervous collapse utterly fascinates me, in a way similar to the third Big Star album.

Will *you* like it? Hard to say. That’s a question that will probably take care of itself, at least if you’re American, because you’ll have to put out some real effort to acquire a copy. If my description is sufficiently

intriguing that you’re actually *willing* to make the effort, then I suspect you’ll find the album interesting, and worth the search. On the other hand, if my description makes you say “Well, if I found it used for a dollar...” (or worse, “I’ll pay you the dollar, just take my copy”) then don’t bother.

### ***Best of / Best Kept Secrets, 1992 CD***

After an unspecified amount of therapy, meditation or some other form of mental regrouping, McNabb returned to his senses in 1992, and, perhaps in attempt to get the taste of *Permanent Damage* out of his mouth and ours, compiled this two CD review of the Icicle Works’ five years on Beggars Banquet.

The first CD is *Best of*. It uses fourteen tracks to cover *The Icicle Works* (“Love is a Wonderful Color”, “Birds Fly” and “Out of Season”), *The Small Price of a Bicycle* (“Hollow Horse”), *If You Want to Defeat Your Enemy Sing His Song* (“Understanding Jane”, “Who Do You Want for Your Love?”, “Evangeline” and “Up Here in the North of England”) and *Blind* (“Shit Creek”, “High Time” (an acoustic version here), “Little Girl Lost”, “Starry Blue Eyed Wonder”, “The Kiss Off” and “Blind”). The other two songs are the single “When It All Comes Down” and one song (“Firepower”) originally intended for *Permanent Damage* before the original band split.

The versions of “Understanding Jane” and “When It All Comes Down” are both 1992 reworkings. The new version of “Understanding Jane” beefs up the bass, guitar and drums with additional over-dubs, and the new “When It All Comes Down” actually does the opposite, replacing the heavily processed drums of the version on the first compilation with a more natural-sounding track. I’m not convinced that either reworking substantially improves on the original, and the otherwise forthright liner notes don’t explain the rationale behind redoing them.

“Firepower”, on the other hand, is terrific, and makes me regret the original band’s dissolution all the more. If this song is representative of what the whole album would have been like (and with the Icicle Works this is far from a safe bet), it might have been the band’s best album, a controlled, yet cathartic howl of rage even more affecting than *If You Want to Defeat Your Enemy*. We’ll never know.

As a career overview, this selection of tracks looks oddly lopsided until you remember the other compilation. My guess is that McNabb chose to touch only lightly on the first two albums, since *The Icicle Works* compilation covers them so thoroughly, and focused instead on the last two. It’s slightly suspicious, given this theory, that he chooses to *repeat* tracks that were on the first compilation, but restoring the original

version of "Birds Fly" is essential, and like I said, "Hollow Horse" might as well be the band's theme song (in fact, it's first on this disk).

What transforms this package from adequate overview to essential-for-all-fans, though, is the second disc, labeled *Best Kept Secrets*. These sixteen tracks consist of eight single b-sides ("One Time", "I Never Saw My Hometown 'til I Went Around the World", a live cover of World Party's "Private Revolution", "Nirvana" live at the Paradise here in Boston, "The Atheist", "Whipping Boy", "Broken Hearted Fool" and "Goin' Back"), the three US-only tracks from *Blind* ("Sure Thing", "Hot Profit Gospel" and "Tin Can"), two tracks from anthologies (the Byrds' "Triad/Chestnut Mare", and Neil Young's "The Needle and the Damage Done", performed with Pete Dinklage), and three released here for the first time ("Like Weather", "Solid Ground" and the conceptual piece "Acid Hell Nightmare").

With the possible exceptions of "Solid Ground", which I don't find particularly impressive, and "Acid Hell Nightmare", which is just silly, all these songs are very much worth any Icicle Works fan's while. There are at least two-dozen other Icicle Works b-sides from the sixteen singles they put out over the course of their career with Beggars Banquet, but having missed them all by not paying close enough attention to the band at the time, I really appreciate getting this selection, at least.

The liner notes to this set are excellent, as well. There's a short biography by Terry Staunton of NME, track listings of all the albums and singles, and comments from McNabb on each of the thirty-two songs. It even comes in a clever case that fits the two CDs into the space of one, and, because it bills the second CD as "free", should only cost you the price of one import, not two. Highly recommended. All compilations should be this good.

### *Understanding Jane ('92 version), 1992 CD5*

If you've been a dedicated Icicle Works fan all along, and already have all the b-sides, this CD single has both "Like Weather" and "Solid Ground", the two real unreleased songs from *Best Kept Secrets*. It also has the rework of "Understanding Jane", and the album version of "Little Girl Lost". You'll miss having "Firepower", however, if you don't by the compilation, so my advice is not to bother with this single. I wouldn't have, except that I found it before I found a copy of the collection, and so didn't know it was just a subset.

## Ian McNabb

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### *Truth and Beauty, 1993 CD*

After the experience of *Permanent Damage*, Ian McNabb finally broke down and went solo after all. He gets some help on bass and "programming" from *Permanent Damage*-mate Roy Corkhill, and there are a few songs with guest performances, but for the most part this album is all Ian. Given how central his songwriting, voice and playing were to the Icicle Works, I would have expected this album to sound quite a bit like some facet of the band's repertoire. And there are tastes, to be sure, but for the most part this album does a good job of striking out on its own.

My overriding impression is that McNabb essentially approached this album by starting over. There is little in the way of extremely flashy instrumentation, and the central mood is rather sedate. Most significantly, he seems comfortable enough this time around to take himself seriously without being overbearing. He doesn't try to reproduce the percussive onslaught of *The Icicle Works* (the album's rhythms are almost exclusively drum-machine driven, which some people will probably bristle at, but I consider the drum programming very well done), the grand sweeping vision of *If You Want to Defeat Your Enemy* or the wildness of *Blind* or *Permanent Damage*. Instead, he concentrates on writing good songs and presenting them well. That can make this album either more accessible or less exciting than the Icicle Works, depending on your point of view. My first impression was the latter. I have a strong tendency to approach solo albums by members of deceased bands I liked hoping that they will just keep making records like their band did, which isn't at all fair. I've mostly gotten over that now with this album, and started to appreciate the opportunity to concentrate just on McNabb's songs for once. It's not that the songs were always *obscured* by the Icicle Works' performances (at least, not on the first three albums), but the performances here are much more transparent. Now, *most* of rock music filters songs through performances that capture most or all of the listener's attention, and that's something I like about rock, but it is nice occasionally to find a calmer spot for contrast.

The most impressive song on this album, without question, is the twelve-minute closing track, "Presence of the One". This slow, stately song looks on paper like it's going to be a sprawling epic, but it actually isn't epic at all. It reminds me of the quiet parts of "Starry Blue Eyed Wonder", but instead of giving way impatiently to crashing drums like "Starry Blue Eyed Wonder" does, this song is allowed to evolve at its own



pace. The fade-out at the end is almost a minute long, and the last forty-five seconds or so are completely silent. Effective use of silence on a rock record is quite rare, but I think this end-of-CD spacer is well-applied. If you have a multiple-CD changer, like I do, one CD's end cuts directly into the beginning of the next. In the old days of LPs this wouldn't happen, and when an album finished the world would be *quiet* until you actually got up and changed records. This gives you time and space to let the album just past echo around in your mind a bit. When the next one just jumps in (and often this is the only way you know that the previous album *has* ended) your attention is shifted away immediately, and only the last disc in the changer gets to sink in "properly". One way to solve this would be to put a between-disc delay on the changer, but I don't think that would be taken as a feature by today's MTV-fed culture. The other solution is for the artists who want that space to include it themselves.

At the other extreme, "Great Dreams of Heaven" and "If Love Was Like Guitars" are two of the catchiest pop songs here. "Great Dreams of Heaven" saunters along on a steady drumbeat, with lots of ringing guitars. The verse vocals are delivered through a telephone, or megaphone or something, but rather than take away from the song, they just enhance the directness of the lyrical, double-tracked chorus. "If Love Was Like Guitars"'s chorus has one of the album's strongest hooks, and an excellent guest solo from Gordon Longworth.

I wouldn't call this album a masterpiece, but as a solo debut it's pretty accomplished, and it certainly shows that there is life for McNabb after the Icicle Works. I expect even greater things to come.

### ***Great Dreams of Heaven*, 1993 CD5**

The single of "Great Dreams of Heaven", besides a slightly abridged version of its title song, features three acoustic-guitar-only performances by McNabb for *Rock Over London*. One, "I'm Game", is also on *Truth and Beauty*, but the other two, "Unknown Legend" and "Caroline No", aren't. The feel is very much like Jules Shear's *Unplug This*, and what I said about liking *Truth and Beauty* because it lets you focus on the songs themselves goes double here. I wouldn't want Ian to do just this *all* the time, because a lone acoustic guitar doesn't show his prodigious talent for arrangements and studio work, but this is a rare, precious glimpse of the songwriter in total isolation.

### ***I'm Game*, 1993 CD5**

This single has the album version of "I'm Game", a new song called "What's It All About?", and a cover of Jimmy Buffet's "A Pirate Looks at Forty". "What's It

All About?" is the one that actually *sounds* like a cover, like an old protest song meant to be played on the soundtrack of documentaries about the confused legacy of the Sixties. Ian does a good job with it. The Buffet cover I don't know the original of, and I'm not that crazy about the harmonica and accordion on McNabb's version, either.

### ***(I Go) My Own Way*, 1993 CD5**

The single for "(I Go) My Own Way" features a nicely remixed, and slightly extended, version of the title song, with John Leckie helping out on production. The single adds three more songs. "Play the Hand They Deal You" must be from the same session as the new version of "(I Go) My Own Way", as it features the same cast, including Leckie. It's a big sweeping song that could have been on the album except that there might already be enough big sweeping songs like this on it. It reminds me of "Truth and Beauty" itself.

The third song is another stirring McNabb solo performance called "If My Daddy Could See Me Now". The last track is a long, languid love song called "For You, Angel", that ambles along at a slow pace punctuated throughout by strange background noises, and then decomposes for nearly two minutes at the end into a bizarre dub remix of itself.

This is definitely the most impressive of the three singles I have from *Truth and Beauty*. The remix is especially well done, the acoustic track here shares the virtues of the radio sessions on the "Great Dreams of Heaven" single, and both "Play the Hand They Deal You" and "For You, Angel" are significant album-quality songs. Plus, fine milled end papers! An excellent musical value.

## **The Comsat Angels**

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### ***Waiting for a Miracle*, 1980 LP**

As hard as it is to imagine a band even *more* underrated than the Icicle Works or the Chameleons, the Comsat Angels are them. Misunderstood by their labels, and prevented from using their name in the US by a humorless, litigious satellite manufacturer, they haven't had a lot of help in life. Part of the difficulty, no doubt, is that they don't make particularly accessible music. Where the Chameleons and the Icicle Works had a knack of *huge*-sounding music, the Comsat Angels make quiet music in huge *spaces*.

The foundation of the Comsat Angels' sound is the uneasy rhythm section of drummer Mic Glaisher and bassist Kevin Bacon (not the actor). Glaisher's drumming is precise and clean, with no unnecessary

noise, and though most of the songs here on their debut album have a compelling groove, it's rarely a dance beat. Above this rhythm, Stephen Fellows' spare, atmospheric guitar and Andy Peake's careful keyboards sketch wraithlike musical shapes, and Fellows and Peake's somewhat droning voices walk through the spaces in the music like they are avoiding mines. The Comsat Angels' ability to imply vast spaces without having to actually *fill* them is their defining genius, and this album is breathtakingly empty.

The standout track, without a doubt, is "Independence Day", a masterfully tormented ghost of a pop song that thrives on the harrowing chorus "I can't relax 'cause I haven't done a thing / And I haven't done a thing 'cause I can't relax". One of my favorite details is the way that for the first half of the song the usual hi-hat part is taken by some almost-inaudible noise that might be a brush on a snare or could even be a hand rubbing a piece of cloth back and forth, so that when the hi-hat eventually comes in to take its place it seems like an inspired addition, not just something that has been in every song in popular music for the past twenty years.

Georgia's comment on this album, which she dropped in to register as I was writing this, was "Elvis Costello meets the Clash". I wouldn't have come up with either of those comparisons, but I can understand where they come from. Elvis's early arrangements were similarly spare, and a few of Peake's keyboards on this album have that sort of electric-organ timbre that Costello was fond of. Elvis' low-fi rockabilly aesthetic is miles from the Comsat Angels' atmospherics, though, and so the ways they differ are far more important than the ways they are similar. The Clash's anger performs a similar function to the feeling of unease in the Comsat Angels' sound, but there's no reggae influence here at all, and the Comsat Angels' technical skill and musical control are both much greater than the Clash's. My own assessment is that they are more like a cross between the Chameleons and later Talk Talk, perhaps like one of those groups covering the other one. And as you could probably deduce from my reviews of *those*, I like this a lot.

### ***Fiction*, 1982 LP**

The Comsat Angels second album, *Sleep No More*, I haven't been able to locate. It is comfortably out of print, like all their Polydor material, and for some reason the label adamantly refuses to either re-release the back catalog on CD or give up rights so that somebody else can, and so it seems reasonably likely that I'll never find a copy. I consider myself pretty fortunate to have turned up all the old vinyl that I *have*, seeing as I discovered the band long after the fact.

*Sleep No More*, according to sources who *have* heard it, was a very dark and moody affair even compared with *Waiting for a Miracle*. *Fiction*, their third album, lightens up a little, and I don't find it as effective on the whole. It doesn't have the measured emptiness of *Waiting for a Miracle*, but the band has yet to find their eventual knack for thickening their atmosphere's textures without losing their essential spirit. There are a few songs that work for me, notably "Not a Word" and "Ju-Ju Money", but most of the others just make me want to hear *Sleep No More* all the more. The band's potential is obvious here, but with other, better, albums to choose from, I rarely find myself putting this one on.

### ***Enz*, 1982 LP**

*Fiction* was the last studio album for Polydor, but the Dutch wing of the label hung on long enough to release this odd collection of singles and b-sides. The ten songs here include the two *Waiting for a Miracle* singles "Independence Day" and "Total War" (and the "Total War" b-side "Home is the Range"), the between-albums single "Eye of the Lens" (and its b-sides "Another World" and "At Sea"), the *Sleep No More* outtake "Mass", a remixed version of *Fiction*'s "After the Rain", and the two singles "Do the Empty House" and "It's History", whose origins I can't tell you.

It's a pretty impressive collection, actually. *Any* record with "Independence Day" on it commands my attention, admittedly, but this one holds up in its own way almost as well as *Waiting for a Miracle*. It's less focused, naturally, but the variety turns out to be interesting enough to compensate. The presence of the menacing "Eye of the Lens" and its muted companion piece "At Sea" easily keep "Independence Day" from being the sole highlight here, and the fast, noisy "Home is the Range" is a fascinating study in contrast with the band's usual style. The presence of "Eye of the Lens" and "At Sea" on the BBC Sessions album makes this record a little less-essential, which is good, seeing how hard it is to find, but it's still worth a search for serious fans, as none of the b-sides deserve to be consigned to obscurity.

### ***Land*, 1983 LP**

In the reverse of the Talk Talk progression, the Comsat Angels went from moody atmospherics to synth-pop. Their new label, Jive, was determined to get them on the hit wagon along with A Flock of Seagulls, Duran Duran, Depeche Mode and the like, and this album is the first misguided result.

Actually, as synth-pop albums go, this is a pretty decent one. The redone version of "Independence Day" is catchy, and the follow-up "Will You Stay Tonight?" is a little insipid but infectious nonetheless. If

you'd never heard the Comsat Angels before, you'd probably think that this album wasn't *quite* produced right (vestiges of the band's distinctive sound leak through despite the production), but that it was basically agreeable pop. For the Comsat Angels fan, the album is somewhat painful, as you have to hear the band's genius being bent uncomfortably toward some commercial ideal that they aren't temperamentally suited for.

As a phase in the band's career, though, or as an experiment in fusing two dissimilar styles, it's quite interesting. Steve Fellows' vocals never do fit the synth-pop mold, and this means that the tension between the band's instincts and their new style is never completely absent. At the best moments, this tension enlivens the music, and I think both "Mister Memory" and "As Above So Below" turn out to be great songs despite their circumstances. The remake of "Independence Day" reminds me uncomfortably of "Pretty in Pink", but at least there isn't a movie of "Independence Day" to *completely* betray its original ideals. In this case, too, the "ideals" are musical, not lyrical, which makes them a little harder to betray in quite as unambiguous terms as the Psychedelic Furs managed to.

#### *Will You Stay Tonight?, 1983 12"*

I'd *rather* have 12"s from the Polydor era, but these two are the ones I found, so they're the ones I have. This one backs "Will You Stay Tonight?" with a painful "Dub Mix" of the *Land* album track "A World Away", and a non-album b-side called "Shining Hour". "Shining Hour" is actually pretty cool. It would be better without the cheesy drum-machine groove, but the echoey piano that provides almost all the support for Fellows beautiful vocal track sounds great, and the light bass and keyboards stay appropriately out of the way for almost all of the song. Strip just a couple of lines out of the drum-machine pattern (the hi-hat, the hand-claps and the wood-block sounding things), so that the rhythm is reduced basically to the kick-drum sound, and you'd have a song for which no apologies would have been necessary.

#### *Island Heart, 1983 12"*

If there was ever a band that shouldn't have had dance remixes done of their songs, the Comsat Angels was them. The dub mix of "Island Heart" that starts off side two of this 12" is truly awful, worse than the album version on the front by several orders of magnitude. The other b-side, a non-album track called "Scissors and the Stone", might have been great at half this speed, without the pounding drums, but the effort here to turn it into a dance-smash wrecks it completely. Ugh.

#### *Seven Day Weekend, 1985 CD*

Things continue to fragment on the second Jive album, *Seven Day Weekend*. The revolving cast of producers prevents this album from sounding particularly consistent, but given the *specific* consistent sound that *Land* had, this may not be a bad thing. This is still an album of the band doing stuff that isn't their forte, but this time they seem to have relaxed into it, and this record at least sounds like it was *recorded* this way, where *Land* often sounded to me like it was an attempt to make New Wave dance hits out of pre-Jive-style source tracks. Several of these songs, like "Believe It" and "Close Your Eyes", really do rock in the way that I think the label *wanted* the band to. It's a pathetic waste of the band's skills, particularly of Mik (spelling varies from album to album, I notice) Glaisher's drumming, here replaced with a rather uninspired drum-machine, but at least it comes close to succeeding at *something*.

#### *Chasing Shadows, 1986 CD*

Having failed to mold the band into easy money, Jive eventually let them go. A chance connection with Robert Palmer resulted in a surprise re-emergence on Island, and *Chasing Shadows* is a concerted effort to divert the digression of *Land* and *Seven Day Weekend* (the latter of which is actually the album that got Palmer interested, ironically enough) back towards the direction that the band had been going on the first three albums.

The *sound* of this album is the most important change. The production, by the band and Kevin Moloney, restores some of the empty spaces that the last two records were very much missing, and rips out much of the excess synth-pop filler. Mik Glaisher and Kevin Bacon seem to emerge from prolonged hibernation (not self-imposed, the liner notes to *Time Considered...* make clear), and though most of the rhythms on this album still owe more to the steady drive of *Land* and *Seven Day Weekend* than they do to the edgy sketches of *Waiting for a Miracle*, the effect of human hands on the sticks is apparent, and this makes a big difference. I'm a drum-machine fan, but the Comsat Angels' style is not the sort that they are meant for.

It's also clear that the band hasn't been wasting their time in between records. The playing on this album is superb, Steve Fellows' vocals showing particular improvement (Palmer's guest vocal on "You'll Never Know" sounds dead by comparison). Andy Peake's keyboards are up-to-date, and the band no longer sounds like Costello by any stretch of the imagination. The piano and soft bass on the sad closing song "Pray for Rain" are stunning, as are the driving

Dolby-esque keyboards, rumbling bass, pounding drums and charged guitar of "The Thought That Counts".

Fellows assessment of *Chasing Shadows*, in the interview for the notes to *Time Considered...*, is that the album has a consistent sound, but that the songs aren't that strong. There are a couple tracks toward the beginning that I could live without (the bass walk and shuffling drums on "The Cutting Edge" bother me, and "Under the Influence" seems forced), but on the whole I think these songs are as good as any of the band's. "Carried Away" is slow and awe-filled, "The Thought That Counts" and "You'll Never Know" sound to me like the way *Land* and *Seven Day Weekend* were meant to, "Lost Continent" builds hypnotically, "Flying Dreams"'s mixture of drums and piano and changing tempos are striking, and "Pray for Rain" is, as I said, pained and remarkable. In some moods, I like *Chasing Shadows* even better than *Waiting for a Miracle*, and even in the other moods it's never far behind.

#### *Fire on the Moon (Dream Command), 1990 CD*

Finally caving in to trademark pressure, the band changed its name to Dream Command for their long delayed next album. Nobody but me seems to like this one. It is, I will admit, a partial regression to Jive-era hit-seeking ("Sleepwalking" sounds a lot like "Island Heart" to me, for example), but this time around the band *sounds great* to me, so I don't mind nearly as much. The dramatic overdriven guitar and crashing drums of "Celestine" and "Venus Hunter" are exhilarating, the quick snap of "Phantom Power" and "She's Invisible" I find irresistible, and the slow grace of "Mercury" I consider a worthy sequel to "Pray for Rain".

Probably it's just that this time around they're trying to be a *rock* band, not a *dance* band, and while both efforts are stylistic tangents, this time I like the band they're *trying* to be, too. Objectively, this album is at least as off-topic as *Land* or *Seven Day Weekend*, and the fact that it was released under another name isn't in the end all that inappropriate. The band was dropped by Island almost the moment the album was released, and thus there was no promotion to speak of, but I come across copies of this with surprising regularity, and while this shouldn't be your introduction to the Comsat Angels, it's certainly worth hearing if you like the band, and given the paucity of Comsat Angels releases on CD, it's not like your budget will be overtaxed by the others.

#### *My Mind's Eye, 1992 CD*

After Dream Command went nowhere, I pretty much expected to have heard the last of the Comsat

Angels, and so when they returned with a new album in 1992, I was overjoyed. When I heard it, I was even *more* ecstatic. *My Mind's Eye* is a resounding "fuck you" to just about everybody who ever got in the band's way. All their other albums, *Waiting for a Miracle* included, sound lifeless and underachieving compared to this one, which made #3 on my 1992 top ten list, edged out by only *Little Earthquakes* and *Grave Dancers Union*.

The uncanny thing that the Comsat Angels manage on this album is to reinstate their original mastery of implied spaces *without* actually having to empty them. The music on this album is frenetic, charged and *loud*, and yet it still inhabits these amazing aural tracts whose boudoirs are never explicitly delineated. Even a straightforward pop song like "Field of Tall Flowers" sounds like it's being beamed from Mars. Building their own studio with Island's money to record *Fire on the Moon* in turns out in retrospect to have been critical. At least, I *assume* that the luxury of owning their own studio is what explains the remarkable production on this album.

For once, an album finds the Comsat Angels not moving backwards in *any* sense. This record collects some elements from the past (*Waiting for a Miracle's* independence, *Fire on the Moon's* power, *Chasing Shadows's* coherence), but the synthesis it makes of them is entirely new, and *My Mind's Eye* makes more sense as the follow-up to *everything* that went before than as the continuation of any one stylistic thread in their past canon. I get the sense that for the first time the band is completely in control of what they are doing, and that this time they didn't let anybody else get in their way. Their apparent dissolution after Dream Command probably ended up *helping*, as it freed them of outside expectations, and made it so that if they were to continue they would *have* to do it on their own terms, simply because nobody *else's* terms were available.

Almost every element of the band's sound has evolved brilliantly (a scientifically-questionable phrase that captures the sense of what I mean all the same). Glaisher's drumming is confident, strong and steady. He makes a lot more noises on this record than on *Waiting for a Miracle*, but I find that there *still* aren't any extraneous ones (if design is the process of removing everything that isn't essential, I often think that *art* is the process of adding things that *come* to seem essential). Kevin Bacon's bass fits into the rhythm as if he and Mik are sync-locked somehow. Steve Fellows berserk guitar is a far cry from his restrained playing in the early days, but the band has developed around him in such a way that the howling storms he whips up here now seem entirely in character. With the demise of Echo and the Bunnymen, the Chameleons and the Icicle Works, and the defection of U2, Fellows may be

the sole living practitioner of the sort of guitar playing that he and Echo's Will Sergeant can take as much credit for inventing as anybody else. Perhaps this just demonstrates holes in my musical education, but Fellows seems to me to have developed along lines that have no particular referent (liner inspiration credit to Hendrix notwithstanding), and his work here seems as exciting and original to me as anything I can think of.

His singing, too, has continued to develop. It was always incredibly well-suited to the band's slower, moodier moments, but on *Land*, *Seven Day Weekend* and *Fire on the Moon* (the "off" albums) it often seemed out of its element. This contrast wasn't always *bad*, mind you, but *My Mind's Eye* finds Fellows' voice supporting the harder material completely for what seems to me like the first time. Production tricks help with "My Mind's Eye", but that's fair, and on both "Driving" and "Route 666" he seems to manage quite well without it. On "And All the Stars" he reminds me just a little of Ian McNabb. These are subtle changes, but significant ones. As a general-purpose vocalist I don't think Steve is quite up to Ian's level, but within the range of styles required by the Comsat Angels' music, there's no need to ask for better.

Keyboards, as the paint that fills the spaces, are extra-important to a band whose treatment of those spaces is one of its trademarks, and Andy Peake is probably the *player* most responsible for the band having managed to fill out their sound without losing the feeling that they've arranged to record it during spacewalks. His carefully under-stated synthesizers imply vertiginous distances without ever seeming to *be* those distances. The album's production should probably share this credit, as it is the *balancing* of instruments, as much as any one instrument's individual part, which is responsible for this album's sound. The way the drums and cymbals echo dryly, the way the keyboards simmer just under the surface, the way the guitar solos seem to be something overheard from miles across a salt flat, these are just some of the tricks the band has coaxed out of its studio, and they make for a record that I hope heralds a long-running new phase in the band's career.

### *Driving*, 1992 CD5

The single for "Driving" bears the caveat "Not for sale in the United States of America". This warning is not visible without actually *opening* the case, though, and so is clearly meant more as a legal ass-covering measure in anticipation of the inevitable imports than it is as prevention from dangerous society-destabilizing copies reaching the band's not-particularly-numerous American fans. The single features the album version of "Driving", an instrumental version (the "Driverless

Mix"), a spacey instrumental version of "My Mind's Eye" ("The Wind, the Bass, the Drums", so named because it omits all the other parts), and the non-album track "There Is No Enemy" (which I believe got included on the 1993 US release of *My Mind's Eye*, in the hopes of getting people who had purchased the album as an import the previous year to cough up another \$15 for the domestic version). The instrumentals are interesting, but expendable. "There Is No Enemy" is excellent, though, and if you haven't purchased the album yet you should find a domestic copy, as it will cost you around half of what my import copies of the album and this single cost me.

### *Field of Tall Flowers*, 1993 CD5

What, *more* promotion?! I don't know what *effect* this single had on the band or the album's success, but the fact that another single appeared, many months after the album came out, is a welcome sign that *somebody*, at least, really cares about the Comsat Angels, finally. *Both* versions of the title track here are actually remixes. The first is a relatively straightforward single mix, the second is a nice acoustic version. The single also adds the driving "Too Much Time" and the haunting bass/vocal duet "Storm of Change" (okay, it has a little guitar towards the end, but it's *mostly* just bass and vocals). Both b-sides are superb, and the acoustic version of "Field of Tall Flowers" suits it especially well, making this an unusually valuable CD5.

### *Time Considered as a Helix of Semi-Precious Stones*, 1992 CD

With the vaults at Polydor and Jive firmly shut, it seemed like the pre-Island Comsat Angels material was doomed never to make it to digital, until it occurred to Steve Fellows to mention that the band had done quite a few BBC sessions over the years. John Peel's promotion of their self-produced 1979 debut EP was critical in getting their career started, and over the next five years they appeared almost a dozen times on Peel's show and various others. Compiler Simon Robinson and RPM records leapt on this opportunity, and with Fellows participation assembled this phenomenal 19-track, 77-minute retrospective. Covering the band's first five years and albums, and including a detailed history by Robinson, track-by-track notes by Fellows, and the sort of credits that you only get on compilations prepared by people who actually *care* about the music, this package is an exemplar of how a retrospective for an unjustly overlooked band *ought* to be done.

In album terms, this set represents *Waiting for a Miracle* with "Total War", "Real Story", "Waiting for a Miracle" and "Independence Day"; *Sleep No More* with

"Be Brave", "Eye Dance", "Gone", "Dark Parade" and "Our Secret"; *Fiction* with "Ju-Ju Money" and "Now I Know"; *Land* with "Mr. Memory", "Island Heart" and "Nature Trails"; and *Seven Day Weekend* with "High Tide" and "You Move Me". The rest are the b-sides "At Sea", "Eye of the Lens", and the Rolling Stones' "Citadel", the only cover the band ever released.

As a early-career overview and a best-of, this album is in the unique position of actually doing a *better* job than the *original* albums. The five tracks from the Jive albums, in particular, blow *Land* and *Seven Day Weekend* away, and the equalizing effect of having all the songs in live-for-radio form makes *Time Considered...* serve as a chronicle not of the career that the band actually *had*, but of the one that the music, left to its own devices, *would* have had. Not having the original albums on CD remains unfortunate, as I'm an inconsolable completist, but given the choice between this record and seeing all five of the albums it spans actually reissued, I'd *rather* have this. The track distribution serves *me* particularly well, since the album most heavily represented, *Sleep No More*, is the one I don't have, but it also provides a pretty fair sampling of material from all five albums. All three b-sides are precious, and the Stones cover is a fascinating recasting of the song that bears almost no resemblance to the original band.

I consider this album a must-have. The Comsat Angels are a brilliant band that your musical education is incomplete without, and this compilation fills the early-Eighties part of that gap with a single masterful stroke.

## The Dream Academy

### *The Dream Academy*, 1985 LP

Before I get too far from The Icicle Works, here's another band I associate with them for a bad, if easily understood, reason. The title of the first song from this album, "Life in a Northern Town", reminds me of the title of the Icicle Works' "Up Here in the North of England".

The song itself was a novelty hit that you may recall from the lines "In winter 1963 / It felt like the world would freeze, / With John F. Kennedy / And the Beatles", and the incessant "Ah hey ma ma ma" chorus vocals. The rest of the album has a superficial resemblance to the Thompson Twins, partially because the core band is two men and a woman, who aren't related. Gilbert Gabriel, Nick Laird-Clowes and Kate St. John employ a revolving cast of credible guests to fill out their arrangements. David Gilmour co-produces

most of the album. Prolific session-bassist Pino Palladino and drummer Dave Mattacks (first encountered in this book back with Joan Armatrading) appear for one track (Pino for two). REM's Peter Dinklage plays guitar on one song, and this was back when REM was just a cool band, not an insufferably self-righteous scrap pile for toadying industry award-show trophies (but I'm getting ahead of myself).

The album has some dead parts, but on the whole the band makes an appealing, smooth pop that resembles Prefab Sprout more than anything else. As with most bands whose first hit has some novelty catch like Sixties name dropping, the Dream Academy got ignored with a vengeance after that, so I have no idea what their other records sound like, and I'm not sufficiently fascinated by this one to go out of my way to find out.

This album does have one fabulous song that is completely out of character with the rest of it. "Bound to Be" is a frenetic dance-song that combines elements of Thomas Dolby's "Hyperactive" synth-pop and Sixties girl-group bubble-gum funk. Nothing on this album even remotely approaches its energy, but this one track strikes me as a perfect example of what the Thompson Twins were after all along but never quite achieved.

## Milltown Brothers

### *Slinky*, 1991 CD

The first Milltown Brothers song I heard was "Which Way Should I Jump?", which I thought was wonderful. The second song I heard was "Apple Green", whose repetitive chorus and cheesy organ-sound caused me to reluctantly write the group off as another lamentable product of the same hateful era in Manchester-led British pop that produced bands like the Charlatans, the Farm, the Stone Roses and the Happy Mondays, who I detest.

Boston's "alternative" radio station, WFNX, has a huge annual concert birthday-party where they take over four adjacent clubs in the shadow of Fenway Park and invite just about every band on their playlist to come appear on one of the stages. There are almost invariably several bands I am interested in, so I tend to try to go. Of course, the perversity of existence being what it is, some of the bands I want to see end up being scheduled in different places at the same time, and getting from one place to the other once the clubs get packed is a hopeless mess, so I've gotten in the habit of picking the club with the best overall lineup and staying there for the night. School of Fish were the band I really wanted to see in 1991, so that drove my

choice. They were fourth on at Avalon. The first band was Chapterhouse, who were amazingly awful. The second band was the Milltown Brothers.

They were terrific! Artificial stimulants might have been responsible, but they had an irrepressible manic energy that was especially welcome after Chapterhouse's dreary set. The lead singer caromed around the stage like an out-of-control unicyclist, running into amplifiers, hitting the drummer's cymbals with his hands, and generally risking grievous personal injury in the interest of entertaining me. There was no sign of the listless sullenness or lame house-music monotony that "Apple Green" had led me to fear.

So, I went out and bought the album shortly thereafter. I wish I could say that it captured their live energy, but for the most part it doesn't. "Which Way Should I Jump?" is good, and "Never Come Down Again" has a similar appeal. At times they sound for a few moments like the Cavedogs. On the whole, though, *Slinky* doesn't hit me as anything special. If they come through your town opening for some band you like, though, don't go late.

## The Wonder Stuff

The third band that night was the Wonder Stuff. I'd previously heard "Caught in My Shadow", and liked it, so I was very interested to see what their other stuff sounded like.

They were phenomenal, a whole extra energy level again above the Milltown Brothers. I fell in love with the band instantly. All five members struck me as immensely likable, despite the fact that lead singer Miles Hunt rarely made it through a whole sentence without saying "fucking" twice, a trait that normally annoys me. The inclusion of a violin player was inspired, and Hunt's hilariously snide lyrics and between-song commentary reminded me of first seeing Billy Bragg. The next day, I rushed out and bought the band's then-newest album (*Never Loved Elvis*), and the prior two soon followed.

### *The Eight Legged Groove Machine*, 1988 CD

As the title indicates, the band began as a four-piece, with no violin player, which makes this first album slightly less satisfying for me. They play either very-angry dance-pop, or very-danceable, tuneful punk, depending on which way you look at it. The drums and bass are powerful and fast, delivering the kind of beats that are best danced to by simply jumping up and down, flailing your arms and screaming like a maniac. Loud, brash guitar and nice vocal harmonies

fill out the songs, giving you something to listen to when you run out of energy for jumping. My favorite of the many songs of this type here is "Unbearable", for its pounding bass line and the chorus "I didn't like you very much when I met you, / I didn't like you very much when I met you, / I didn't like you very much when I met you, / And now I like you even less", but the singles "It's Yer Money I'm After Baby" and "Give, Give, Give Me More, More, More" probably have their adherents as well.

The Wonder Stuff show some other sides on this fourteen-song debut (the CD has eighteen, and all but the last two are less than three minutes long). "Rue the Day" is a pretty acoustic-guitar ballad. "Like a Merry Go Round" is very close to the pure pop of the dB's. "The Animals and Me" tosses in a drum-machine groove and some synthesizers, but is, ironically, one of the album's least frenetic songs. "Some Sad Someone" could be by Boston if the vocals were two or three octaves higher and the guitar was run through a Rockman.

The four CD bonus tracks are worth hearing. "Jealous" sounds like That Petrol Emotion. "Astley in the Noose" is a wonderfully acerbic anti-tribute to Rick Astley (no relation to Jon Astley, who *is* listed in this book). "A Song Without End" is a veritable epic by Wonder Stuff standards, stretching to a luxurious 4:07.

### *Hup*, 1989 CD

*Hup* is a transition album. The songs here are, for the most part, slower and less boldly enthusiastic than on *Eight-Legged Groove Machine*. Martin Bell, the violin player who would be a full-time member by *Never Loved Elvis*, appears here for the first time, but his presence is not yet an integrated element, so the songs he plays on seem to have a rather forced bluegrass feel. The sounds here are more heavily processed than on the first album, with some samples and odd synthesizer noises, and the whole album is slightly fogged by excessive reverb.

The songs, underneath this confusion, are actually excellent. "Thirty Years in the Bathroom", "Radio Ass Kiss" and "Cartoon Boyfriend" all have a delightful bitter taste. "Golden Green" is a lilting country-ish folk song. "Can't Shape Up" marries a wistful melody to a hard dance-beat, and comes up with something that isn't particularly wistful or danceable, but which I like listening to anyway.

All the same, I wouldn't recommend this as the place to begin exploring the Wonder Stuff. If you like both their first and third albums, you'll probably like this one too, but it's pretty hard to make any such judgments in reverse from listening to *Hup* in isolation.

### *Never Loved Elvis*, 1991 CD

"Mission Drive", which begins the Wonder Stuff's third album, is a perfect introduction to it. The song begins slowly, with a slowly picked guitar line, plucked mandolin and light drums accompanying a slow, sweetly sung intro. The singing gradually takes on an ominous strained quality, and then the song crashes into gear with thrashing drums, choppy guitar and buoyant violin. "I've never loved Elvis / And I've never sung the blues", the song declares, introducing this album's deliriously un-soulful jig-and-reel fervor. "Play" revs the energy up even further.

Fiddler Martin Bell is now a full member, and the band also has a new bass player, Paul Clifford. The new fivesome sounds incredibly cohesive. Bell's violins, banjos, mandolins, accordions and other miscellaneous odd noises are completely integrated, and this turns the Wonder Stuff from a dance-pop band that occasionally retains a guest fiddler to a band with a style uniquely their own. The three original members, Hunt, guitarist Malc Treece and drummer Martin Gilks, sound like they've been given all-new lives, and there is no sign at all of the murkiness that shrouded much of *Hup*. This whole album has a charged, vital freshness that alternates between harnessing and just riding on an irresistible carnival-like gaiety. "Welcome to the Cheap Seats" neatly captures the essence of *Never Loved Elvis*'s attitude: the bleachers are not only a great place from which to watch whatever spectacles are occurring, but a source of excitement themselves. The videos for "Welcome to the Cheap Seats", "The Size of a Cow" and "Sleep Alone", with extravagant surreal sets reminiscent of Lewis Carroll, are good evocations of the strange but inviting world these songs inhabit.

The most remarkable thing about *Never Loved Elvis*, to me, is that not only has the band found an unexplored new musical direction, but they've simultaneously managed to recapture (and even surpass) the energy that their first album created with much different tools. This album is just as much more danceable than *Eight Legged Groove Machine* as it is more interesting listening than *Hup*. Hunt's bitter insights are sharper than ever. "Maybe I should take the mic, / Stand up tall like Michael Stipe, / And try to solve the problems of the earth." "Jesus loves you / More than I do." There are subtler, more incisive moments, as well, as in "Caught in My Shadow" when he muses "These streets used to look big, / This town used to look like a city, / These people used to talk to me." The ever-popular Kirsty MacColl contributes backing vocals on several songs.

"Caught in My Shadow" remains the album's climax for me. Seeing the video was my first contact with the song and the band for me, and so that's the

way I remember it. The video, if you haven't seen it, has the band out on the street in what I think is the center of Birmingham, performing the song surrounded by a very happy-looking crowd of fans. About the same time this video came out, MTV was also playing an Extreme video with the same general premise, Extreme out on the streets of Boston. This prejudiced me against the Wonder Stuff initially, but after seeing both videos a few times it made me like the Wonder Stuff all the more. Where Extreme looked hopelessly pretentious and their fans vapid, both the Wonder Stuff and their fans looked like they were genuinely enjoying the event. The bobbies holding back the crowd were getting into it. People were dancing, singing. I wanted to be there. And unlike the commercial camera-work of the Extreme video, intent on the photogenic faces of the singer and guitarist, the Wonder Stuff's video was shot more as a documentary, giving you more of a feel for what the event was actually like, instead of a packaged, shiny commercial for the band's line of hair-care products or insignia jeans or some such thing.

The song itself is practically perfect, with acoustic guitars, mandolin, organ and percussion dancing around the brisk rhythm section, and Miles' clear voice soaring over the top. Although the lyrics offer mixed emotions, if you don't feel uplifted by this song then, well, I'm very sorry. And the same goes for the album, 13 songs over.

### *Dizzy*, 1991 CD5 (Vic Reeves and the Wonder Stuff)

I don't know anything about Vic Reeves, but apparently this is an odd collaboration. To me, it's just another great Wonder Stuff single that happens to have a guest vocalist. It reminds me of the Throwing Muses song "Dizzy", because the two songs have the same title, and both use the word to drive a chorus with a great pop hook. This single has two versions of "Dizzy", and the slight, but enjoyable "Oh! Mr. Hairdresser".

### *Welcome to the Cheap Seats*, 1992 CD

A film crew followed the Wonder Stuff around for the second half of 1990 and much of 1991, and the resulting documentary, *Welcome to the Cheap Seats*, is very well done and enjoyable, which is a difficult thing to do with a rockumentary in the post-*Spinal Tap* era. To get some of the performances from the video on a better sounding medium than VHS tape, the band released two singles with four songs each, and later Polydor Japan combined the two on a single CD which I picked up as an import that was much cheaper than buying the two exorbitant CD5s separately.



The first “reel” has the album version of “Welcome to the Cheap Seats”, an excellent unreleased track called “Me, My Mom, My Dad and My Brother”, the band’s fabulous 1990 single “Will the Circle Be Unbroken”, done with Spirit of the West, and a cover of the Jam’s “That’s Entertainment” that I gave my “cover song of the year” award to in 1992 (actually, it tied with Tori Amos’ version of “Smells Like Teen Spirit”).

The second four are a stripped down remix of “Welcome to the Cheap Seats” that eliminates almost everything except the acoustic guitar when Miles and Kirsty are singing, letting you focus on their duet better, and similarly acoustic versions of “Caught in My Shadow”, the 1990 single “Circlesquare”, and the song “Can’t Shape Up”, originally from *Hup*.

All seven new songs/mixes are terrific, and highly recommended to any fan of the band. “Will the Circle Be Unbroken” and the “That’s Entertainment” cover by themselves are worth just about any reasonable price, and the rest just make the package that much more fun. The combined Japanese packaging also includes the lyrics to all songs in both Japanese and English, and a sticker that I like, even if the significance of the fallout-shelter graphic as the backdrop for the band’s logo seems rather arbitrary. The actual video adds many live performances (from both a sold-out 20,000+ stadium show in Walsall to a gig the band played at a tiny Midlands high school because the kids wrote them a nice letter and asked them to), all the promo videos from *Never Loved Elvis*, a few seconds of Miles starting to play the Indigo Girls’ “Closer to Fine”, and an untitled acoustic song that I hoped would show up on an album, eventually. Also, Big Country gets a mention in the thank-yous at the end.

## Ned’s Atomic Dustbin

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### *Are You Normal?*, 1992 CD

If you take the Wonder Stuff, replace the fiddler with a second bass player, and give Miles a cold, you get a band that sounds a lot like Ned’s Atomic Dustbin. There are worse fates, to be sure, but I find it hard to think of Ned’s as anything other than either a second-rate Wonder Stuff or, in other moods, a second-rate EMF with their samplers in the shop. Having two bass players is a neat idea, and the second bass usually plays melody, giving the band an identifiable sound, but John, the singer, is just too bland, and the song “Walking Through Syrup” is too close to a description of what the band *sounds* like. *Are You Normal?* is not a bad album at all, and you could pogo around the living room quite happily to it if such was your desire. Some

subset of Wonder Stuff/Jesus Jones/EMF fans are liable to like it a lot, but I can’t manage as much enthusiasm for this band as for the other three.

## Carter the Unstoppable Sex Machine

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### *1992 The Love Album*, 1992 CD

The Wonder Stuff, Ned’s Atomic Dustbin and EMF are pretty frivolous bands, but they are models of sobriety next to Carter the Unstoppable Sex Machine, a hyperactive robot-equipped pair of Scots who don’t seem to have the least regard for album coherency.

Parts of this album I like a lot. The single “The Only Living Boy in New Cross” is delightful, like the Pet Shop Boys on speed. The comic overdrive of “Suppose You Gave a Funeral and Nobody Came” is hilarious, and the manic guitar surge of “Do Re Me, So Far So Good” is a powerful combination of snide punk vitriol and sequenced rhythm-track jerkiness. All of these are raging explosions of frenetic rapid-fire drum-machines and charging guitar, and that’s when I like Carter the most.

They don’t seem to be able to keep up the intensity on record, however, as this album is punctuated by painful sing-song piano tunes like “Is Wrestling Fixed?” and “England”, which sound like excerpts from a high school musical, albeit with better lyrics, and odd experiments like “The Impossible Dream”, which is apparently their answer to Sid Vicious’ rendition of “My Way”. I understand the desire to demonstrate that hyperkinetic mosh-pit enliveners aren’t the extent of their capabilities, but I want *more* of them. I wouldn’t mind the interludes nearly as much if this album weren’t so short, but as it is the preponderance of filler on this, an only 36-minute album, leaves me not very impressed with the band, and tempted to write them off as gimmicks.

## EMF

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### *Schubert Dip*, 1991 CD

“Unbelievable”, which appears on this, the first EMF album, was an enormous hit, one of relatively few US #1s in my collection. It was also, at the time, unspeakably annoying, and I hated it with vehement passion. I hated even looking at EMF, and the mere word “unbelievable” was enough to set me into station-switching convulsions. I couldn’t escape the song,

though, and it buzzed menacingly after me like a large malevolent hornet (and, mind you, stinging insects *really* bother me).

Eventually, the “Unbelievable” blitz subsided. I got a new job (this doesn’t have anything directly to do with EMF, but it’s part of the story). One day, eating lunch with my friend Marty (co-worker at the new job, you see), we were talking about truly great albums, and he revealed that *Schubert Dip* was on his list of such things. I shuddered, and shared my impression of EMF as Hell’s in-house one-hit-wonder band. He insisted, however, that *Schubert Dip* was actually a solid, compelling, remarkable *album*, a prolonged burst of non-stop energy that “Unbelievable” was merely one small part of.

I didn’t believe him for a second, and didn’t even consider buying a copy. He circumvented this reticence, however, by picking up a cheap used copy and dropping it off in my office with a deceptively malice-free caveat about how I ought to at least listen to it once, but I didn’t have to like it or anything. So, I took it home and put it on. I wasn’t hovering over the Stop button waiting to have an excuse to yank it out, but neither was I totally committed to actually listening to the *whole* album.

Turns out, Marty was right. This *is* a spectacular album, for exactly the reasons he cited, and I gave it a Belated Mention award in my 1993 year-end write-up. It starts out brilliantly, with the choral intro to “Children” suddenly exploding into whirling sirens, battering drums, ringing guitars and keyboards, and singer James Atkin’s likable half-spoken Ian-McCulloch-at-13 vocals, and it doesn’t let up for a second. In the wake of dozens of British techno-Rave dance bands, EMF manages to churn out a better dancefloor-shaking soundtrack while avoiding all the things that alienate me from most of their apparent peers. These songs are tight and bouncy, with a healthy dose of punk energy, never slipping into the painful House repetition or glazed-eye drool-inducing neo-psychedelic directionlessness that Manchester suffered a cruel epidemic of for a while around the beginning of the Nineties. EMF make heavy use of samples and sound effects, but they never *rely* on them, and stripped of samples *Schubert Dip* would still have ten world-class pop-rock songs.

In fact, I even like “Unbelievable” in this context. Those of you who shared my *initial* opinion of this song may frown at my change of heart, but the song takes on a *very* different personality as the sixth strong song of a strong album (the sixth sick sheik’s sixth sick sheep’s sick) than it does as an isolated novelty hit from a band fully expected to disappear once the song’s fifteen minutes on the charts are complete. The five songs before it firmly establish the band’s credibility, and

demonstrate clearly that EMF is a band building chattering pogo-anthems out of top-quality raw materials. When “Unbelievable” rolls around, then, I find that I now hear its musical structure just as much as the trappings of its arrangement, whereas before I wouldn’t have vouched for it *having* a musical structure (at least, not an intentional one). Having gone from hating EMF to loving them essentially during a *single* listen to this album, I can’t do anything else but recommend it enthusiastically.

### *Unexplained*, 1992 CD5

To fill the time until EMF’s second album (and, presumably, to try and keep their name in people’s faces as continuously as possible), they put out this four-song EP, which paves the way from *Schubert Dip* to *Stigma* nicely. They begin to play down the sirens and rap-style vocal samples and concentrate more heavily on their music. I don’t *know* that this is a conscious move to combat the image that “Unbelievable” earned them, but that sure *seems* like the reason.

It’s working. “Getting Through” is a dense, powerful song, with thickly distorted guitar and limber bass. Every part is impressive, and there’s almost nothing in the song that doesn’t sound like it originates from a musical instrument. Some of the samples return for “Far from Me”, which sounds like it could be a leftover from *Schubert Dip*, newly performed but retaining some of its original personality.

“The Same”, on the other hand, with its ricocheting synth-bass line and Deep Purple organ, shows the first obvious signs that not only can they do “their thing” without as many extraneous noises, but they can even do *other things*, which was by no means obvious from *Schubert Dip*. The guitar part that parallels the bass, and the moments where the song stops or everything but the rhythm section drops out, show EMF expanding its dynamic vocabulary effectively. The cover that closes the EP, the Stooges’ “Search and Destroy” (it took me a while to remember that James Osterberg is Iggy Pop’s real name), has a blaring rock intensity that is also a new side of the band, and which sounds to me like a midpoint between the Rolling Stones’ “Gimme Shelter” and the Sisters of Mercy’s cover of it.

For those of you who give a shit about the chronology of things (and I know there’s at least one such person, since I plan to read this book myself), I actually got *Unexplained* taped to *Stigma* as a free bonus, probably the day after Marty gave me *Schubert Dip*. In fact, it’s possible that noticing this bundle at Tower prompted me to mention it to Marty, which prompted him to get me *Schubert Dip*. There, wasn’t that interesting?

### *Stigma*, 1992 CD

*Stigma* follows through on the promise of *Unexplained*, delivering a darker, denser, more organic, more forceful, more mature, less innocent (and less successful, both commercially and critically) set than *Schubert Dip*. At the same time as it proves that EMF aren't liable (yet, anyway) to challenge any of the Jacksons for chart-topping consistency, it also establishes that the band has the unmistakable potential for a long, *artistically* satisfying career.

"Getting Through" is the only song actually reprised from *Unexplained*, but the spirit of "The Same" and "Search and Destroy" are very much in evidence. The guitars are loud and snarling, the keyboards much more varied than on *Schubert Dip*, where electric-piano samples dominated the non-siren faction. The rhythm section is both improved and less mechanical, evolving into a role that isn't strictly limited to giving the mosh-pit its requisite cadence.

Perhaps the biggest change on *Stigma*, though, is an omission. *Schubert Dip* was seething with noises, both in between songs and during them. Samples, sirens, dialog, *Schubert Dip* brought the sounds of its own party with it. *Stigma* eliminates this entire component. It took me a while to realize what it was that makes this album sound initially less dynamic and alive than *Schubert Dip*, and that's it. It's a hard transition, to be frank, and I bet a lot of people who listened to this record just thought it lacked something, without being able to specify exactly what. I think EMF *had* to make the break, though. The sirens and the dialog would get to be *defining* gimmicks pretty quickly if they kept them up, and once that happened they'd be dead in the water, unable to get taken seriously with the noises, and unable to get rid of them without the band's sound seeming to disintegrate. In the short term, this means that *Stigma* sounds much less like a gloriously crazed party erupting in your house than the first album does, and yeah, that's too bad, and we'll have to see whether it ends up killing the band's career (which is certainly possible). They have the small comfort, I think, of knowing that though this has the potential to stall their career, the other way they'd have killed it for good.

So, you need to adjust your frame of reference for this album. Frame adjustment is a life skill, though, and this is one of many good reasons to master it, as *Stigma* on its own terms is excellent. EMF is a surprisingly powerful band for five kids who look like they are still in high school and haven't quite gotten used to being able to buy their own gear, and my prediction is that this album will age particularly well.

### *They're Here*, 1992 CD5

EMF put out piles of UK singles, most of which I was able to turn down. This one, though, I had to have in order to preserve the novelty of hearing them cover Traffic's "The Low Spark of High Heeled Boys" for posterity. Honestly, it's not *that* great a version. They manage to compress the song somewhat, but it's still nowhere near as dense as their own compositions. Its slow pace isn't their forte at all, and forces them into an awkward lumber. The trippy cascades of synth beeps and self-consciously anachronistic organ don't help matters, either. This makes a certain sense in my life, though, as it means that I now have *two* versions of this song, and though I'm quite sure I like the song, *neither* version actually appeals to me that much. Keep trying, world. *Somebody's* will eventually get it right, I feel certain, and by the time they do the narrative of failed attempts that I will have accumulated will make an interesting saga.

The third song on this under-generous single is "Phantasmagoric", which in my opinion suffers from its proximity to "The Low Spark...", and ends up sounding much too much like the Charlatans.

## Jesus Jones

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### *Liquidizer*, 1989 CD

Jesus Jones and EMF aren't *alike*, by any means, but they seem to travel as a set. Mostly, this is because the two bands rose to prominence at about the same time, both using samples, and they actually *look* similar. The differences are instructively ironic, though.

First, Jesus Jones hit the big time with their *second* album. This one, their first, not only stands alone, but in many ways prepares the path for *Doubt* and *Schubert Dip*. This might have been expected to give Jesus Jones an advantage as their second and third albums came out alongside EMF's first and second, but in fact EMF turned out to be substantially *more* successful (at least, that's my perception).

Second, Jesus Jones is even *more* dedicated to samples than EMF was at their outset. This should make them a correspondingly bigger novelty than EMF, but it doesn't work out that way. Their sampling is actually much more integrated into their sound and style, and the transition EMF accomplished, moving *away* from sound effects, Jesus Jones would have a *very* difficult time with.

Third, given that Jesus Jones' style is less gimmicky than EMF's (first albums, at least), you might expect that Jesus Jones' albums would be more consistent wholes. This, too, doesn't turn out to be the

case. The albums are erratic, and I don't really experience them as wholes at all. There are songs that are brilliant, and songs that are annoying, and the quality of an album becomes a matter of calculating the ratio of songs I like to songs I don't, and overall gestalt doesn't enter into it.

Lastly, Jesus Jones leader/songwriter/singer Mike Edwards has a much better-developed sense of melody, both in writing and singing, than EMF's James Atkin. Given how central vocals tend to be to my experience of a band, this should mean that Jesus Jones comes out sounding more accessible to me. But (and you may be picking up the pattern here), that's not so. EMF's songs have *many* more conventional virtues, and comparing the two bands, Jesus Jones is definitely closer to the musical fringe. They are also, despite Edwards having a technically superior voice, closer to punk.

*Liquidizer*, all that considered, is pretty good. The "get all the devices making noises and then hit Record" approach to making music is inherently hit or miss, but this album scores some solid hits, and even when it misses the racket it produces is enough to keep you from getting too bored. "Move Mountains", the first song, is one of the best. A jerky, programmed drum track, wheeoo-wheoo siren sounds, chainsaw guitar (I think that's a guitar) and lots of strange voice samples pound their way into a semblance of a song that really comes together behind Edwards' chorus. "Never Enough", the second track, is even better, with a surging bass line and a mournful synthetic violin that hold up either end of a freight-train-force wall of sound.

"All the Answers" doesn't actually *slow down* the drums, but it does use more kicks and fewer snares, which has the same effect, and this comes out being about as close to a ballad as Jesus Jones gets. Edwards' singing is more distinct here (though it's pretty heavily processed throughout this album), and there's some nice harmony to play off the guitar noise. "One for the Money" is, under the whining gunshot sounds and snare-explosions, a classic rock song. You have to listen closely to hear it under the cover of the band's sonic barrage, but it's there, trust me.

There are good moments scattered through the rest of the album, but just about every other song has *something* about it that bothers me. Edwards' mechanical approach to composition isn't anything I object to on principle, but it does mean that if something in a song annoys you, the chances are excellent that it will come back and annoy you a dozen more times in the *exact* same way before the track is done. As a result, I think *Liquidizer* is best appreciated if you don't listen to it too frequently.

### *Live*, 1990 CD5

*Live?! Jesus Jones?* The prospect seemed so bizarre that I *had* to buy this five-song explanation, just to find out what it would sound like.

Well, it sounds like instead of mixing these songs the conventional way, in a studio with a trained engineer and all, they hooked each device to a separate speaker, cranked them all up and pointed them at the middle of a biggish room, and placed a single microphone at the bullseye. The versions of "Move Mountains", "What's Going On", "Broken Bones" and "Song 13" here are all vastly inferior to the *Liquidizer* album versions. The one redeeming feature of this disc is the blazing sampler-happy interlude "Barry D. Next to Cleanliness", where Jesus Jones is temporarily transformed into a strangely inviting mixture of Yaz, Black Sabbath and Public Enemy. Perhaps it's just that this is the only song that I haven't heard a better version elsewhere, but I quite like it, and it makes me wonder why this side of the band only comes out on a single.

### *Doubt*, 1991 CD

For three minutes, on "Right Here, Right Now", Jesus Jones achieved a state of grace. A quiet, catchy song with perfect melody and a snappy, steady dance beat, "Right Here, Right Now" would be a pop classic even with nonsense lyrics. The lyrics it actually has, though, an awestruck emotional memoir of the world awakening from Cold War hibernation, take it from pop to history, and enshrine it not only as my #1 song for 1991 (tied with Anthrax and Public Enemy's "Bring the Noise"), but as a song that will forever be inextricably linked in my mind to an exciting time when deposits of evil in the world seemed to suddenly start melting away like catsup stains in time-lapse laundry-detergent commercials. This is the soundtrack of the Berlin Wall coming down. This is the soundtrack of the USSR splitting apart, of Tianamen Square, of Nelson Mandela getting released from prison. This is the human counterpart to CNN. The sense of wonder it conveys, of import at being present while these events happen, is palpable. Too, the ambiguities are not entirely lost. The surrender of Eastern Europe to democracy means, along with the end of an era of repression, the final death of a dream of a better way of life that never really got a chance even in the segment of the world that raised walls around itself with the nominal intention of giving it a try. The death of Communism means the death of communism, and there is some great sadness in this fact. "Right Here, Right Now" doesn't address it directly, but by avoiding the obvious temptation to slip from amazed observer to triumphant participant, it retains just enough

perspective that I hear both victory and defeat in the words. "A woman on the radio / Talks about revolution, / But it's already passed her by". "I saw the decade in / When it seemed the world could change at the blink of an eye, / And if anything then there's your sign of the times". Wistful, melancholy, hopeful, excited, confused, *alive*. Masterful. If only this and Van Halen's "Right Here, Right Now" (different song) could have traded videos.

Between "Right Here, Right Now", and the title *Doubt*, I had *very* high hopes for this album, which it doesn't live up to. If anything, the yield on *Doubt* is *lower* than *Liquidizer's*. I like the bouncy energy of "Who? Where? Why?" (with the muttered "Jesus Jones" samples, and African chorus and percussion), the slow hum of "I'm Burning", the "Move Mountains"-like clamor of "Are You Satisfied?", and the bass rumble and breathy vocals of "Blissed". I'm not as crazy about the unstructured noise of "Trust Me", "Two and Two" and "Stripped", the awkward spoken rant of "Nothing to Hold Me", the forced XTC-swing of "Welcome Back Victoria" or the obvious dance-hit cheesiness of "International Bright Young Thing" or "Real, Real, Real". "Right Here, Right Now" would redeem a much worse album than this, but *Doubt* does nothing to change my impression of Jesus Jones as fundamentally uneven.

### ***Perverse*, 1993 CD**

The third album, *Perverse*, shows a marked improvement in consistency. With the exception of a two-song skid in the middle ("From Love to War" and "Yellow Brown", which for me get lost in psychedelic reverse envelopes and meandering sproingy bass), I like this album *all the way through*, which for a Jesus Jones album is rather remarkable. The perhaps inevitable complement to that is that fewer of these individual songs stand out like "Never Enough" and "Right Here, Right Now". Still, Jesus Jones has made a quality *album* for the first time, and that's cause to celebrate.

They even manage the coherent record with material that varies in *type* more widely than the songs on the first two albums did. The general trend from *Liquidizer* to *Doubt* was one toward cleaner arrangements, away from the roaring noise of the first album. *Perverse* continues this trend on a conceptual level, but increased production savvy here (Warne Livesey) allows them to bring back some of the noise without it overwhelming the other components.

The closest thing to a direct successor to "Right Here, Right Now" is "The Right Decision", but even it doesn't have the light touch, crisp drums and center-stage vocals of "Right Here, Right Now". The drums

are a bit harder and faster, the vocal lines more clipped and meshed with the thicker, weaving synthesizer lines. "Magazine" and "Get a Good Thing" are like noisier settings of the same sort of melodic piece as "Are You Satisfied?", but both (especially "Magazine") are more charged. The lightest, cheeriest songs here are actually "The Devil You Know", which alternates between twinkling sitar-like keyboards and ping-ponging monster noises, and "Don't Believe It", in which spacey, flanged bass-pulses sail through on their own mysterious errands.

Elsewhere on the album, the caravan of moods passes through the mesmerizingly robotic ("Zeroes and Ones" and "Your Crusade"), some funky NIN-esque cattle-prod-as-instrument ("Tongue Tied"), and an odd techno/ambient/rave marriage ("Spiral", which flips from muted ambient synthesizer murmuring to a sawing, pounding, drill-like (strange tool, eh?) dance pattern just often enough to keep you from being swallowed up in the trance parts). The album concludes with a song, "Idiot Stare", that I swear reminds me at times of Blue Öyster Cult, circa *Fire of Unknown Origin*, and ends with an orchestral coda that sounds like the Kronos Quartet.

Whether or not Jesus Jones can both keep up the album-long consistence shown here, *and* unearth another song as flawless as "Right Here, Right Now", remains to be seen. Put me down as "optimistic", though. Jesus Jones are one of the few bands who manage to exist almost completely in the present, and this positions them closer to the future than just about anybody else working.

### ***The Devil You Know*, 1992 CD5**

The single for "The Devil You Know", which actually preceded the album by a few weeks (thus the earlier date), provides more mixes of the song than, to be honest, I really needed. The album version is joined by a single edit, a mostly drumless version called the "Satellite Over Tehran Mix", an instrumental version called the "Kidney Mix" in which R2D2 takes Mike Edwards place, and one additional track called "Want to Know" that sounds like the Chipmunks doing techno, with very limited equipment. I was impatient to hear "The Devil You Know", and this was a domestic single (and so was cheap), but it's a disc of distinctly limited long-term value.

# Boylan Heights

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from the Connells album *Boylan Heights*

## Soundtrack

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Game Theory: "Throwing the Election"

Big Star: "September Gurls"

Guadalcanal Diary: "Always Saturday"

The Connells: "One Simple Word"

Pop Art: "Roommates"

Tommy Keene: "My Mother Looked Like Marilyn Monroe"

'til tuesday: "Coming Up Close"

Del Amitri: "Stone Cold Sober"

American Music Club: "Johnny Mathis' Feet"

Too Much Joy: "Crush Story"

## Introduction

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This was the hardest chapter by far to choose ten songs from, because more than any other area, Boylan Heights is *defined* by great songs. This chapter is what I refer to as "pure pop". That is, music whose primary focus is not power, energy, politics, narrative, sales, gloss, sex-appeal, technology, musicianship or atmosphere, but rather melody. That's not to say that melody is *lacking* in other chapters, or that this chapter is devoid of all those other qualities, but the artists in this chapter all *primarily* appeal to me as writers and performers of wonderful *tunes*. I am co-opting the word "pop" for the purpose of describing this focus, using it in the "fizzy soda" sense, really, not as an abbreviation for "popular" (when I mean what is usually called Pop in the later sense, I will say "top 40").

As it turns out, this chapter ends up overwhelmingly skewed to what detractors would call "whiny, jangly American alternative/college guitar pop". That wasn't the conscious intent, but in paring off Hull and The Suburbs, this is what was left behind. The guitars are a historical by-product; as of 1993, with New Wave dead and gone, guitars are the lowest common denominator, and the only melodic instrument whose presence in a pop song is not in any way remarkable in itself. Artists that move much beyond simple guitar arrangements tend to quickly become notable for that reason, and end up in some other chapter. There are plenty of keyboards and other strange instruments scattered through this chapter, but the guitar is still the main instrument.

As for whiny, that too is a result of the way I break up music. There are distinctive features to various vocal styles like heavy metal, rock, folk, progressive and commercial top-40 that strongly influence where in this book the artists are placed. The style detractors call "whiny" is, to me, more an absence of the other styles than a style in itself. It is the sound of someone singing because they love the melody of the song, not because they have a well-trained voice they want to show off.

The fact that most of these bands are American is the result of both omission and inclusion. The British bands who are closest to this style made a coherent set in and of themselves, and thus became the chapter Hull. The few that remain here, most notably Del Amitri, *sound American*, in a way that is much easier to hear than to explain. Additionally, the emergence of this category as a commercially viable sub-genre, spearheaded by the enormous market success of REM, came from a strong regional base in Georgia, and a startling number of these bands come from somewhere on the southern East Coast, or can be connected, however indirectly, to someone who does.

I've made this chapter sound like it accreted, rather than being assembled, but that's not quite the truth. In fact, this chapter is towards the middle of the book for the very good reason that the music here forms the center of my collection. One of the concrete inspirations for this book came from the "genre" field of the database I keep of my collection. When I started the database, early in 1989, I defined a small set of genres, and as the database drew I discovered that some absurdly high percentage of the albums I entered where getting assigned to "ALT", for Alternative. The effort to redo my genre divisions to split up my collection more evenly, then, was centered around the need to provide a finer granularity of categories around or instead of Alternative. In doing so I realized that what was happening was that I was paring away subgroups like Steeltown, The Border, Hull, The Suburbs and Earth, getting closer with each slice to pure pop, in the center of Alternative. Now, with the world split into ten areas of vaguely equal size (a factor of two isn't that big a difference at all), I can see that Boylan Heights is what I *meant* all along by Alternative, but that the way the term "alternative" became loaded by the media caused many other kinds of music to become entangled in my category. That's part of why I've chosen to give the chapters in this book place names that *label* their subgenres, rather than terms like "heavy metal" and "punk" that attempt to *describe* them; this way both you and I will be less likely to misunderstand categories based on the words used to identify them. Of course, if this book gets sufficiently famous, then these terms themselves will get absorbed by the media, and we'll have the same problem all

over again. I don't think I'm being unreasonably humble, however, when I opt to worry about that problem when it happens...

## Big Star

So much has been written about Big Star already that I hesitate to add to it. In perhaps the only known example of all major critics and journalists agreeing about anything that appeared during my lifetime, Big Star is now credited with being the prime inspiration behind the whole wing of pop music that this chapter represents, and share the bill with the Velvet Underground as the progenitors of "alternative" music. If you care about anything in this chapter, or more or less any of the other chapters, or just the development of rock in general, you *must* go out and buy the two CDs that represent Big Star's three albums. All Big Star records now come with extensive liner notes explaining in some detail why Big Star is so phenomenally important, so you will have no trouble rationalizing these purchases. Not being familiar with Big Star is now considered equivalent to not knowing anything by the Beatles or the Rolling Stones. The difference is that the music of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones permeates modern existence, and you'd be hard pressed to avoid hearing it if you wanted to. Big Star records, on the other hand, never get played in public for any reason, and so you have to actually purchase them yourself.

### #1 Record/Radio City, 1992 CD

The two "real" Big Star albums, originally released in 1972 and 1974, respectively, were conveniently reissued on one CD in 1992 by Stax. The first features the band's original four-piece line-up, with Alex Chilton, Chris Bell, Andy Hummel and Jody Stephens. Chris Bell departed before the second album, leaving the other three to persevere as a trio. This makes the first album a somewhat larger-sounding, and more cheerful, effort. Big Star's sound, after all the comparisons to Game Theory, REM, Let's Active, the dB's, the Replacements, the Posies, This Mortal Coil and so on, is much raspier than I might have expected, but then I remember that this is 1972, and it makes sense again. The nerve required to title a debut record "*#1 Record*, by Big Star" is in stark opposition to the simple, straightforward production and direct, appealing songs. Big Star are the complete opposite extreme of presentation from, say, Yes' sprawling, monumental *Tales from Topographic Oceans*, which was approximately contemporaneous, though I note that I, myself, like

both, and think that trying to make the two poles into "good" and "bad" is unnecessary.

The second record is a little stranger, with Chilton's lone wavering voice replacing the frequent tight harmonies of *#1 Record*, odd syncopations creeping into what probably would have previously been smooth pop songs. These songs are a little less accessible than those on the first record, but hearing the two albums back to back, the first prepares you for the second. Additionally, the third-to-last of the CD's twenty-four songs is the magical gem "September Gurls", perhaps the band's finest moment. (The Bangles covered this song many years later, in case it sounds familiar to you.)

The last two songs, "Morpha Too" and "I'm in Love with a Girl", pave the way for *Sister Lovers*. Both are extremely short and minimally arranged, and sound like they were recorded as an afterthought, or ad libbed on the spur of a moment. Both are quite beautiful, but they have a noticeable trace of the unsettling quality that would characterize the third album.

### Third/Sister Lovers, 1975 CD

Although the "original" copyright on the 1992 Rykodisc reissue of this album is 1975, the album was recorded in 1974 and didn't appear until 1978. Even then, it was never completely finished, and this version is the first that doesn't have a fundamentally wrong track order. Andy Hummel had left the band by this point, too, leaving Chilton mostly to hang himself. The resulting album sounds like Alex was going brilliantly insane while making it. Virtually none of the songs here make it all the way through without some eerie quirk of production, deranged performance, intentional blemish, sonic Quaalude overdose or other intentional subversion. The atmosphere of willful self-destruction is incredibly thick, and the only reason I'm confident the album *wasn't* recorded in a padded cell is that you'd never get reverb like that in a padded room.

The very things that make *Sister Lovers* so alarming, however, are what make it an album virtually without equal. No matter how hard Chilton tries, he can't disguise the fact that these fractured moments of pain, chaos and paralyzing listlessness are grown from the seeds of pop songs. This palpable tension makes listening to the album a far more interesting experience than many albums by bands who probably thought they were doing something similar.

You should still listen to the first two *first*, since otherwise you won't fully appreciate the disintegration underway, and also since the side of the band shown on the first two records is the one most clearly reflected in

most of the bands I mentioned Big Star as influencing (with the notable exception of This Mortal Coil, who you'll find I've listed in another chapter). This is also not a record you should put on casually for the first time. Set aside time to do nothing but listen to it. The Rykodisc re-issue, with five bonus songs, lasts 55:15, and you'll need some time to recover, so I'd budget at least an hour and a half, if I were you. This is not only one of the most important albums pop music has produced, it's one of the most affecting works of art, *ever*. I'm not exaggerating. (Well, not intentionally, anyway.)

### *Live*, 1992 CD

If you survive the three studio albums, Rykodisc also issued this live recording at the same time as their *Third/Sister Lovers* reissue. Recorded after *Radio City*, this set features #1 Record's "The Ballad of El Goodo", "In the Street", "Thirteen" and "Don't Lie to Me", and *Radio City*'s "O My Soul", "Way Out West", "You Get What You Deserve", "Mod Lang", "Back of a Car", "Daisy Glaze", "She's a Mover", "September Gurls" and "I'm in Love with a Girl". There's also a cover of "Motel Blues", and a short interview segment in the middle. The interview is priceless, as the interviewer comments to Chilton at one point that Big Star had been compared to the Beatles in the mid-Sixties, and didn't he think it was somewhat anachronistic to be playing "this type" of music in the mid-Seventies? Chilton isn't sure, but the songs before and after the question sound like they could have been recorded yesterday, and I think history has answered the question rather conclusively.

Perhaps because the band's new bass player, John Lightman, had only joined the band three weeks before this performance, Chilton chooses to perform "The Ballad of El Goodo", "Thirteen", "I'm in Love with a Girl" and "Motel Blues" as solo acoustic numbers. Lightman acquits himself credibly for most of the rest of the show, though, and the band sounds pretty coherent, especially considering the breakdown of an album that was to follow. Given how little Big Star material there is, in proportion to the band's importance, I'm not going out too far along any limbs by recommending this album along with the studio ones, but *Live* would be worth having even if it were one of fifty.

## Chris Bell

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### *I Am the Cosmos*, 1992 CD

After leaving Big Star, Chris Bell began work on a solo album. When he was killed in a car accident in

1978, the album was still not completed, but years later his brother David compiled this release with some help from Jody Stephens, and so we have some idea of what the record was turning out to be.

After all the hype surrounding Alex Chilton's presence in Big Star (the Replacements' song "Alex Chilton", for example), I admit that I more or less believed that Alex was the musical force behind the band, and that Chris Bell's solo work was, while of historical interest, not liable to be of comparable quality. This impression is *way* wrong. In fact, the combination of *I Am the Cosmos* and the two Big Star records Chilton made without Bell demonstrate beautifully how crucial Bell's role was in holding Big Star together and preventing Chilton's ego and attendant insecurities from destroying the band just like they quickly did. Bell's solo album isn't as mesmerizing without Chilton as *Sister Lovers* was without Bell, but *I Am the Cosmos* is certainly on par with #1 Record and *Radio City*.

In terms of musical development, I think it actually makes the most sense taken *before* the Big Star records, as if it was the foundation that Bell and Chilton built Big Star on, and that Chilton subsequently tore down. There are several strange moments here that don't strictly make sense that way, and in his own quiet way Bell uses some of the same tricks that Chilton flaunted on *Sister Lovers*, but where Chilton strived for them, Bell seems to do his best to avoid them, or at least mitigate their harrowingness.

So, while you're out buying Big Star CDs, get this one, too, so you'll have the whole picture. Plus, Rykodisc releases are always so nicely done that you should take virtually any excuse to buy another.

## The Posies

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Many of my favorite bands have strong associations in my mind with specific people in my life. Usually this is for the not-too-mysterious reason that the person *introduced* me to the band. The Posies will forever remind me of my ex-girlfriend Nora and her roommate Anne. How *they* came across the band I have completely forgotten, but they were passionately devoted fans. They wrote the band letters, the band wrote them letters. (When Anne ended up in Lesotho at the time of *Dear 23's* release, the band themselves sent her a copy.) And they played *Failure* over and over again until I finally broke down and bought a copy myself.

In the years since, the Posies got a major label contract, became notable Seattle musicos, and even temporarily joined Big Star, all of which provide enough handles that I can now think of the Posies as



one of my *own* favorites, not something I borrowed from Nora and slimily neglected to return after the relationship ended.

### *Failure*, 1989 CD

The Posies first album, *Failure*, is one of the most charming 43 minutes to ever achieve conventional distribution (to the band's own surprise, at that). Jonathan Auer and Kenneth Stringfellow wrote the songs, played all the instruments, and produced the whole thing in one of their living rooms (the liner notes don't specify which). They put it out themselves as a cassette in 1988, and it did so well that Popllama picked them up and elevated them, as they put it, "from the depths of obscurity to the heights of it".

Two things are primarily responsible for the irresistible charm of *Failure* (the title of my *next* book is *The Irresistible Charm of Failure*, in fact – the first magical-realist guide to getting into top colleges despite poor SAT scores (some critics will no doubt insist that the book you're reading *now* is the first magical-realist guide to getting into college without a good SAT score, which would be a pretty ingenious thing for them to say if I hadn't said it here already)): first, it *sounds* like two guys made it in their living room, playing all the instruments themselves. Auer, to be brutally blunt, is not Neil Peart, and the rhythm parts of this album hang onto the beat by sheer determination only. What you hear in the drums and the rest of the playing on this album is not the performances themselves, which vary from superb to inadvisable, but the *intent* behind them. You *hear* what they *mean* to play, and this album transcends its own limitations more convincingly than anything else I can think of, at least while writing this entry.

Secondly, where most people who set about to record an album in their living room, or their garage or some other nearby location not conventionally used for that purpose by studio veterans, attempt to turn their low-budget setting into an asset by producing deliberately low-budget sounding music (this is why "garage rock" is called that), the Posies defy this and every other available trend and make an album of spectacularly great self-effacing pop songs. Whatever their other instrumental failings, both of them are excellent guitarists and fine singers, and when they set aside a few tracks for harmony, which they usually do, the results are nothing less than magical, and remind me more of the Mamas and the Papas or CSNY, or one of those bands from the Fifties who were always called the Something Brothers, or the Something Five, and wore velour cardigans on Ed Sullivan, than they do anything more current.

How any band in gloomy Seattle, just as grunge was gathering itself up to pounce on the music industry, could maintain the composure necessary to execute an album of such breathtakingly fresh and clean songs, I have no idea, but the Posies pulled it off. Do not let the studded leather jackets and pointy-toed boots that Jon and Ken are wearing on the back cover fool you for an instant: there is nothing even vaguely studded or pointy-toed on this album. Imagine being given a Fresca after 31 years of drinking nothing but double-strength Moxie. It tastes kind of strange, but it has an arresting clarity that instantly shows you how syrupy and over-bearing the stuff you had been drinking was. Well, hearing the Posies is like that. Yes, that's right: the Posies are the aluminum grapefruit of rock music.

### *Dear 23*, 1990 CD

For their second album, the Posies signed to Geffen, the coolest major label available in 1990. Bassist Rich Roberts and drummer Michael Musburger, recruited for touring purposes after *Failure*, make their recorded debut as Posies here. John Leckie is recruited to relieve Jon and Ken from having to produce the record, and the band sets out confidently to make their follow-up.

How do they do? Well, ah, er, hrm. Actually, they don't do so well at all, in my opinion. *Failure* did so well despite its technical constraints that once the constraints are removed, a real rhythm section is in place in a real studio, and the band can afford as many reverbs as they want, they don't appear to know what to do with themselves. The sound on this record is thick and velvety, swirling and echoing mutedly in unseen cavernous spaces, and if you like that sort of thing you should be pretty impressed. For me it just buries both of the things that I loved most about the first album. Jon and Ken's vocal harmonies, instead of standing out and carrying the music, blend into the processing, and become merely an extension of the reverb. Guitars get mulched into a gale of feedback, and the echoey drumming is a quantum leap both technically and musically, but in different directions. The singing has had all its edges meticulously filed off, and as a result substitutes languor for exuberance, which is hardly my idea of a clever trade.

Just looking at the covers of the first two albums tells the story plainly. *Failure's* blocky one-color artwork is unpretentiousness personified, and the overhead "band" photo makes Auer and Stringfellow look simultaneously silly and well-meaning. *Dear 23's* cover, on the other hand, is painstakingly staged and lit like a Masterpiece Theatre episode. The band looks somber and intense, and the collection of ornate props

on the front makes *Images and Words* look like Keith Haring.

There are good things about *Dear 23*, but listening to it makes me too angry to care about them.

### *Frosting on the Beater*, 1993 CD

Vague rumors circulated about the Posies' third album long in advance of its appearance. Various, they claimed that the band had finished the album and the label had rejected it, that the band themselves had heard the finished product and opted to chuck it out and start over, that the Posies had turned grunge after all, or that Auer had accidentally overdosed on Boston records, and had quit the band to form an electronics company. Always eager to fixate on an excuse to give a band another chance, I chose to interpret all this as signifying that the band was going to make a new beginning, and get back to something I'd adore. I rushed out and bought the album the moment it came out, not willing to take the risk that I'd hear a song on the radio and find it underwhelming, and let that dissuade me from buying the record.

Good move. *Frosting on the Beater* is the Posies best album yet, though I would never have predicted that *this* band would make *this* album. The Posies sound like they backed from *Dear 23* all the way to *Failure* and then said "Now, let's try this big electrified powerful sound again from the top, and this time let's try to pay closer attention, hm?" Where *Failure* simply pretended that it had never even heard of grunge, *Frosting on the Beater* extends a welcoming hand to it, and then flips it over with what would be a textbook example of judo-style self-defense if judo textbooks used musical examples (which perhaps they should). It seems to snap its fingers for attention in the faces of Sonic Youth and the Smashing Pumpkins, saying "You didn't get it when Nirvana explained it, so let's try and explain it another way."

For the Posies have made a surging, throbbing, crashing, grinding rock album with both their original enticing pop naïveté and a new vicious streak, if you can swallow such a preposterous contradiction. Dave Fox replaces Rich Roberts on bass, and more importantly, Don Flemming takes over for John Leckie as producer. Everybody then pitches in and clears away all the murk that shrouded *Dear 23*, and someone has the good sense to realize that Nigel Tuffnel's fondness for 11 wasn't meant to apply to reverb decay. *Frosting on the Beater* doesn't attempt to recycle *Failure's* living room sparkle, but it finds a new, more powerful groove into which it settles with a loud click.

"Flavor of the Month" is possibly the best single-song example. Walls of guitars smash out of my speakers, with pounding bass and drums firmly in tow.

Over this torrent of sound, Jon and Ken brave the storm to weave their delicate harmonic web, which somehow manages to hold its structure despite the buffeting. That would be enough, but when you listen carefully (and a reviewer gives you a little push) you realize that this is not a Baskin-Robbins tribute but a rather scathing explication of the cloying manufactured appeal of corporate-backed fashion. "Flavor of the month is busy melting in the mouth, / Getting easier to swallow and / Harder to spit out." This is ambivalent in a way, admitting that the fad-machine is well run, and that the mass-produced new sounds and styles it generates are similar in many ways to the more interesting trends that develop on their own (witness the comparable sales and chart successes of Nirvana and then Pearl Jam, or Alice in Chains and then the Stone Temple Pilots). At the same time, *knowing* that this stuff was manufactured makes its appeal that much more disgusting, and "harder to spit out" is terrifying because it means that the machine is getting closer to winning after all. It reminds me of a scene toward the beginning of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, the Phillip K. Dick novel that the film *Blade Runner* was loosely based on, where Rick Deckard tries to persuade his depressed wife Iran to set her artificial mood-control machine to get her out of her sullen mood. She doesn't want to set it, and he suggests that she use setting 3, which would make her *want* to set it. She tries to explain, "I can't dial a setting that stimulates my cerebral cortex into wanting to dial! If I don't want to dial, I don't want to dial that most of all, because then I will want to dial, and wanting to dial is right now the most alien drive I can imagine; I just want to sit on the bed and stare at the floor." That is, the greatest fear about the corporate machine is that it will make us *like* the corporate machine! Rick doesn't get it. Pearl Jam doesn't get it, either.

The Posies get it. They should; they're an antidote.

## Game Theory

We now come to the book's second of my four favorite bands. Big Country is back in Steeltown, and it will be a while before we get to Kate Bush, in Earth, and Marillion, in Eden. I don't mean to imply that the intervening chapters are filled with artists I don't like, by any means; *every* chapter in the book has a large chunk of music I would be devastated to have to live without. Still, my four top favorites are anchor points of sorts for the whole effort, and so this is another key landmark.

Game Theory grew on me more gradually than the other three. I bought *Real Nighttime* when it was

new, and the two earlier EPs not too long after, but then I more or less forgot about the band for almost two years, before hearing "Mammoth Garden", from *Lolita Nation*, brought them back to mind and I realized, listening both to the new album and the old ones, unearthed, that I *really* liked them. *Lolita Nation* continued to grow on me, reaching my DID list before very long (where it remains to this day), and it pulled the other records right along with it. I filled in the one I'd missed, bought the last one when it came out, and shelled out for the compilation, despite the fact that most of it I already had. Of course, the perversity of life being what it is, it wasn't too long after I formally recognized the band as one of my favorites that it dissolved. That normally-sad story, in this case, has a happy ending, as the next artist listing will show.

Game Theory is also both the least commercially-successful of my four favorites, and the only American act. When I'm feeling isolated I can pick up my Guinness British chart books and remind myself that Big Country, Kate Bush and Marillion together are responsible for around thirty top-ten albums and singles in the UK. For Game Theory, on the other hand, I must be content with a lukewarm entry in Trouser Press and a more enthusiastic but incomplete and out-of-order listing in the All-Music Guide. As my favorite American band, bar none, Game Theory deserves better press, my attempt at which follows.

### ***Pointed Accounts of People You Know, 1983 EP***

This EP is the second Game Theory record, after a debut, called *Blaze of Glory*, that I've never seen in its original form. The first incarnation of the band surrounds leader Scott Miller with bassist Fred Juhos, keyboard player Nancy Becker and drummer Dave Gill. Compared to later work, this is definitely gangly adolescence, but I find it utterly charming. Dave Gill's synth drums instantly date this record, but I *like* synth drums. Miller's singing voice, often falsetto, is thin and easily strained, but as I explained in the chapter intro, voices straining to achieve a great melody fascinate me much more than trained voices executing a mediocre one in comfort.

Tinny guitar, rumbling bass and cheap-sounding analog keyboards provide the rest of the accompaniment. The production on this EP is hardly what you'd call "sparkling", but neither is it intrusive, and the enthusiasm driving the performances is perfectly audible. The songs, too, are bigger than their setting, and ennoble the recordings.

The first side is Scott's three unassisted compositions. "Penny, Things Won't" and "Metal and Glass Exact" meander angularly through their verses, and hit their strides on the choruses. "Penny" is a

pained love song, torn between the palpable reality of desire and the intellectual confidence that things won't work out. "Penny, you're just a girl that I know and I'm just me. / Don't ever find words for that look in your eyes / I'd like to believe I'm the only one who sees. / It's all the faith I keep sometimes / And I can't watch it leave." The middle sentence, with its strange end-heavy clause, is to me an excellent example of Miller's wonderfully unique talent for phrasing. Rather than let the lyrics conform to the beat and cadences of the song, which is the easy way and the one most of rock adheres to, Scott makes the words be what they should be, and then somehow manages to sing them into place. You can criticize his vocal range (as he is quick to himself), but the more important quality to me is the ability to sing words as if you not only understand what you're saying, but understand that what you're saying is the reason for the song, not vice versa. And in this respect Miller is a singer with very few peers.

"Metal and Glass Exact" is an oblique bit of observation of a shallow, conceited partner, for whom having "metal and glass exact" is about all that is important. "In a bedroom disconcerting, / Lined with royal blue curtains, / It looks so inadvertent / But it makes you that much more uncertain." Calculated casualness is the ultimate distance.

"Selfish Again" is my favorite song on the EP, and musically the straightest upbeat pop song. Lyrically, I find it the most complex and satisfying song here. It's about being selfish, as you might guess from the title, but instead of celebrating selfishness for its own sake, Miller seems to wish that life could arrange itself so that each person acting selfishly actually produced the greater good of the whole society. The appeal of acting selfishly can be not the benefits that result from it, but rather that it is at least relatively clear, usually, *what* to do if you are being selfish. Attempting to be unselfish is hard, because it is often very difficult to determine what the unselfish thing to do *is*. "And I do / What appears to be the thing to do / But accidentally sacrifice the many for the few."

The second side features two songs by bassist Fred Juhos, and one co-written by Scott and Nancy Becker. That makes this the Game Theory album with the lowest density of Miller-written songs, and the only one to contain more than one song by any other songwriter. The reason for this is not ego; Miller is simply a better songwriter than almost anybody else.

Juhos sings both his songs, and Nancy sings her collaboration. In Juhos' case this is somewhat regrettable. His Dead-Milkmen-like "sure, I can't sing, but who cares?" delivery is funny, though, which is the desired effect here. "I Wanna Get Hit by a Car", his first song, is every bit as silly as the title might lead

you to expect. "37th Day" isn't as obviously comic until the very end, when the mock-poetic lyrics culminate in "She's beautiful and she's golden. / You'd marry her in may, / Or trade her for a sandwich / On the 37th day."

Nancy Becker, though, does a very credible job with "Life in July". The various women who've taken secondary vocal chores in Game Theory over the years have produced some exquisite moments. This one is not as bold as, say, "Mammoth Gardens", but "Life in July" is to this record what the later song was to *Lolita Nation*.

### ***Distortion*, 1984 EP**

The production takes a small step up on the following year's EP, this time at the hands of Michael Quercio, of the Three O'Clock. Guitars and keyboards are more forceful and backing vocals (some by Michael himself) are given a new emphasis. There is still a fresh, amateurish quality to the arrangement, which I suppose could interfere with the not-at-all-immature songwriting and playing if you let it, but I don't.

The centerpiece of *Distortion* is the magnificent "Nine Lives to Rigel Five", which in a just world would have been a New Wave classic on par with "She Blinded Me With Science", "Walking in L.A." and "Turning Japanese". That would have undoubtedly wrecked Game Theory's career with the critical backlash, but I still feel that having it linger in obscurity is vastly unjust, and I was very glad Scott included it on *Tinker to Evers to Chance*. The drums whoosh, the synthesizers buzz, and the lyrics go something like:

#### **Nine Lives to Rigel Five**

(my unofficial transcription of ©1984,  
Scott Miller and Rational Music)

Side by side, slide by space and time,  
You're the Neil Armstrong telecast from  
1969.

Proportion, distortion, I saw in those  
shoes

That you're the kind of ego that I doubt  
I'll ever lose.

It's nine lives to Rigel Five,  
Nine lives to Rigel Five,  
And I'm waiting nine lives to Rigel Five  
With nothing to say when I arrive.

Now Jo-Jo's proposed that we leave our  
homes

Like runaway gnomes in the twilight  
zone.

They said "Baby, when you're grown, all  
means more".

I said "Let's get out the twister game and  
get down on all fours".

It's nine lives to Rigel Five,  
Nine lives to Rigel Five,  
And I'm waiting nine lives to Rigel Five  
With nothing to say when I arrive.

Now I know a problem that physics  
won't resolve,

I know a cover that acid won't dissolve,  
A place that's just too far, I think, for us  
to go.

Now is it wise to have a hope so strong  
For real-time answers to real world  
wrongs?

And oh, Susanna, if you gotta cry for me,  
Send me back to Alabama with a banjo  
on my knee,

And nine lives to Rigel Five,  
Nine lives to Rigel Five,  
And I'm waiting nine lives to Rigel Five  
With nothing to say but good-bye.

I'm not going to transcribe any other whole Game Theory songs, for two reasons. First, this isn't a lyric book, and I haven't got time for it. Second, I take the omission of lyrics from all Game Theory/Loud Family albums after *Pointed Accounts* to be intentional. These songs are meant to be listened to, not read (as the above rendering shows in an extreme case). Scott Miller's lyrics are extremely dense and very rewarding, but they are *meant*, I think, to be heard in context, and decoded in fragments, subconsciously. Phrases catch your attention, and you develop associations and assumptions around them in ways that you wouldn't if you just read the words off a lyric sheet. Also, Scott's delivery often turns the lyrics into a deliberate puzzle, complete with puns and intentional homophones, and part of the fun of many Game Theory songs is puzzling out bits of them. I'm *not* going to systematically ruin that fun for you, though I will quote bits here and there. I made an exception for "Nine Live to Rigel Five" on the grounds that if it were an underground classic like it should have been, people would memorize the lyrics to sing drunkenly during the slow parts of late parties, in which case somebody would have to transcribe them, which might as well be me.

The two songs surrounding “Nine Lives to Rigel Five” are more serious. “Shark Pretty” is the fast one, “The Red Baron” the slow one. Both are excellent, and begin to hint at *Real Nighttime*, to come. “The Red Baron” is the more impressive of the two to me, undulating slowly along until, toward the end, it rises on Nancy’s keyboards and backing vocals. My favorite phrase from it, “Stay the way I hate you”, reminds me of the Housemartins’ “Johannesburg”.

The flip side has only two songs. Juhos’ contribution to this record is “Kid Convenience”, a song just as inane and fun as “I Wanna Be Hit by a Car”. Trumpet and saxophone make a rare appearance here, and the song really doesn’t sound much like Game Theory, but it’s hard to be angry at such a cheerful, chirpy song, especially when it contains concepts like “remote-controlled hair”.

The last song is another by Scott, “Too Late for Tears”. With its pounding drums, it’s easily the fastest and hardest-rocking Game Theory song on either EP, and for the few seconds before Scott starts singing it sounds like Penetration! Miller’s vocal delivery matches the instrumental intensity (and I love “a scrape with truth you didn’t plan”), and when the song suddenly drains away in a abrupt synthesized halt, I feel let down, wanting more. Obliging it starts up again, runs through the synth riff a few more times, and then burns out in a short but fiery guitar solo.

### *Real Nighttime*, 1985 CD

Maturity arrives, in the guise of producer Mitch Easter, for Game Theory’s second full-length album. There are no itemized band credits on this album, but the “Musicians” list has the four band members from *Pointed Accounts* and *Distortion*, plus Michael Quercio, Mitch, Jon Cowans and Thin White Rope drummer Jozef Becker. The sound reflects the additional musicians, and is both fuller than on the two EPs, and less inclined to sheer silliness. Dave Gill’s synth drums are supplemented by more real drums than before, and added guitars surround Nancy’s keyboards. Also, no songs by Fred. All this combines to make *Real Nighttime* seem like an attempt to be much more serious, and seriously ambitious, than Game Theory was on either EP. *Pointed Accounts* and *Distortion* are delightful, but I’d be pretty surprised to find that Game Theory became anybody’s favorite band on the strength of them alone. *Real Nighttime*, on the other hand, is enough foundation for a devoted cult with aspirations to religious non-profit status.

The album begins with a few seconds of sonic chaos, entitled “Here Comes Everybody”. Bite-size chunks of noise wouldn’t really arrive in force until *Lolita Nation*, but this one seems to have slipped

through ahead of time. “24” gets the record underway for real with a gorgeous pop song, featuring the full complement of angelic backing vocals, ringing guitars and wistful lyrics.

Having got you into an appropriate mood with the airy, appealing grace of “24”, the record then slams into off-road gear with “Waltz the Halls Always”, the drums pounding hard and fast and the guitars and keyboards keeping up their own insistent forward motion. This song combines synthesizer and guitar/bass perhaps better than any previous Game Theory work, showing another effect of the band’s maturity, or perhaps of Easter’s production (or both), and Miller’s vocals have an edginess that complements the song’s headlong drive. This was my favorite Game Theory song for a long time, and I used to include it regularly on dance tapes in college for Harvard Lampoon parties. I was very happy when it would come on, but then I was usually pretty happy all the way through those tapes, as I made them, which meant they didn’t contain “Freak Out” or “ABC”. Other people tended to be mostly confused that they weren’t getting Motown or the latest Talking Heads song, but they were usually too drunk to formulate their concern in any particularly interesting way (or, more importantly, to operate the stereo fast enough to get the tape shut off before I could stop them).

“I Mean It This Time” backs off again, and is another lilting classic with great dual-vocal effects from Scott and Nancy. There are some keyboards here, but the drums are all-natural and the song is mostly guitar, bass and drums. The lyrics are confused and melancholy, but determined. “If I drop out, I mean it this time”. A very pretty, thoughtful song.

The mood gets darker again with “Friend of the Family”. Heavy again on synthesized drums and other noises, this one uses choppy guitar harmonics, and drums that refuse to settle into any comfortable groove, to maintain a musical tension that Miller then plays off with dense, complex and sometimes-sinister lyrics that jump from strange references to factories, chain-mail (armor, not pyramid-scheme letters) and families to pointed relationship questions like “Have we been cheated of three of our seasons, / And could we break up for such practical reasons?” This is a rather long song for Game Theory (over six minutes), and it evolves considerably over its course, changing tempos frequently, sometimes abruptly and sometimes quite slowly. It’s very impressive, in a somewhat unexpected way, given Game Theory’s usual predilection for short pop songs.

The mood relaxes yet again with “If and When It Falls Apart”, which is very similar in character to “I Mean It This Time”. Just as before, the intensity returns immediately. Ominous insect-like synthesizer buzzes

through much of “Curse of the Frontierland”, and Miller and Becker sound almost pained on the chorus. “I don’t like quiet rooms but I just can’t take that sound”, Scott sings, and the mood of social-banalities-induced desperation is palpable. While it’s on the subject of the suburbs, the album jumps straight into another clamorous and angry song, “Rayon Drive”, in which Miller lashes out at what I take to be the empty meaninglessness of a white, middle-class, cul-de-sac existence, where people “find things to talk about, but nothing to say”, and have “no memory at all of who [they] voted for”. The abrupt way in which “Rayon Drive” ends contributes subtly to the sense I have that even though *Lolita Nation* is still a few years away, Game Theory is already *conscious* of overall album structure. The fade-out ending (whether production-induced or played) is so omnipresent in popular music as this century ends (or even, come to think of it, *music*, period) that ending even a single song sharply creates a surprisingly strong impression.

After two songs in a row of tension, the release offered by “She’ll Be a Verb” is both effective and welcome. The clanging percussion that permeates this song, and some strange verse-to-chorus transitions, keep it from being as accessible a pop song as “If and When It Falls Apart”, for example, but the chorus is irresistibly catchy, and placing “She’ll Be a Verb” after “Curse of the Frontierland” and “Rayon Drive” gives it a lot of room to be stranger than it could have been in isolation, without really feeling the effects. “Real Nighttime”, which comes next, speeds up again, so “She’ll Be a Verb” manages to be both initially appealing and even more rewarding on subsequent listenings. Good placement.

“Real Nighttime” is another fast song, but still basically a pop song. It isn’t particularly weird or disturbing, and so it restores the dynamic level of “Curse of the Frontierland” and “Rayon Drive”, but arrives at that point going in a different direction. Taking quick advantage of this modulation of mood, the next song is a cover of Big Star’s “You Can’t Have Me”. The fact that Big Star is Scott Miller’s favorite band is very apparent, and this rendition updates the song while meticulously preserving its original spirit. I heard this version *before* the original, and so Big Star’s version seemed oddly limp and offkey the first time I heard it. I’ve since come to understand the original, too, but this version still sounds great.

The original album then ends with one last hook-filled backing-vocal showcase, “I Turned Her Away”. It is a comfortable concluding point for a very classically-paced album, and a terrific song in its own right.

The CD reissue continues, however, with three more songs. “Any Other Hand”, another original, is arranged for just a couple acoustic guitars and Scott’s

voice. The shimmering instrumental backing makes a very interesting combination with the disturbing lyrics (“I wish you died by any other hand” is the chorus). Compared to those of many of the other bands in this chapter, Game Theory’s arrangements tend to be quite complex, and it is possible to get hung up on this detail and think that they don’t belong alongside bands with much simpler presentation, like the dB’s or REM, but songs like this one should show even the most obtuse listener that the songs underneath are the heart of Game Theory’s music.

The other two bonus tracks are two more covers, of the Beatles’ “I Want to Hold Your Hand” and Todd Rundgren’s “Couldn’t I Just Tell You”. Scott has never been shy to admit his influences (the liner notes to this album refer, with Joycean obliqueness, to the Beatles, Let’s Active, Chris Stamey, Big Star, the Three O’Clock, the Beach Boys, Lou Reed, the Velvet Underground, Bob Dylan and Syd Barrett, and probably some more I missed), but it’s great to *hear* the sincerity of his admiration in the three covers here, and also to hear the way in which the songs change in Game Theory’s hands, even when changing them is not their motive. The Rundgren song is particularly excellent, especially as it was a completely unlooked-for bonus on the CD version of an already-masterful album.

### *The Big Shot Chronicles*, 1986 CD

*The Big Shot Chronicles* will always be “the forgotten Game Theory album” in my mind, even now that I’m no longer likely to ever forget about it. When it came out I wasn’t paying Game Theory that much attention, and I didn’t buy it until finally inspired to by hearing “Crash into June” on my parents’ car-radio while sitting outside a nursery (plants, not children) waiting for my mother to buy plants (which she does like I buy music, meaning that she buys lots of them and it takes her a really long time). Even once I had a copy, it ended up being the forgotten album a *second* time, as for reasons which completely elude me, Enigma declined to reissue this album on CD when putting out *Real Nighttime*, *Lolita Nation*, *Two Steps from the Middle Ages* and *Tinker to Evers to Chance*. It wasn’t until 1993, after Alias, having signed the Loud Family, bought up Game Theory’s back catalog, that this album finally made it to digital.

Historical accidents aside, *The Big Shot Chronicles* is actually an eminently logical next step in Game Theory’s stylistic maturation, showing steadily increasing pop skill. My reading of the progression from *Real Nighttime* to *The Big Shot Chronicles* is that into order to make another leap of progress as big as the one that Game Theory had made from the EPs to *Real Nighttime*, Scott Miller needed a new band. What

actually motivated the personal changes I have no idea, but this album features an all-new supporting cast, with Shelley LaFreniere replacing Nancy Becker on keyboards, Gil Ray taking over drums from Dave Gill, and Suzi Ziegler filling in on bass for Fred Juhos. Mitch Easter returns to produce again (in fact, he produces *all* of Scott's bands' albums from *Real Nighttime* through *Plants and Birds and Rocks and Things*, the latest as I write). The audible effect of the new band is that Game Theory just sounds like they've gotten better, which I guess is the first of several testaments to Miller's taste in companions. Gone are some of the more awkward elements of Game Theory's early sound, like the synth drums and the stranger keyboard parts, and in their place are more guitars, real drums, stronger melodies and harmonies, and an overall tightness that "maturity" is as good a description of as anything else.

The first song, "Here It Is Tomorrow", announces the arrival of all of this in grand style. It is emblematic of the band's growing power that this song seems to effortlessly combine both the seductiveness of *Real Nighttime*'s slowest, prettiest songs and the power of its fastest, most energetic tracks, for something more powerful *and* more appealing. Just to show that the band can do *either* extreme better, "Where You Going Northern" is a slow song that I think is even better than "She'll Be a Verb" or "I Mean It This Time".

"I've Tried Subtlety" splits the difference for a song whose mid-range tempo conceals crashing drums, wailing and churning guitar and soaring analog synth that is closer in musical feel to strings than the often-beepy keyboards of the previous albums, but which retains the personality that Nancy Becker's playing introduced.

"Erica's Word" both speeds up and strips down, relying on acoustic guitar and crisp drums on the verses, and adding squalling electric guitar and echoing handclaps. Another of Scott's many studied relationship songs, I think it's one of Game Theory's best and most appealing, and apparently they even made a video for it, though I've never seen it. "You always liked the photo of us sitting in a car, / Just like we're driving. / Girl, it's not looking like we'll go all that far." As I've commented before, Scott's somewhat thin singing (he credits himself with "miserable whine", not "vocals", on the jacket) is integral to these songs' appeal to me, but I realize it might well bother you if you react differently.

"Make Any Vows" is faster still, and bigger; in a way, it's this album's "Waltz the Halls Always". "'Cause if I lost all the will you thought I'd keep, / Would you make any vows on Lovers' Leap? / If it took all this time to find the risk, / Would you sign any bottom lines? / I don't think so." This gale-force

energy then dissipates on a dime for "Regenisraen" a hauntingly beautiful acoustic ballad (this album's "Any Other Hand") with soaring choral harmony rounds. Since I lived with this album for so long on vinyl, I'll point out that here's where the first side ended.

The second side, then, starts out like it is going to be a redux of the first. "Crash into June" is a clear sequel to "Erica's Word", not that that's at all unwelcome, and "The Only Lesson Learned" reminds me pleasantly of "I've Tried Subtlety". "Book of Millionaires", in between them, squashes that theory with a plot twist: a strange *slow* song. The strange songs on *Real Nighttime* are almost invariably the faster ones, using hard drums and driving synthesizers to achieve dark moods, and the slow songs tend to be the prettiest ones. This one feels becalmed in limbo. Reedy, quavering synthesizers fence uneasily with a slow guitar line, while cymbals crash in the background almost at random. The chorus picks up the melody somewhat, but the tune dies away disconcertingly as Scott sings the title. "Too Closely" has a little of the same mood. It's *notes* aren't as unsettling, but it seems to go just enough slower than it "should" that it produces, in miniature, some of the same feeling of parts of Big Star's *Sister Lovers*; I read the deceleration as *symbolic* of breakdown, if not breakdown itself.

"Never Mind" declines to return the album to comfortable, conventional pop ground. Heavily distorted guitar, edgy percussion reminiscent of "Friend of the Family", and backing vocals that are on-key but slightly out of sync, combine to give this song a fragmented feel. The closing song, "Like a Girl Jesus", continues off into uncharted realms of mutated pop. Scott's vocals seem to drift in as if from a great distance, and the other instruments, when they come in, are also awash in reverb. I don't get the feeling, like I do with Big Star, that Miller is actually going insane, because he seems to be in control of the music, and seems to understand where it is going, but in the sense that these final songs push at the seams that normally hold pop music together, the bond between it and *Sister Lovers* is quite strong.

The Alias CD appends five bonus tracks to compensate us for having had to wait so long for it. The first is "Girl with a Guitar", a song co-written by Scott Miller and Michael Quercio for Michael's band the Three O'Clock's 1985 album *Arrive Without Traveling*, and Scott's solo acoustic rendition makes an interesting contrast to the Three O'Clock's fuller, faster arrangement. "Come Home with Me" is another acoustic track, this one sounding like a demo for a song that didn't end up getting done for the album.

The third bonus track, "Seattle", is a cover of a song written by V. Guaraldi, whoever that is. Without

knowing the original I can't quite tell what the point of this morose, reverb-heavy acoustic take is meant to be. In a aesthetic-whiplash-inducing mood swing, the next bonus track is a banzai rock cover of "Linus and Lucy", the Charlie Brown cartoon theme song. It's definitely up there with the Jam's "Batman Theme" and the Manic Street Preachers' cover of "Suicide Is Painless" as one of the best rock translations of a crappy TV jingle.

The last song is a Fred Juhos composition called "Faithless". This is rather an odd inclusion here, seeing that a) Fred wasn't even *in* Game Theory anymore by this album, and b) in reissuing early Game Theory material (on *Tinker to Evers to Chance* and *Distortion of Glory*) Miller has tended to omit Juhos songs. This one is a good deal more serious and musical than "I Wanna to Get Hit By a Car" or "Kid Convenience", and I suspect that, or guilt, is why it ends up appearing here.

### ***Lolita Nation*, 1987 CD**

When *Lolita Nation* came out, and I picked up a copy in Newbury Comics, a single question formed in my mind which has not been adequately answered to this day: Who in the world let Scott make a double album? The idea that Enigma, despite Game Theory never having produced a whole lot in terms of sales, would give the band the freedom and budget to produce not only a double-LP release, but *this* double-album, runs counter to just about everything I've ever heard about major labels. Perhaps they really had faith in the band, or perhaps they just didn't understand what was actually happening.

Whatever the case, *Lolita Nation* is both Game Theory's masterpiece and one of the most brilliantly conceived deconstructions (and reconstructions) of the pop album form ever released. Breathtakingly ambitious, successful beyond anybody's wildest dreams, and perverse in about the most musical ways anybody has yet come up with, this may well be my single *favorite* album by anybody, and my always-questionable attempt to render the wonder of listening to a record into words is bound to be even more unequal to this task than to most.

Instead of taking pop songs and trying to strange the commercial appeal out of them, which one could say that previous Game Theory records did, *Lolita Nation* takes an awesome pile of individually engaging bits of music and feeds it onto disc through a deranged extra-dimensional musical Cuisinart with a sharp blade but a flaky motor. This 74-minute epic ends up as a mixture of straight, whole pop songs with shards of other songs, dialog, noises and other miscellany, like flipping through cable channels or setting the car radio to "sample". The track listing on the back of the album has 52 entries, which collapse into 27 tracks on the CD

(one track covers 25 entries, another covers two). Of these, 15 are "real" songs of the three-minutes-or-more, lyrics-and-music variety: "Not Because You Can", "Dripping with Looks", "We Love You Carol and Alison", "The Waist and the Knees", "Nothing New", "Look Away", "Slip", "The Real Sheila", "Andy in Ten Years", "Mammoth Gardens", "Little Ivory", "One More for Saint Michael", "Chardonnay", "Last Day that We're Young" and "Together Now, Very Minor".

Two more significant line-up changes happen here. Suzi Ziegler is gone, replaced on bass by Guillaume Gassuan, and Donnette Thayer adds an additional full-time guitar for the first time, as well as her stunning voice. Several guest players also factor into this album, including Quercio, Easter, Jozef Becker and future Loud Family guitarist Zach Smith. All these hands make *Lolita Nation* even more accomplished than *The Big Shot Chronicles* on a song-by-song level, never mind the added dimensions of aliens-observing-our-culture randomness.

"Kenneth-What's the Frequency?" opens the album with a movie-soundtrack-like snatch of dialog and background noises, leading to the famous phrase uttered during a mysterious attack on Dan Rather in '86 or '87. The *very* beginning, in fact, supplies a scratchy-record intro so that even those of us listening to *Lolita Nation* on CD can experience the old traditional beginning-of-album sound.

The first full song, "Not Because You Can", sets the stage for a more muscular album even than *The Big Shot Chronicles*. The guitars are loud, Gui's bass fits in perfectly with Gil's drumming, and Shelley's keyboards fit seamlessly together with the rest even better than they did on "Erica's Word".

"Shard" is a few seconds of a slow song, "Go Ahead, You're Dying To" a few more seconds of another one. Miller has discovered that you don't need to use whole songs to alter pacing, as he did on *Real Nighttime* and *The Big Shot Chronicles*; extremely short fragments will do, as long as they have just long enough to establish themselves. These two damp the manic energy of "Not Because You Can", in preparation for "Dripping with Looks", which is a slow roar of guitar fuzz and eerie vocals.

The minute of "Exactly What We Don't Want to Hear" sounds like a catchy pop song with the bass and drums stripped off and the piano mixed way too loud. It's smooth and melodic, but painfully bare. This, in turn, paves the way for "We Love You Carol and Alison", which eases slowly into a quietly awesome song that sounds like what the previous song's mix was *supposed* to be. It also conceals the album's title: "When the shoulder upstairs gets cold, / If he had his way we'd all be old. / And he's got nerve asking this Lolita Nation to bow and serve". "We Love You Carol and



Alison" is also the first Game Theory I've noticed that uses modulation in the *bass* part to lead changes.

"The Waist and the Knees" integrates all elements to this point: wild noise, soaring melody, howling noises, stop-start tempos, spoken fragments. The steady drumbeat is supplemented most of the way through by rattling table-top stick tapping in place of a hi-hat, giving the song a cheery bounciness that makes its frequent unanticipated right-turns that much more gut-wrenching. This song is pretty close to being the album in miniature, and you can probably guess how much I like it as a result.

"Nothing New" settles down again, taking the most prominent elements of "The Waist and the Knees" and playing them straight, for a song that wouldn't be horribly out of character toward the end of *The Big Shot Chronicles*. "The World's Easiest Job" is another fragment that sounds like a full song missing several tracks. Bass, drums and some keyboards are here, but the absence of guitar is plain. I love the way these excerpts are cut in dimensions of both time and arrangement, as the *arrangement* gaps are something you rarely get to hear.

"Look Away" pushes all the faders back up to the accustomed detents, but cuts out the one element you least expect Game Theory to omit: Scott's voice. Donnette sings this one by herself (she wrote it, too; as much as it would thrill me, this is not a cover of the Big Country song). She does a great job, though this song gets somewhat overshadowed by "Mammoth Gardens", later.

"Slip", next, with its quick, peppy beat, raw production and swooping synth noises, sounds like an odd leftover from *Pointed Accounts* days. "The Real Sheila" returns to the present, for another fine relationship song. This one mixes driving guitar with a slow, sliding synth noise that sounds like an earnest police siren trying to communicate with whales. As with most of Scott's relationship songs, this one is basically self-deprecating. "Lord knows that I'm not exactly the boy of my own dreams / And if I was a girl with dreams, I'd have dreams as big as you please."

"Andy in Ten Years" slows the pace down to nearly a crawl. The drums and bass shuffle quietly, and a muted keyboard part underscores Miller's vocals. This song sounds like it is being performed in an empty garage on a silent summer night, in a moment outside of time. It's hard to imagine any other witnesses than the band themselves, and hard to imagine that Scott could make eye contact while singing it with anybody but whichever woman is providing these backing vocals. Unassuming but incredibly moving.

The background chatter of "Watch Who You're Calling Space Garbage Meteor Mouth / Pretty Green

Card Shark" pulls the album out of that reverie, and Gil Ray's rollicking instrumental "Where They Have to Let You In" restores some cheer. A short backwards passage called "Turn Me On Dead Man" then segues into the album's centerpiece, the ebullient Thayer/Miller anthem "Mammoth Gardens". Donnette's beautiful voice makes the most out of this giddy track. What I'd think about Game Theory if Donnette was the full-time lead singer instead of Scott, I don't know (see the entry for Hex later on, though Hex is not much like this), but set among Miller's songs this one is a powerful contrast. The switch of lead singers is a touch that elevates the *album's* coherency above the *artist's*, and is part of what makes *Lolita Nation* such a remarkable art work, and Game Theory such a great band for having made it (rather than the other way around, which isn't bad but is more often the order).

"Little Ivory", which follows it, is an extremely dark and noisy song that makes the most of its own angularity by pushing the slow, deliberate drums to the front of the mix, and processing them so they almost sound like Gil's synth rig. This leads into the album's most extended series of strange fragments. Ten seconds of "Museum of Hopelessness" leads into the LaFreniere instrumental "Toby Ornette" (which reminds me of Big Country's "Flag of Nations (Swimming)"), which in turn gives way to the 22nd track, whose twenty-five part title I will not attempt to reproduce here. Despite the number of separators in the title, this track is less than two minutes long. Most of it is slices of other Game Theory songs, some of them several seconds but heavily processed, and some of them in their original state but only about two seconds long. If I ran the world, I wouldn't bother with shuffle mode on CD *players*; you get much more interesting results when the *artist* controls the process.

The song to emerge from this whirlpool, "One More for Saint Michael", is appropriately off-center, with Dylan-esque half-spoken vocals and an instrumental arrangement that is mostly bass, pulsing kick drum and acoustic guitar, with a little more percussion around the choruses. So the synthesizers won't feel left out, a mostly synth instrumental, "Choose Between Two Sons", follows, and then the strange bits have a seat for three great songs that close out the album.

"Chardonnay" is in the vein of "We Love You Carol and Alison", its pounding drums leading into harmony-drenched choruses. "Last Day That We're Young" builds more gradually, a simple keyboard pattern gathering other instruments and building momentum until the song finally breaks free over a minute into the track. The album's hardest rocking moments, in my opinion, are late in this song, and when I saw the Loud Family on tour in 1993 this was

one of three Game Theory songs they played, and by far the most overwhelming.

Not wanting to simply end after such a vibrant finale, *Lolita Nation* shuts off the drum mics, brings the acoustic guitars out again, and nudges the band imploringly. Game Theory obliges with "Together Now, Very Minor", a soft mid-tempo song that dies out like the last wisps of campfire smoke, leaving us to sit, lost in thought, in the silent wake of a brilliant album's passing.

This one would go with me to a desert island.

### *Two Steps from the Middle Ages*, 1988 CD

After *Lolita Nation*, it was pretty much inevitable that the next album would be a let down in some ways. And sure enough, *Two Steps From the Middle Ages* is a let down in some ways. Aside from one sub-one-minute track, this is an album of three-to-four-minute pop songs, arranged pretty conventionally, compared with *Lolita Nation*. People expecting further deconstructions of the album form will be disappointed. Like Queensrÿche's *Empire* or Marillion's *Clutching at Straws*, this album can't avoid seeming to an extent like leftovers from the preceding magnum opus. It feels to me like Game Theory here is largely regrouping, figuring out where there is *left* to go after *Lolita Nation*.

On the other hand, freeing the band from focusing on the *album* as a whole gives them the opportunity to concentrate on the individual songs, and on each song's words and thoughts, with the result that these are several of my very favorite Game Theory songs. For the first time, both the band and producer stay the same for two albums in a row, and that helps explain this record's musical coherency. There are fewer guests here than on *Lolita Nation*, though future Loud Family bassist Rob Poor has a hand in several songs (and Zach Smith shows up in the thank-yous), and the band *sounds* more cohesive. It feels more often like everybody is playing, and playing *hard*. All the songs here are Scott's, of course, but they sound like band creations in a way that much of Game Theory's early work doesn't. If *Lolita Nation* subordinated the artist-identity to the album-identity, *Two Steps From the Middle Ages* returns the band to the forefront.

"Room for One More, Honey", the first song, features one of Scott and Donnette's best duets, their voices circling each other, singing different words, and if they were egrets or caribou or something, this would probably be a mating dance on a Discovery Channel nature special. "What the Whole World Wants" dispenses with subtleties and just rocks, Gil's drums crashing exuberantly. The Discovery Channel shows things like *this*, too, late at night when children aren't as likely to be watching.

"The Picture of Agreeability" is the one short song, a Scott solo-track with oscillating synthesizer and some low piano. "Amelia, Have You Lost" is a slow, wistful fraying-relationship song, Donnette's mournful slide-guitar echoing Scott's high vocal. I can't pinpoint any detail that would prove that this is about Amelia Earhart (and several suggest otherwise), but I like to think it is (I wrote a song about Amelia Earhart once myself—for reasons I can't quite adequately explain, she and Marie Currie have become very romantic figures to me). "Rolling with the Moody Girls" is another upbeat track, with a rare guest saxophone. The way the vocal melody's intricate verse-pattern scrambles up and down the scale over and over reminds me of Schiller's "Ode to Joy" in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (and in fact if you don't concentrate pretty hard, it's easy for Scott's cryptic lyrics to start to sound like a foreign language, too).

"Wyoming" is another terrific duet, with Donnette taking the lead this time. Her voice is deeper and more introspective here than on "Mammoth Gardens", closer to her work in Hex, and this gives the song a gentleness despite the persistent, thumping drums.

*Two Steps from the Middle Ages* reaches a first peak with the sparkling "In a Delorean". "Give us grace under pressure, Lord, / And help us watch our tongues, / And make our mistakes young, / In a Delorean." This is an inspired twist on the wish for wisdom, pleading that if we have to learn by trial and error, for our errors to be as spectacular and decadent as possible. In a way, the Agony of Defeat, ala Wide World of Sports, is a kind of victory, and failing *slightly* is even more galling than bombing completely. The Alarm's disdain for "sinning with a safety net" is a similar thought. This makes a nice transition to "You Drive", which shows *another* side of maturity: "Across the nation every sports bar turns the pregame on, / And every regular is sneering like we don't belong. / No it's not true—I played a lot of baseball in my younger days; / One day the diamonds were all gone." What you choose to throw away as childish determines your life just as much as what you embrace as "adult", and youthful naïveté is almost impossible to recapture.

"Leilani" and "Wish I Could Stand or Have" back off from the power-pop pomp of "In a Delorean" and "You Drive", turning introspective. "Leilani" stresses vocal harmonies, while "Wish I Could Stand or Have" is starker. The album then begins to gather itself for a killer ending. "Don't Entertain Me Twice" is a dark rock song, whose chorus has become a mantra for me: "Entertain me once, and then change my life, / But don't entertain me twice". In the context of this book, this goes a long way to explain why it is that songs I find merely "pleasant" don't end up holding much importance in my musical worldview. It applies to life,

too, to the extent that that's something *separate* from music. I design user-interfaces for computer software for a living, and this is a critical maxim, as there is constant temptation to pepper an interface with amusing animations, slick graphics and clever sounds, but purely entertaining elements, with no functional impact, can become annoying *very* quickly. I think most people have a slightly higher entertainment tolerance than *once* (I mean, *Cheers* ran for over ten years, right?), but the principle is sound.

We then get to my very favorite Game Theory song, "Throwing the Election". Why? It's not the hardest rocking, the prettiest, the fastest, the slowest, or any other Game Theory extreme I can identify. It's a catchy mid-tempo song not fundamentally unlike many of the songs on any Game Theory album. For some reason this one resonates with me more than all the others, though. When Scott sings "I've got a feeling the votes are in and I got none / And all I want is one", I feel his trademark melancholy sense of defiance in defeat more strongly than I do with any other song. I don't know. It makes me sad and happy at once. I guess *that's* why.

*Two Steps for the Middle Ages*, like *Lolita Nation* (and, for that matter, *The Big Shot Chronicles*) ends on a hushed acoustic dirge. "Initiations Week", "Together Now, Very Minor" and "Like a Girl Jesus" are of a set, harrowing, intense, strained and beautiful, and all three leave me feeling very sad that the album is over.

Though, admittedly, I'd probably feel that no matter *how* these albums ended.

### ***Tinker to Evers to Chance, 1990 CD***

Game Theory's lack of commercial success notwithstanding, Enigma sprung for a best-of compilation in 1990, just before going belly up. This twenty-two song, seventy-six minute collection makes a pretty comprehensive introduction to the band, and is thus the clear place for new potential fans to begin, if you can still find it. You won't get a sense of the flow of any of the albums, of course, but you get songs from every period of the band's career. At the time this album was compiled, Game Theory was still an active entity that planned more albums, but that didn't happen, so this collection ends up functioning as a posthumous career retrospective after all.

Showing a rare sensitivity to fans, this compilation represents the records that Enigma didn't originally issue on CD quite disproportionately, especially when you consider that Scott doesn't include any songs he didn't write. There are three songs from *Blaze of Glory* ("Bad Year at UCLA", "Sleeping through Heaven" and "Something to Show"), two from *Pointed Accounts of People You Know* ("Penny, Things Won't" and "Metal

and Glass Exact"), three from *Distortion* ("Shark Pretty", "Nine Lives to Rigel Five" and "The Red Baron"), three from *Real Nighttime* ("24", "Curse of the Frontierland" and "I Turned Her Away"), four from *The Big Shot Chronicles* ("Regenisraen", "Erica's Word", "Crash into June" and "Like a Girl Jesus"), three from *Lolita Nation* ("We Love You Carol and Alison", "The Real Sheila" and "Together Now, Very Minor") and three from *Two Steps from the Middle Ages* ("Room for One More, Honey", "Leilani" and "Throwing the Election").

There is also, for historical interest, one song from Scott's pre-Game Theory band, Alternate Learning's album *Painted Windows*, called "Beach State Rocking". This, plus the first two *Blaze of Glory* songs, are actually 1989 performances by the then-current Game Theory lineup of Scott, Michael Quercio, Jozef Becker and Nancy Becker, and these, plus the entertaining liner notes, make this album worth buying even for fans who already have the old records. ("Sleeping Through Heaven" is especially excellent, and comes close to dethroning "Throwing the Election" as my favorite Game Theory song.) In fact, the two *Pointed Accounts* tracks are 1989 remixes, too, though not new performances, so "Something to Show" is the only pre-*Distortion* track included here in its original form. (The tracks from *Distortion* forward are all the originals.)

As an introduction to Game Theory, this album does an excellent job. It covers every release with representative selections, and does a superb job of chronicling Miller's overall career development. I would have picked slightly different songs from *Lolita Nation* and *Two Steps*, but you'll want to buy those albums anyway, so that isn't terribly important. As consolation, originally, for the unavailability of the first three and *Big Shot* on CD, the selection here was appreciated but insufficient, but now that *Big Shot* and *Distortion of Glory* are out, that's no longer an issue. The downside, I guess, is that since those reissues this compilation has less that is unique to it, and I suspect that's why Alias hasn't seemed to be in any hurry to reissue it.

## **The Loud Family**

After several years of silence, Scott Miller finally resurfaced in 1993 with this brand new band, on a new label (Alias Records, pre-major-label home of the American Music Club). Evidently, when Michael Quercio opted to move to San Francisco sometime in between albums, Scott saw it as a good excuse to close the Game Theory chapter and begin a new one. The players in the new band are almost all familiar names from the margins of Game Theory. Scott, Jozef Becker on drums, *Two Steps* guest Rob Poor on bass, *Lolita*

*Nation* guest Zach Smith on guitar, and new recruit Paul Wieneke on keyboards. Mitch Easter again produces, and Gil Ray appears in a couple places.

I waited for the first Loud Family album for a long time. I knew it was coming because at some point in '91 or '92 I got a phone call from my ex-girlfriend Nora telling me that WHRB, Harvard's college radio station, was playing a Game Theory orgy. (That was the extent of the conversation, actually: "Hello?" "Hi, glenn, it's Nora." "Hi." "WHRB is playing a Game Theory orgy right now." "Really? Wow! Thanks." "Sure." Click.) In between playing just about every Game Theory song ever recorded, they had Scott on the phone from California, and he revealed the new group's existence, name, and album plans, and even played demo versions of a couple of songs ("Inverness" and "Jimmy Still Comes Around", I think). The album took a while to arrive. In between my hearing "Inverness" the first time and it reaching the public, actually, I *saw* Inverness itself (drove through it, didn't stop), and it seemed appropriate for this then-mythical album to be associated with Loch Ness (which was what we drove past right after driving through Inverness) (we did a lot of driving on that trip) in my mind.

#### *Plants & Birds & Rocks & Things*, 1993 CD

If you listened to this album without looking at the cover, you'd conclude instantly that it is Game Theory, and that Scott has yet again managed to improve the band a quantum leap with fresh personnel. Donnette's voice is missed, but the rest of the band does an excellent job on backing vocals in her stead, and otherwise the band is nothing but improved. This is the solidest, hardest rocking Scott Miller album yet, and all four new players deserve shared credit for this. Jozef and Rob's rhythm section is mighty, Zach Smith's lead guitar adds a blazing flare that Game Theory rarely had, and Paul Wieneke's keyboards fill in the remaining spaces confidently. In addition, this album returns to something closer to *Lolita Nation*'s montage approach (possibly Scott's non-self-imposed recording hiatus impressed on him the importance of making *every* album push at its possibilities), and includes several bizarre experiments and sound-collages, like "He Do the Police in Different Voices", "Self Righteous Boy Reduced to Tears", "Don't All Thank Me At Once", "Spot the Setup" and "Ballad of How You Can All Shut Up", as well as a number of brief sampled glimpses of Game Theory songs and lyrical allusions. Yes, forget the name change, Game Theory is back and better than ever. Only five years of ingrained familiarity keep this from supplanting *Lolita Nation* on my DID list, and it is a worthy successor to that album, which for me is saying a *lot*.

"He Do the Police in Different Voices" begins the album with several Game Theory snippets, acknowledging history, and then slips into a strained guitar-and-voice song through which snatches of conversation float, eventually overwhelming the track with sirens and synthesizer, at which point "Sword Swallow" bursts into being. Looking at the times on the track list, you might guess that because this one is only 1:44, it's another sound experiment or collection of excerpts, but you'd be wrong. This is actually my favorite song on the album; short does not mean incomplete, and this one is a powerful rock song with raging guitars, precise tempo shifts and triumphant vocals. It would have been my clear choice for the album's first single, except that the music industry's current prejudice against very-short songs is even worse than its prejudice against extremely *long* songs.

"Sword Swallow" having proven that the Loud Family can rock harder than Game Theory, "Aerodeliria" then shows that they can play prettier mid-tempo songs, too. It combines the satin-smooth clarity of "Regenisraen" with the catchiness of "Erica's Word" or "Crash into June". Having established the frame of the album with the first three songs (a three-side frame is an odd image, but an appropriate one), the album then indulges in the slow, short aside, "Self-Righteous Boy Reduced to Tears", which collapses in odd metallic percussion, leading into "Jimmy Still Comes Around".

Apparently there was a video made for this song, though again if MTV ever played it they slipped it by when I wasn't watching *120 Minutes*. With the hilarious chorus "Jimmy's on drugs again, / Hated us yesterday, / Now he's our biggest fan", "Jimmy Still Comes Around" should have been the single that catapulted the Loud Family into international megastardom, but 1993 just wasn't the year for power-pop so wonderful it makes you smile insanely and bounce off your apartment walls. The trends of the moment were a cappella hip hop, Seattle grunge and resurgent country-western, and this isn't any of those, so it got no hype. Pathetic idiots, the public, don't you think?

The band seems undaunted, though, and "Take Me Down (Too Hallo)" is *another* of these songs. I wonder what NWA would make of the line "numb all the pain in Compton". It says a lot about the still-poor state of race relations in this country that "black" music and "white" music are still such identifiable and distinct styles. I can't stand NWA and I bet they'd hate this. And I have *no* idea what to do about that. World society remains largely seas of solid colors, and the colors seem to separate themselves even when the outside forces that were holding them apart are removed.

After several seconds of “No one twisting his arm” samples, “Don’t All Thank Me At Once” amounts to an acoustic guitar showcase. “Idiot Son” is a vintage Miller song, and a fascinating story of a child (possibly retarded?) asking his Wall Street robber-baron father what he will do when all his hollow invented deals fall through. “You’re smart enough to make the numbers appear / The way the sharks around the table want to hear, / But you never had an ounce of faith in anyone. / What will you have for your idiot son?”

“Some Grand Vision of Motives and Irony” turns out to be the one long title that goes with a slow pretty song, rather than an experimental collage. “Spot the Setup”, next, is an *acoustic* experiment, if that makes sense. It sounds like the band put together another one of the *Lolita Nation* dialog/song collages, and then performed it straight through on *MTV Unplugged*. In fact, when the Loud Family came through Cambridge on tour I got to see them perform this acoustic for real, in an in-store appearance, Scott Miller singing without a microphone, eyes closed, leaning up against a comic-book rack (to the annoyance of a pair of eight-year-olds who kept trying to reach the comics behind him). It was strange, but fascinating, to see how clearly this is a *song* to him, not a studio fabrication or an artifact of editing.

“Inverness” blends in a little vaguely Celtic guitar picking. Driving through Inverness I tried to get a feeling for the place to compare with the song. Unfortunately, it was just another Scottish town filled with narrow streets and B&Bs to us as we sped through it. The song, with a chorus of “I bet you’ve never actually seen a person die of loneliness”, makes a much stronger impression on me than the place did. We saw *much* lonelier places in Scotland than Inverness. I wonder if the song is written from first hand experience...

“Rosy Overdrive” is the longest song of the album, a churning guitar-rock assault that stretches out over six minutes. It isn’t quite as complex or musically ambitious as “The Waist and the Knees”, but I *am* reminded of that. The chorus distinguishes itself using the interesting reversal of shutting *off* some noise from the verses during it, instead of *adding* noise. Voices drift, dreamlike, through odd moments of the songs, and the high, wordless, “Ahah, ahah” epiphany that arrives at about the 4:30 mark seems like it has somehow arisen from the fabric of the song, rather than been planned there.

“Slit My Wrists”, in contrast, is short, slow and sweet, albeit in a lyrically-depressing way. *This* should have been the single. It’s neither the most remarkable nor the most representative song on the album, by any means, but it would have generated controversy and garnered attention, and the lilting treatment of its bleak

lyrics hints enough at the band’s depth that it might not have mattered as much that most of the other songs aren’t *like this*. Titling a single “Slit My Wrists”, in the current moral climate, would be somewhat self-fulfilling, in terms of acceptance from Mid-West PTAs and large promotional displays in Wal-Marts, but even that can have the positive side-effect of getting you mentioned in *Rolling Stone* alongside stirring quotes from whichever freedom-of-speech lawyers are currently in the spotlight.

“Isaac’s Law” is the one non-Miller song on the album, written instead by Zach Smith. It has the album’s second reference to Scotland (Aberdeen), and is really great. If it weren’t for the note on the back of the CD, I’d never have guessed it wasn’t a Miller composition. And I mean that as a compliment (and I *wouldn’t* have said it about Fred Juho’s songs on the early Game Theory albums). I’m not entirely sure what Isaac’s Law consists of, but it must have something to do with the impersonality of technology (lines like “There’s just no way to strike a bargain with the Coke machine”). Or, perhaps more likely, it is a reference to Isaac Newton, and is making the point that many things happen regardless of your attempts to avoid or alter them. Natural laws are the literal example, but many social “laws” behave the same way for all the individual’s power to affect them.

“The Second Grade Applauds” is a chaotic, blaring guitar song, with Scott’s singing and some keyboards and drums largely peripheral to the central guitar attack, until toward the end when the drums catch on to the guitar’s implicit rhythm and kick in to give it a boost. “Last Honest Face” starts out in a similar vein, with splintered vocals samples and synth noises drifting in, and combines guitar and a sinister electric-piano part on the verses, but when the chorus kicks in Zach’s guitar slips into a long legato harmony line and the song breaks into glorious melody. This vies with “Sword Swallow” at times for being my favorite song on the album. I think “Sword Swallow” better expands on Game Theory’s style, showing the Loud Family’s heritage and evolution, but “Last Honest Face” to me shows the Loud Family’s own distinct identity better. Both the electric piano hook that leads into and out of the chorus, and the wraith-like background vocals that drift in to replace it, sound like new elements to me, and the way the song breaks down for a guitar solo and then rapidly reassembles itself is mesmerizing. When Scott lays into “I used to think of you as someone I’d come crying to. / You use to put me in my place. / I used to think of you as sun that would come shining through. / You have this town’s last honest face”, it seems to me like his broken relationships have progressed to a higher level of brokenness.

"Even You" is a cross between "Chardonnay" and "Slit My Wrists". I'm not all that crazy about it while it drifts through choruses of "Oh Sandy Lee", but about when you've been lulled into thinking that's all there is to it, a crunching guitar swoops in out of nowhere to rescue it. It's my least favorite song on this album, but criticism doesn't get much milder than that.

"Ballad of How You Can All Shut Up" is the strangest, most fascinating dialog collage here *or* on *Lolita Nation*. A woman's voice alternates with a man's voice that has been processed completely out of understandability, and it sounds as if she's translating his garbled words, though I'm pretty sure she's not. Several phrases are Game Theory lyric allusions, others sound like beginning-language-lesson fragments, and many just seem like random interesting word-combinations. Some music drifts in, and then Scott's voice comes screaming in to sync up with hers, at which point the band launches into the final track, "Give in World". It's pretty interesting (or perhaps I'm just over-analyzing) that, unlike the previous four Game Theory records, this album ends on an unabashed upbeat song. I think Scott realizes what has happened, though, as there is a three-second twentieth track which consists of a guitar lick followed by Scott's voice saying, ingenuously, "Sorry, I don't know why I did that."

Having the last word.

#### ***Never Mind the Camera Crew, 1993 Cassette***

The Loud Family also gets kudos for being one of the first bands to have a strong online presence. Zach Smith turned up on CompuServe for a while, and Rob Poor set up a mailing list on the Internet. One benefit of signing up for the mailing list was that I got a chance to get one of these promotional cassettes. The tape has rehearsal versions of "Spot the Setup", Big Star's "Back of a Car", Johnny Thunders' "You Can't Put Your Arms Around a Memory", Bowie's "Beauty and the Beast" and "Take Me Down", and the original demo of "Jimmy Still Comes Around". It's the only prerecorded cassette I own, and I'd be willing to own lots more if they were this good, though after a while I'd get annoyed at Alias for not putting this stuff on CD.

## **various**

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#### ***Hot! Cinnamon Churros, 1993 CD***

This Alias sampler includes five Loud Family selections: "Jimmy Still Comes Around", a slight minute-long unreleased song called "Shut Up...", Chilton's "Back of a Car", the "No one twisting his arm" samples from "Don't All Thank Me At Once"

(here called "No One Twisting His Arm") and a live version of "Take Me Down". The sampler also has songs I liked by the Archers of Loaf and Matt Keating, which sold me albums, and AMC's "Rise" b-side "Chanel #5", which I already had.

## **The Three O'Clock**

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Michael Quercio's long-time day job, when not producing or playing on Game Theory records, was his own band, the Three O'Clock. The two bands have definite similarities, and fans of either are definitely recommended to investigate the other. Both play what can be loosely termed as jangly, sweet-voiced pop, and both draw from similar influences (not to mention friends). The Three O'Clock is a somewhat less-sophisticated, bouncier band, however, which may make them more appealing to you, or less satisfying, or both. Their songs tend to be more conventionally arranged than Game Theory's, sticking to guitar, bass, drums and keyboards in about equal proportions, with layers and layers of chirpy harmony. The Three O'Clock sounds *happier*. In place of Game Theory's fondness for playing with the nature of albums, and sometimes songs, the Three O'Clock offers a slightly dreamy psychedelic flavor (which must not be *too* severe, since I love them and generally hate psychedelic- anything). Their sense of humor also tends to be more non-sequiturish than obscure, as if Miller and Quercio both read *The Crying of Lot 49*, but laughed at different jokes.

#### ***Baroque Hoedown, 1983 LP***

*Baroque Hoedown* is a singularly appropriate title for the band's debut EP, combining as it does old-fashioned ornateness (Mickey Mariano's keyboard parts have a harpsichord-ish feel to them) with folksy, irrepressible modern cheer. The CD release of *Sixteen Tamborines* claims to contain this EP as a bonus, but three of the eight songs on my vinyl copy didn't make it to disc, for reasons that elude me (even with 16 songs, the CD is only 52 minutes long).

Either way, this is an intriguing, but not overwhelming, record. "With a Cantaloupe Girlfriend" is a hilarious title, and their cover of "Sorry" is an even funnier song. The catchiest tracks for me are "Feel a Whole Lot Better" and "Lucifer Sam". Neither of these are on the CD, but I wouldn't worry about it too much, as the other albums are all much more impressive than this, anyway.

### *Sixteen Tamborines, 1983 CD*

In fact, the band's first full album is a true classic. First of all, it is the only album I know of to contain an autographed picture of Martin Van Buren, with a nice note from the man himself, reproduced on the sleeve. Second, the songs are virtually flawless.

The Three O'Clock here improves on their first EP in several ways. The first song, "Jetfighter", points out both the effective use of a few incidental noises (control-tower chat, in this case) to enhance the song's atmosphere, and a much stronger guitar sound. The second, "Stupid Einstein", finds that on the other end of the spectrum, this album's acoustic guitars have a rivetingly clear presence. The band is discovering its range, which is wider than *Baroque Hoedown* might lead you to believe.

The album's focus is the amazing "A Day in Erotica", a song that whirls dizzyingly from spacey, flanged-guitar verses to quick, upbeat choruses with liquid keyboard arpeggios, to a long section in the middle that consists of tape-looped crowd noises and calliope music, and back. This is the only song I've ever heard that seems to somehow contain *colors*. I guess that's the psychedelic component.

Elsewhere, the album covers three basic moods: gentle and pretty (the heavily Beatle-esque "Fall to the Ground" and "Tomorrow", and "Seeing is Believing"), pretty but not-so-gentle, with some sharp guitar edges ("And So We Run", "On My Own"), and some innocent, horn-filled pop-funk ("In My Own Time" and "When Lightning Starts"). If the credits are to be believed, "In My Own Time" is a *Bee Gees* cover, presumably from the Gibbs' early, pre-disco, period.

The charm of this album was not lost on me when I got it, back in high school, but I've come to appreciate it even more in my somewhat-less-pretentious existentialist adulthood. For people older than me, bands like the Beatles and the Byrds may fill this particular gap, making eager, happy music perfect for sunny summer weekends with nothing in particular to do, days when parades, baby panda bears and ice-cream-eating two-year-olds crowd hostage-killings, race riots and terrorist water-supply poisonings off CNN, and, perhaps because you don't try to go anywhere, the city seems for moment like it isn't filled with dangerous undereducated lunatic litterers and vengeful corporate lawyers foreclosing on family farms over their BMWs' cellular car-phones while tailgating overweight bicyclists. To me, though, the Beatles are pre-history, something so firmly ingrained in the world by the time I became aware of music in more than a vague background way, that I find it essentially impossible to think of them as a band of people like the ones I discuss in this book. Too much mythology, too many

entrenched accolades; the Shakespeare of rock music, impossible to appreciate naively any more. Albums like this, then, take their place, and become my own pop icons, standards of excellent that I can feel some personal connection to.

Buy American (for once).

### *Arrive Without Traveling, 1985 LP*

I found out there was a new Three O'Clock album out, in 1985, when one of the Dallas radio stations (KZEW or Q102, I forget which), played the new song "Her Head's Revolving" on their nightly "Make or Break" call-in show, one of these deals where they play a song that might not normally get on their playlist, and listeners call in to say whether they like it or not. If more than half like it, it gets played, and if less than half like it they run the tape of record-smashing sound effects and chuck the album out a nearby window.

"Her Head's Revolving" blew me away instantly. Who would have expected a powerful, driving *rock* song from the Three O'Clock? And of those people, how many would have expected such a thing to *work*? Not many, and not me. But there it was, all thick swirling guitars and pounding drums, with one of the strangest sing-along choruses I'd ever heard.

Unfortunately, the good people of Texas, whose tastes tended to run more firmly to .38 Special, Bob Seger and "Rock and Roll Fantasy", found this combination to be basically nauseating, and some approval rating down around 30% spelled the end of the Three O'Clock's brief shot at the drunken redneck market.

Eventually I got out of Texas, and by some clever subterfuge involving pizza boxes, a battery-powered space-heater and a large stack of notarized-I mean *laminated*-pepperoni slices, I managed to smuggle my copy of this album out with me. It was worth the trouble. While not quite as immaculately conceived as *Sixteen Tambourines*, *Arrive Without Traveling* find the band maturing in winning way. The biggest shift is one further toward Louis Gutierrez's guitar as the central instrument, away from Mariano's keyboards, which in turn sound more fluid and less like harpsichords here. "Her Head's Revolving" remains my favorite song, but almost all the rest are notable.

One of the most interesting is "Hand in Hand", a poignant song about a retarded boy falling in love, sung to the girl's father. The Three O'Clock were never known primarily for their lyrics, which tend to walk the tightrope between cleverness and nonsense with a boisterous, good-humored clumsiness, but here and there a thoughtful moment pokes through without warning.

I've never seen this one on CD, but it's worth flipping through the Misc. T section of a used-record store for, if such things still exist where you live.

On a side note, I think "Rock and Roll Fantasy" could make a really intense solo a cappella song if done right. Maybe we could convince Tori to do it...

### ***Ever After*, 1986 LP**

After sufficient therapy to get the band over the crushing defeat suffered by "Her Head's Revolving", three of the four members were able to regroup for another album. Guitarist Steven Alternberg replaces Louis Guitierrez, who left to form Louis and Clark. Whether because of Alternberg's arrival or vice versa, *Ever After* is a much less guitar-centric album. Mariano's synthesizers, which had basically played a supporting role on *Arrive Without Traveling*, are here stacked, layered and liberally stirred around, giving the album a glossier, fuller sound than on previous records. Producer Ian Broudie, known in this book for his work with the Icicle Works, lends a hand on string arrangements, which further fill out the album's rich soundscape.

The Three O'Clock don't let this new sonic denseness weigh them down, though. Instead, they use the album's production values to make the transition from jangly alternative pop songs to slick, shiny "commercial" pop. This might sound like a criticism, but I assure you it isn't meant as one; flip to the Earth chapter for evidence that I think big-production top-40 can be truly wonderful. "Suzie's On the Ball Now" is a worthy successor to "Her Head's Revolving", with just as inane a chorus.

My other two favorites are "Warm Aspirations", a lilting love song, and "Songs and Gentle Words", a gentle anthem, if that makes any sense. Not as many of the other songs stand out individually on this album as did on the previous two, but as an overall experience I rate it right up close to *Arrive Without Traveling*.

The cover of this record is also priceless. The band is sitting in the grass under a large shade tree, with a young girl in a long white dress in front of them, and a rather gloomy-looking knight in full platemail behind them, standing slightly slumped, presumably in order to see out of the narrow visor-slit. In the bottom corner of the lyric sheet is another picture of this scene. The band is gone, the knight has sat down, or perhaps fallen (the helmet's expression is rather tricky to read), and the girl has turned just a few degrees toward the knight. The two pictures capture the essence of this album perfectly for me. The knight, with his gleaming armor and jaunty helmet plume, is the clichéd romantic ideal, embodied musically by the strings and rich production. The deadpan follow-up picture shows that

as real as the knight is, his presence is as much a game as anything else. If I could only figure out how Martin Ban Buren relates to this...

### ***Vermillion*, 1988 CD**

The Three O'Clock drop out of sight for a bit, and then re-emerge for one last record with yet another guitarist (Jason Falkner) on, of all labels, Prince's Paisley Park. You don't have to look at the label to hear the influence of Prince's smooth, eclectic techno-funk on this album. The one song he supposedly wrote for them, "Neon Telephone", with Wendy and Lisa singing backup, is only the most obvious example; "Love Explosion" and "Ways of Magic" both show the polished pop of *Ever After* leaning towards a slight soulful- and funki-ness. Only one song, the long slow ballad "Through the Sleepy Town", really shows the band's roots.

I can't, as much as I try, take this album seriously. The soft-focus band pictures on the jacket look silly. The songs seem to grasp at too many outside influences. The way Quercio's potentially-annoying voice is toned down and/or offset by other singers throughout strikes me as a suspiciously motivated attempt to increase the band's listener-friendliness. Compared with the rest of the band's career, I consider this a novelty record.

Of course, that doesn't mean I don't like it. I do, in much the same way I like Jane Wiedlin's albums. There is a certain innocent joy that comes through strongly enough to make it virtually impossible for me to keep that stern "sell-out sell-out sell-out" frown on my face. This album won't change your life, but you'd have to be pretty small-minded to dislike it.

## **Let's Active**

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Mitch Easter is this chapter's central figure, with direct ties to an amazing number of bands here, and indirect ties to most of the rest, mostly as producer and owner of the Drive-In studio. He is now best-known for having produced the first few REM albums, and his own band, Let's Active, never caught on to the same extent. They've outlasted REM in *my* favor, though.

### ***Afoot*, 1983 EP**

Let's Active's debut EP is a cheerful affair, six songs loaded with Mitch's sproingy guitar and Faye Hunter and Sara Romweber's snappy rhythm section and backing vocals. Mitch's picture on the back of the jacket makes him look like a healthy Robert Smith, and the band sounds like a cross between REM and the Go-Go's. The songs are simple, with very few over-dubs that couldn't have been produced by the three players



in real-time, and the lyrics are nothing special. For stripped-down upbeat primordial jangly American guitar pop, though, there's little that tops this.

The bands around Let's Active in Boylan Heights all add their own spins to the form, as do Let's Active on subsequent albums, but here the music is pristine and pure. This may be the best garage-band record to ever sound like it was made in a *clean* garage. "Every Word Means No" and "Make Up With Me" feature Mitch's guitar wriggling around like a small, excitable house pet. "Edge of the World" is a little calmer, with an ever-so-slight trace of ambient reverberation and some melodic interplay between guitar and a keyboard. "In Between" is the most strident of these songs, at "not very". You'd never call this "monumental"—in fact, it's about the opposite of that—but this is a little classic that has held up amazingly well over the past ten years. The CD reissue of both *Afoot* and *Cypress* on one disc, which is a good value, unfortunately takes away somewhat from the EP's original charm. You should still buy it if you find it, as it's out of print and rather hard to come by, though probably not much harder than the EP itself.

### *Cypress*, 1989 CD

The second Let's Active album, *Cypress* (originally released in 1984), has twice as many songs as *Afoot*, and makes at least six times as much noise. The bare simplicity of the EP is forsaken for a bigger, darker sound, assisted by additional production from Mitch's frequent collaborator Don Dixon. Where REM avoided pop trivialization in the early days with a murky, impenetrable moodiness, Let's Active boost their arrangements here with bigger bass, crunching guitar and some relatively unobtrusive keyboards. Rather than relying on quick hooks and easy catchiness, these songs are deeper, and show more development and variety. Vocal harmonies remain an important component of the band's appeal, but where the harmonies on *Afoot* were close and tight like the Bangles' or the Go-Go's, the duets here are allowed some space to evolve, more like Game Theory's.

Most of the time, it works great. Songs like "Waters Part", "Ring True" and "Blue Line" retain plenty of the propulsiveness of *Afoot*, but shift down into a lower gear to trade speed for power (to use a car metaphor that my boss, Dave, would appreciate, but that I myself barely understand). "Easy Does" and "Lowdown" take advantage of some subtle processing to come at their essential poppiness from a different angle.

A couple songs seem to me to bog down, though, under their own weight. "Crows on a Phone Line", with its listless straight-descending-scale chorus melody,

drags on for quite a bit too long. "Prey" also seems scattered, and could have stopped earlier. "Gravel Truck" is an instrumental interlude, no more. On the other hand, "Flags for Everything" and "Co-Star" rekindle the energy of *Afoot* quite effectively, and the revived 1982 song "Counting Down" would have made a great seventh track on the EP. The CD, besides appending the entire *Afoot* EP, adds "Gray Scale" (an expendable track that was only previously available on the UK edition of *Cypress*) and "Two Yous" (a delightful buzzy *Afoot*-worthy Three-O'Clock-like tune that was previously unreleased, though it's not entirely clear whether it's actually an old song or a new one).

I also find that listening to this album too much over a short period of time leads it to grate a little on my nerves, which I can't really explain. It hasn't happened in a while, because I only recently found this on CD, and since my CD collection hit critical mass I definitely haven't been *overplaying* anything on vinyl, but it may be that this album shows just enough predilection for complexity to nudge me into trying to appreciate it on that level, yet it isn't *that* complex, compared to other things I listen to, and so I'm dissatisfied.

Or maybe I should adjust my equalizer.

### *Big Plans for Everybody*, 1986 CD

This third Let's Active album is basically a Mitch solo effort. Future wife (and *Lolita Nation* contributor) Angie Carlson helps out on a few tracks, as do Faye Hunter and drummers Rob Ladd and Eric Marshall, but four of these songs are nobody but Mitch, and of course he produced and mixed the album himself. Now, nothing against Faye and Sara, but Let's Active as a trio was hardly Rush, so the jump from band to Mitch making do as best he can without them isn't as great as it might have been. He's not a flashy drummer or bass player, but he isn't that *flashy* a guitarist, either. He's *effective* at all these.

Solo, multi-instrumentalist projects like this are fascinating to me, having done a few songs that way myself, with not-completely-satisfactory results (i.e. it mostly sounded like crap, with the occasional moment that I really liked). Mine *sounded* like it was only me, stewing in my own reverb. In a very different way, some essentially-solo Kate Bush material does sound like there is just her orchestrating all the sounds. This Let's Active album sounds like a *band*.

In fact, it's an even better Let's Active album than the last one. The ghosts of *Afoot* have been swept away thoroughly enough that they neither haunt this album, nor are noted in their absence. *Big Plans* builds on the budding musical complexity of *Cypress*, but applies it as if Mitch understands what he's doing much better this

time around. Did producing *Real Nighttime* make part of the difference? (This *title* sounds like Game Theory...) I'd like to think so, but without dates and diary entries it's impossible to tell whether things happened in the right order, much less which one influenced the other, if either.

The cover of this album has Mitch sitting in the middle of a narrow road, and there is a traveling feel to the whole album. It shows up most obviously in the grinding bluesy riff of "Last Chance Town" and the album-closing instrumental "Route 67", but even songs like the first one, "In Little Ways", have a loping, steady beat that I can imagine as the soundtrack to some half-forgotten road-movie. "Writing the Book of Last Pages" has the sense of *emotional* displacement that goes along with all good nomadic art, and having the thing produced at the Drive-In only helps.

It's hard to know what, exactly, to compare this album to. It's nothing like REM or the Go-Go's, as early Let's Active was. I keep thinking of Robyn Hitchcock, but that's not it. Maybe Robyn minus Julian Cope. That's closer, if cryptic. Imagine Robyn Hitchcock's pop craftsmanship, without the pretentiousness and arty weirdness that Julian is fond of. Something like that.

### *Every Dog Has His Day*, 1988 CD

For the fourth Let's Active album, Mitch was feeling sociable, and this one features a four-piece band: Mitch, Angie, Eric Marshall and John Heames (it doesn't say, but I'm assuming he's a bass player). Mitch even gets some help on production from John Leckie, who I know from his work with the Lucy Show, Magazine, the Posies, early Simple Minds and the Skids, only one of which, you'll note, is in this chapter.

The album that arises from this assembly sounds, with the possible exception of "I Feel Funny", even less like the other three Let's Active albums than *Big Plans* sounded like the first two. Really loud guitar and some *lead* vocals from Angie, instead of Mitch, make this remind me of the Swimming Pool Q's, but this has little of the cathartic pop grandeur of Calder and Boston's band.

I quite honestly don't know what to make of it. Some of the songs, the title track especially, click, and are vicious. Angie's leads stand out nicely, especially on "Forty Years". On the other hand, the album doesn't seem like a coherent whole at all. It sounds like Mitch had another album left on Let's Active's deal with IRS, and had some rock songs lying around, and put the two together. Perhaps if there was another record or two by this version of the band, to provide context, it would make more sense to me, but years on from *Every Dog Has His Day* that doesn't look too likely.

I don't know: a strange album. Strangely *normal*. I can't get my head around it.

## Sneakers

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### *Racket*, 1992 CD

I bought this record because Scott Miller said it was great. Actually, I'd been thinking about buying it anyway, but hadn't found a copy until after I got to meet Scott at an in-store appearance by the Loud Family on April Fools' Day, 1993. Someone asked him what Mitch was up to, and he pointed out that this CD had just come out.

*Racket* is an odd semi-archival document. Sneakers was a band that I'd never heard of, but which was evidently legend with somebody else. In its original incarnation in the mid-Seventies, Sneakers included future dB's members Chris Stamey and Will Rigby, and Mitch Easter, and their first record was produced by Don Dixon. This makes Sneakers the ancestors both in spirit and practice of most of this chapter. The band only released two EPs in their brief career. The first one, *Sneakers*, had six songs that are all included on this CD (tracks 13-18). The second, *In the Red*, had a cover with isn't included here, and five other songs which are (tracks 7, 8, 9 and 12, and perhaps 1).

The chronology is somewhat confused, however, by the fact that although all of these songs were *written* in the late Seventies, several were recorded in 1991 and 1992, and most of them were mixed or remixed recently as well. The notes on the first 12 songs offer no clues as to when each song was recorded, mixed or otherwise affected. In fact (and this may be the point), it makes little difference. These could all be old or all be new. They share a rough, simple, impromptu charm that transcends time (and sometimes timing). Sneakers by now are less a band than a casual studio lark, and many of the post-*Sneakers* songs are mostly Mitch or mostly Chris, with occasional guest appearances from the dB's Gene Holder and Let's Active's Faye Hunter.

The record's overall quality, as might be expected from its haphazard construction, is erratic. There are several great performances of great songs ("S'il Vous Plait" in particular), some charmingly sloppy performances of great songs ("Decline and Fall", and all the early ones), and some complete throwaways ("Mark Peril Theme", "I Will Understand", "Be My Ambulance", "B&G Pie Commercial"). The historical interest of the reissue of these songs, however, is such that it would make little difference if they were all inaudible garbage. The fact that most of the songs are really good is an added bonus. Anyone with an

interest in any of the artists in this chapter who are connected with Mitch, Chris or Don Dixon (which is most of them) should find this CD fascinating and essential.

## Don Dixon

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### *E E E*, 1989 CD

Don Dixon has a few albums of his own, too. This is the only one I've heard, and as it doesn't particularly appeal to me, it's likely to retain that status. It's got lots of horns and soulful old-fashioned r&b rock and roll, but I can't get over hearing it as a half-assed Robbie Robertson album. The cover of the dB's "Bad Reputation" makes me long for the original, and the whole album is just too retro for me.

## The dB's

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### *Stands for deciBels*, 1981 CD

Chris Stamey and Will Rigby went on to form the dB's, recruiting Peter Holsapple and Gene Holder to round out the original four-piece configuration. Their first record, only released in the US in 1989 by IRS, sounds more than a little like Sneakers. The production is dated, and the jangliness is primeval. There are some irresistible pop gems, like "The Fight", "Bad Reputation" and "Big Brown Eyes", but a number of these songs are odd, noisy, conceptual experiments. The debt this album owes to Big Star is readily apparent, but somehow the fractured sound of songs like "Moving in Your Sleep" isn't as riveting when made by a band that hasn't firmly established its pure-pop credentials yet.

Fans who discovered the dB's with this record may well feel that it is their best, and that the others steadily wander away from the band's essential charm. Having discovered the band, myself, in their later, slicker, more countrified phase, this album seems incompletely formed, and like Sneakers my interest in it is mostly historical.

It is worth noting that the IRS reissue is remastered, and contains new liner notes from Stamey and Holsapple, so devotees who still only own the original vinyl or one of the imported CD issues can feel okay about buying yet another copy.

### *Repercussion*, 1982 CD

The second dB's album shows substantial sonic maturing, by which I mean that it sounds less like it was recorded in somebody's garage in some way that involved *lots* of duct tape, and more like it was done in a recording studio with the associated devices turned on. It also contains the first appearance of the dB's defining song, "Amplifier", a hilarious romp about a man whose girlfriend stole or destroyed everything he owned, except his amplifier. This song takes the pathos commonly associated with country music, and turns it from focusing on lost pick-up trucks, bottles of Jack Daniels and large mournful dogs, to being a piece of functional rock and roll apparatus. To me, that is the dB's strength captured in one not-very-pithy sentence.

Several others of these songs are similarly appealing. "Living a Lie", "Happenstance" and "Neverland" are all great, with quick, snappy beats, doot-doot Everly-Brothers-like harmonies, and sharp guitar hooks. There are still some songs like "From a Window to a Screen", "I Feel Good (Today)" and "Ups and Downs" that strike me as throwaways that I would have thrown away, but this album is at least halfway from being a historical curiosity like *Stands for deciBels* to being a great pop album like *Like This*....

IRS reissued this one, too, in 1989.

### *Like This*, 1984 CD

Many dB's fans will howl when I say this, but to me *this* is the first *real* dB's record. Chris Stamey left the band for a solo career after *Repercussion*, leaving Peter, Gene and Will to continue without him. As Chris and Peter had shared songwriting on the first two albums, Chris' departure takes away half of the band's personality. You can definitely see that as a negative thing without being at all unreasonable. To me, though, the dB's first two records are inconsistent and this one isn't.

"Amplifier" is included here again (same version; remember that *Repercussion* wasn't available domestically at the time), and it sounds more in character here than it did on *Repercussion*. Its country twang runs through most of the songs here, like "Spitting in the Wind", "Not Cool", "New Gun in Town" and "White Train".

The new element is a polished studio feel, incorporating frequent keyboards, that gives the dB's a much *bigger* sound than they had before, and lets them produce a few songs that show a bit of the grandeur that Game Theory and the Swimming Pool Q's were sometimes masters of. "On the Battlefront" is the most like this, slow and graceful and moving, but "Lonely Is as Lonely Does" contains some elements, and even "Love is for Lovers" benefits from the rich production.

"Love is for Lovers" is, in fact, my favorite dB's song. Gloriously resonant guitar chords and a steady beat build towards the near-perfect chorus's galloping hi-hats, echoing hand-claps and soaring vocals. In my mind it is associated with Bruce Cockburn's "Lovers in a Dangerous Time" and the Suburb's "Love is the Law" as classic pop songs with the word "Love" in the title (not a small set, mind you).

The first two dB's records were intelligent, but that intelligence often took the form of self-consciousness. Here it is channeled instead into clever lyrics, and the band plays without apology for the first time. As with many of the bands in this chapter, relationships are the most common lyrical theme. Some of my favorite bits are "I can understand / Why you want a better man, / But why do you want to make him out of me?", and "She's got soul but I don't know, / Every girl I know has got some soul."

Not only do I strongly recommend this album to anyone who likes the entries around it in this chapter, but it makes a pretty good introduction to Boylan Heights as a whole for people not familiar with any of this. The jangly-guitar charm is here, but Peter Holsapple's vocals are a more easily acquired taste than the whinier styles of Mitch Easter, Michael Quercio or Scott Miller, and the country flavor and mainstream production provide points of reference to other styles.

Also, it's really great.

### *The Sound of Music*, 1987 CD

The dB's fourth and last record continues in the vein of the third. New bass player Jeff Beninato brings the lineup back to quartet, but the sound is largely unchanged. There is more piano and organ, and less synthesizer, but this is only a matter of degree. Guest performances from Syd Straw, Hunters and Collectors' horn player Jeremy Smith and Benmont Tench and Van Dyke Parks spice up this collection, but again it is Peter Holsapple's songwriting and leadership that drive the album.

Nothing here supplants "Love is for Lovers" in my mind, but many songs come close. "Never Say When", with its high harmony vocal, is great, and "Think Too Hard" ought to be a rock standard. "Never Before and Never Again", which is the one Syd Straw sings on, has classic country style. "I Lie" plays voices like slide guitars. "Bonneville" and "Working for Somebody Else" have western stomp.

Inevitably, the lack of one blow-you-away song like "Love is for Lovers" or "Amplifier" makes *The Sound of Music* a little less impressive than *Like This*.... Also, with the advantage of hindsight to realize that this was the band's last record, it becomes possible to hear into it hints of creative dissolution and weariness.

I think these criticisms are strictly imposed from outside, though. If the dB's had made twenty more records, *Like This*... and *The Sound of Music* would be a period in the band's evolution, and most people would find better things to do with their time than quibble over which was better.

## REM

And then there is REM. As the music that had been alternative in the first half of the Eighties became mainstream in the second, the two bands that catapulted unexpectedly into mega-stardom were U2 and REM. Both managed to do it without seeming to sell out, and dragged most of their original fans along with them into the stadiums of the world. Both also managed to completely alienate me in the process. In U2's case they did it the honest way, by changing musical styles. In REM's, they did it in a much more disconcerting fashion, by becoming so insufferably self-righteous and politically aware that the mere mention of Michael Stipe is enough to make me feel cross and violent. At one time REM was easily one of my four or five favorite bands, and several of their songs were among my very favorites; now I switch stations whenever they come on, and until writing this chapter forced me to revisit their earlier albums, I hadn't even *considered* replacing any of them with CDs.

### *Chronic Town*, 1982 EP

REM's first record, produced by Mitch Easter and the band at Mitch's Drive-In Studio, is a short, unassuming five-song intro to the band that only partially displays their true qualities. Bill Berry's steady drumming is prominent, as is Mike Mills' melodic bass playing. Peter Buck's guitar is pretty thin here, though, as is Michael Stipe's voice. Stipe mumbles a bit, but hasn't yet mastered the utterly indecipherable style that made him, for a while, such a remarkable vocalist. Vocal harmonies are also mostly absent.

Still, the difference between REM and Let's Active at this early stage is instructive. Let's Active, from their name onward, projected a silly good humor that worked both in favor of their charm and against their ever being taken seriously. Songs like "Every Word Means No" are good natured and upbeat, but there is nothing mysterious about them. They draw you in, and then there you are, in. There's nowhere further to go. On later Let's Active albums Mitch tried to fill out the experience by adding sonic depth to the band's sound, but this effort was never wholly successful.

Now, that isn't necessarily a terminal criticism, and it's absolutely acceptable for a pop song to be just a pop song. In terms of critical accolades, though, praising *Let's Active* is a second-order act; it is necessary to first acknowledge the band's surface appeal and to almost apologize for it (as I'm doing now), before you can go on to say how great you think they are.

REM, on the other hand, understood mystery well. They have the pop songcraft to catch your attention ("Gardening at Night" is my favorite on this EP), but they set their pop songs in a murkier, darker, less-accessible environment. The titles are cryptic, as are the lyrics (even here where you can understand them), and the music doesn't follow any particular pop clichés. There is a droning, repetitive quality to REM's songwriting out of which they somehow construct melodies, almost as if by negative space, using the smallest, subtlest shifts in Peter Buck's arpeggiated guitar playing to drive the songs' movements. Many bands have started out catchy and tried to become deep, or started out unique and tried to become appealing, but REM started out oblique, and then, for a little while at least, proceeded to get even more oblique.

### ***Murmur*, 1983 CD**

With alternative-radio airplay of a new version of REM's first single, "Radio Free Europe", their first full album, *Murmur*, brought them quick cult credibility. It's also the beginning of what I think of as their mature sound. "Radio Free Europe" itself is a masterpiece, fast enough to dance to, dark and complex enough to stand up under scrutiny, and catchy enough not to *require* scrutiny. Producers Mitch and Don Dixon give Stipe's voice and Peter Buck's guitar added reverb here, allowing those two elements to do most of the work of filling out the band's sound. Some additional instrumentation complements this effort, and suddenly REM sounds like a major force, rather than just an interesting band.

This album also sees the serious addition of backing vocals. Some of these are Stipe, over-dubbed, but the important ones, in my opinion, are Mike Mills'. In fact, I'm convinced that the thing that *made* REM was not Stipe's singing, Buck's jingling guitars and mandolins or any of the other things commonly credited with this, but Mike Mills. Without his bass playing, which takes what normally would be rhythm-guitar parts, Buck's spare picking would have a hard time carrying these songs. And without his understated backing vocals, Stipe's voice would have been left in isolation, where it is much less effective. As he doesn't display blinding technical virtuosity on bass or in singing, Mills doesn't get a whole lot of

recognition, but without him, I think REM would fall apart completely.

The other songs on this album are uniformly excellent. Elegant cello accentuates the haunting "Talk About the Passion", spirited, wavering backing vocals drive the enigmatic "Moral Kiosk" (not that the *other* songs aren't enigmatic, as well...), slow piano and muted drums keep the beautiful ballad "Perfect Circle" on course, and chiming acoustic-guitar chords and rumbling drums perk up "Catapult". Mills' backing vocals are especially effective on "Shaking Through".

The most *obviously* remarkable thing about this record, though, is the way Stipe's vocals manage to conceal the lyrics. It's not that his singing is mixed too low, and it isn't even that he's obviously slurring anything, but somehow his delivery renders about 40% of the words that he sings completely incomprehensible, so that it is impossible to make heads or tails of anything more than the occasional phrase. Go ahead, *try* to transcribe "Sitting Still". "We could ban it in the sieve"? "Up to buy a Katy's bar"? "City traffic a bikini"? There's something about kitchens, and "wasting time sitting still" is clear, but the rest—who knows? It sounds like English words that you just don't happen to know. It's really remarkable, and served as REM's gimmick in the early days, a gimmick that got people talking about them but didn't get in the way of enjoying the music at all, since most people don't pay that much attention to the lyrics anyway. And even if you do, the discernible phrases that poke out are interesting enough to give you a reason to *try* to decipher the others, or make up theories about what they might be.

In some ways, REM never quite equaled this album, and it stands as a weed-choked landmark on the road to modern pop music. In fact, I think the cover is actually a picture of it.

### ***Reckoning*, 1984 CD**

The follow-up doesn't add much to REM's stature. It *does* add a little to their *range*. "Camera" is their slowest, most moving song yet, and there was a time when it and Echo and the Bunnymen's "Ocean Rain" vied for my vote as the greatest slow song ever. "Seven Chinese Brothers", "Harborcoat" and "Time After Time (Annelise)" are somewhere in the middle, most like the songs on *Murmur*. At the other end of the stylistic spectrum, the songs "Southern Central Rain (I'm Sorry)", "Pretty Persuasion" and "Don't Go Back to Rockville" all add a bluegrassy honky-tonk cheerfulness that in the post-"Shiny Happy People" period seems a lot less appealing than it did to me at the time.

### *Fables of the Reconstruction...*, 1985 CD

The brash, dissonant guitar notes that open "Feeling Gravity's Pull" waste no time establishing that this album is not another retread. With the exception of the single "Can't Get There from Here", the cheery poppiness of "Don't Go Back to Rockville" is mostly shelved in favor of an excursion deeper into *Murmur's* murky obliqueness. This time around, though, the addition of horns and strings on a few songs, and new producer Joe Boyd, give the presentation a distinctly different feel. It's edgier, tighter and more focused, though not necessarily more accessible. Stipe hasn't completely made the transition to legibility, but the indecipherable portion of his singing has been cut from 40% to closer to 20%, and with a little perseverance it is possible to make pretty good guesses at *most* of this album's lyrics.

As with *Murmur*, every song here is intense. "Maps and Legends" and "Kahoetek" (not to be confused with "Cuyahoga", on the *next* album) are closest in feel to early REM songs. "Life and How to Live It", "Feeling Gravity's Pull" and "Old Man Kensey" are most indicative of *this* album, clamorous and in some ways uncomfortable. The arrangements are the same, but the songs do not progress in orderly, predictable ways, instead veering off into the underbrush at times with little warning. This isn't anything to convert Fugazi fans, but the band has learned to do what they *usually* do well enough that they can now *not* do it. "Old Man Kensey" is especially interesting, with droning vocals giving the song an oddly monastic cant.

The most important song here in *my* life, though, was "Driver 8", which was one of my standard guest vocal numbers with this band three friends of mine sort of had (see The Clash) in high school. This is how I know you can more or less determine what Michael is singing on this album, as I had to transcribe "Driver 8" in order to sing it. Parts of my version didn't make *much* sense, I concede, but they sure sounded like what Michael was saying. My definitive performance of "Driver 8" was during a rehearsal, when, fed up with the heat and volume in the claustrophobic music room, I ran the mic cord out the crack under the door, and down the hall, and sang my part from the more-comfortable living-room. It wasn't so much that the song sounded *better* from outside of the room, but that hearing it that way, muffled by the door and the hall, swirled around upon itself in its tiny space, seemed so much more *appropriate* than actually being in the room trying to pretend like there were any sort of live dynamics, which there weren't, as Marc was entirely imperturbable, and would barrel along at whatever pace his right foot set, kicking the floor over and over

and over again, until we worried it might give way, regardless of David or my attempts to manipulate the pace of the music in any way whatsoever.

### *Life's Rich Pageant*, 1986 LP

The first sign of REM's serious decay is that this album's sleeve actually lists the songs *in order*, for the first time. And on the outside, no less. Of course, it neglects to mention the "bonus" cover "Superman", but given how much radio saturation that song got, this omission turns out to be rather coy.

This album is louder and more straightforward than *any* of the previous ones, and is thus also much less interesting to me than any of them. It sounds too much like a normal pop-rock record, and "Superman" is simply bubblegum. The first time I heard it I thought it was great, and each subsequent listening detracted from it, until now it doesn't interest me at all.

### *Dead Letter Office*, 1987 CD

On the eve of vanishing permanently from my favor, REM released one last significant recording, the b-sides collection *Dead Letter Office*. This album compiles two *Murmur*-era outtakes, six from the period of *Reckoning*, three from around *Fables...*, two from around *Life's Rich Pageant*, and one whose notes do not reveal what period it arises from.

The originals are pretty interesting, but the real draw are the covers: Pylon's "Crazy", Aerosmith's "Toys in the Attic", Roger Miller's "King of the Road" and three VU covers: "There She Goes Again", "Pale Blue Eyes" and "Femme Fatale". All of these are interesting, and "Pale Blue Eyes" is stupendous. They did it live when I saw them on the *Reckoning* tour (I think that's when it was), and it was even more amazing than "Camera", which was saying a lot at the time. Peter Buck's self-effacing liner-note description of this record as a "junkshop" notwithstanding, I highly recommend it. One last burst of simple charm before the end.

### *Document*, 1987 LP

This, as far as I'm concerned, is the full-fledged beginning of REM's insufferable adulthood, when they had the poor grace to become both painfully annoying and staggeringly popular, so that just when I want to tune them out they are suddenly inescapable. It was a pathetic moment of weakness when I bought a copy of this album, and although it's not wholly unenjoyable, that's the most enthusiastic praise I can muster for it. How I long for the days when Michael Stipe was shy and mumbled.

## The Golden Palominos

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### *Visions of Excess, 1985 LP*

The Golden Palominos are less a band than an ever-changing concept-project of drummer Anton Fier. I bought this album because, at the time, I was still into REM, and Michael Stipe sings on three of these songs. Other notable guest participants include Chris Stamey, Richard Thompson, Henry Kaiser, Syd Straw, Jack Bruce, Arto Lindsay and John Lydon, as well as the core cast of Fier, Bill Laswell, Jody Harris and Bernie Worrell. The guest list alone sets this album up to be a fascinating combination of folk, country and punk.

And that's more or less what it delivers. Fier as a drummer is heavily into Simmons, and of the school who don't hit a drum unless they think it will do some good. Thus you won't find a lot of hi-hat filler and busy grooves here. Fier defines his rhythms as often implicitly as explicitly, and his style is what holds together what could have been an extremely haphazard collection.

The three Stipe numbers, "Boy (Go)", "Clustering Train" and "Omaha", sound like a blend of REM and late PIL, Stipe's distinctive vocals fitting in surprisingly well with Fier's huge, "World Destruction"-esque, stilted drums, Laswell's thumping bass and Harris' squealing guitar. Thompson provides lead on "Boy (Go)", and Stamey and Kaiser both play on "Omaha" (a Moby Grape cover).

Lydon's song, "The Animal Speaks", has a certain PIL-ness about it, but Laswell and Worrell refuse to take back seats, and Fier doesn't settle into the monotonous grooves that PIL often resort to, so the song comes out thick and atmospheric, five strong personalities half-clashing, half-harmonizing for a dense, swirling composite.

Jack Bruce's song, "Silver Bullet", is the strangest one. Part of this is that my initial reaction is "Jack Bruce? What is *he* doing here?" Even once you accept his presence, the song is pretty bizarre. Fier and Laswell set up a super-mechanical rhythm track, which Bruce's bluesy voice and harmonica, Worrell's organ, Harris' slide guitar and more Richard Thompson guitar work sound *very* odd against. Syd Straw's backing vocals add yet another bizarre touch. I don't know what to make of it all.

Straw sings lead on "(Kind of) True" and "Buenos Aires", both of which also feature Richard Thompson. "(Kind of) True" is the most "normal" song on the record. Fier lets Straw mostly hold the focus, and she steers the band toward a country-ish rock sound somewhere between Kimm Rogers and Tribe. On "Buenos Aires" Fier takes the reins back, and his

polyrhythmic synth drums drive the song. Straw's high, soulful, multi-tracked vocals come out sounding almost like Laurie Anderson. Harris, Thompson and Nicky Skopelitis all are listed as playing guitar on this one, but Fier and Straw are the only players I find myself able to pay attention to.

Okay, when I said "Silver Bullet" was the strangest song, I meant that it was the strangest one to *find* on this album. Arto Lindsay's "Only One Party" is more in character with the album, but is definitely the weirdest track. Lindsay's vocals are hoarse and distorted, like Tom Waits yelling at you through a megaphone from the street outside your window until the police finally come and chase him away. He plays guitar like that, too. Fier and Laswell amuse themselves as if none of this was going on, which only makes Lindsay even more bizarre by juxtaposition.

This should definitely be an interesting album for fans of any of the participants to investigate, though it's so eccentric as a whole that I'd be hard pressed to know who to recommend it to on its own merits.

### *Drunk with Passion, 1991 CD*

Buy another Golden Palominos album for \$1.99? That seemed like a pretty good deal, thus this. After listening to it a few times, though, I'm not so sure. The lineup this time is mostly Fier, Laswell and Skopelitis, with Amanda Kramer singing five songs and Stipe, Bob Mould and Bob Kidney taking one each. Richard Thompson plays guitar on five songs.

On paper this looks like the recipe for a fine album. On disc I find it uniformly listless and uninteresting. Amanda Kramer's voice doesn't do anything for me, and thus the long meandering songs whose focal points it is simply bore me. Fier's drumming strikes me as almost totally uninspired, a surprising contrast to how impressed I was with his work on *Visions of Excess*. All these songs are too long, Mould's shouting can't even enliven "Dying from the Inside Out", and if the credits didn't alert me to Thompson's presence, I'd never have guessed it. It perplexes me how such an illustrious group of musicians can have made such a dull record.

## Guadalcanal Diary

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### *Walking in the Shadow of the Big Man, 1984 LP*

Guadalcanal Diary is another Georgian band, and sometime-REM producer Don Dixon produced this debut album (as well as their third and fourth), but unlike REM, Guadalcanal Diary actually *sound* like the come from the south. Guitarist Jeff Walls also plays lap

steel and autoharp, and he and guitarist/singer Murray Attaway lend frequent southern twangs to the music. The effect of this varies from hilarious to eerie, and the songs vary similarly. On the one extreme are "Watusi Rodeo", an all-out comic romp with the key refrain "Look like cows but they're water buffaloes", and the Civil War drama "Trail of Tears". On the other are "Sleepers Awake" and "Why do the Heathen Rage?", which twist the southern twang into a slow, almost-mystical yearning.

Somewhere in the middle is their cover of "Kumbayah", a song that has taken on a bizarre set of associations in our culture mostly connected to mosquito-infested summer camps and endless compulsory singalongs. Guadalcanal Diary's rendition largely bypasses this adopted identity, opting to be, instead, a rock cover of the original folk-hymn. Attaway's singing moves from ghostly quiet to roaring exuberance, and the band follows along in close step. The most affecting moment for me is at the very end, where the applause that follows the song suddenly snaps off, as if some lost tribe of ghost Indians had just been spooked and vanished into the desert again. That quick touch turns what could have been a clichéd rock gesture (the applause) into something much more mysterious and interesting. A vague connection to Big Country's *Restless Natives* soundtrack drifts through my mind.

The album, for all that, is hardly the band's best. The two instrumentals, "Gilbert Takes the Wheel" and "Walking in the Shadow of the Big Man (Part 1)" are pleasant but largely uninspiring, and neither "Ghost on the Road" nor "Pillow Talk" move me like the others do. If you like the band, this is worth tracking down, but I wouldn't start here.

#### *Jamboree*, 1986 LP

There was a moment when I wasn't sure that I was going to turn out to be a really big Guadalcanal Diary fan after all, and this is it. Their second album, *Jamboree*, isn't *that* much different from the first one, but where the first one showed mainly potential, this one has signs of finding *a* direction, but one I don't care for as much as I might. Both sides start off well, the first with "Pray for Rain" and the second with "Lonely Street". These are slower, sadder songs than most of the ones on the first album, but they retain an arresting intensity. The rest of the first side is pretty listless, though. There are moments, but the band's energy seems to have been submerged under a layer of something quite viscous, like gravy or maybe shampoo. It isn't necessarily that Rodney Mills' production is *bad*, but compared to the other three, with Don Dixon, this one is different, and because the second

two albums are stronger than the first two, the Don Dixon Guadalcanal Diary sound seems like the *right* one.

The second side has the opposite problem, by which I mean that it seems to overemphasize the *other* extreme of the band's personality. "Country Club Gun", "T.R.O.U.B.L.E.", "I See Moe", "Please Stop Me", "Dead Eyes" and "Cattle Prod" all build on the country/rockabilly/silly side of Guadalcanal Diary. On the first album this seemed unselfconscious and charming, but here it seems too calculated, too heavily stressed to be appealing. It's as if you put the first album in a centrifuge for a while, spinning it until the elements of an interestingly complex sound began to separate, and that's this album. I liked the elements combined much more than I like them isolated.

#### *Two by Four*, 1987 CD

Don Dixon returns for the third album, and the band proceeds to make the killer record that the first one made me think they could. With the sole exception of "Let the Big Wheel Roll", which could have been a *Jamboree* side two outtake, none of these songs are limp or corny. The creative tension between musical urges that was shown (or implied) on the first album is fully exploited here. What I'll call the band's spiritual side crafts soaring melodies and lush guitar harmonies, and the country bar-rock side gives them the force and upbeat energy that transforms them from staid to enchanting and invigorating. "Under the Yoke" and "Get Over It" assume guises of sinister and bouncy, respectively, demonstrating the scope that the band's approach allows them. This album uses a few more studio processing tricks than the first two, as well as some unobtrusive keyboards, and this just complements the improved playing, the more-sophisticated songwriting, and the improved production that makes the improved playing of the better songs easier to appreciate.

"Things Fall Apart" is a great example of what I mean. The bulk of the song is a jittery, fractured rhythm that combines squalling, squeezed out guitar parts with uneasy off-beat bass and drums. As the verse heads toward the chorus, the rhythm section begins to rumble towards coalescing, and then suddenly the chorus breaks free, the hi-hat kicks in, triumphant vocal harmonies swirl by, and the previously-withheld steady rhythm catches the whole song up in its grip. The chorus then gives way to a moment of synth-strings and Murray singing, which blends back into the verse rhythm. The overall effect is a carefully crafted pop song not afraid of its own dark side, and powerful through this confidence.



If you are still having trouble relating Guadalcanal Diary to the rest of pop, they also offer here their only cover, the Beatles' "And Your Bird Can Sing". This, along with Game Theory's version of "I Want to Hold Your Hand", are particularly interesting to me because they take the quintessential British pop icons and render them in the style I think of as a distinctly American outgrowth of the British Invasion, though I realize that saying that will probably appall fans of a variety of earlier American bands like the Byrds and Buffalo Springfield.

Also definitely worth mentioning is "3 AM", a song "dedicated to alcoholics everywhere, recovered and otherwise". The band's talent for moving into and out of intense quiet, as on "Kumbayah", resurfaces in even more affecting form here. Pain, despair, hope and simple nighttime are all clearly audible in Murray's voice and the acoustic guitar and keyboard cello part that form most of the song, and when the band comes in the drums echo thickly and the backing vocals float dreamlike in the background. The song seems to me to both recreate the haze it describes, and pierce it, offering salvation without having to say the words, just by shining a light on the subject.

One other interesting note: the liner notes thank, among other people, Rob Gal, who played guitar on the solo album by Anne Richmond Boston, who was in the Swimming Pool Q's, who are next.

### *Flip-Flop, 1989 CD*

For Guadalcanal Diary's final album they provided perfect closure by taking all the lessons they learned along the way, and applying them to a record that is closer in spirit to their first one than the middle two, and at least as good as 2x4.

"Always Saturday", the second song, is clearly my favorite song the band did, and was responsible for rekindling my interest in them after it faded with *Jamboree*. A sparkling, oscillating guitar/synth arpeggio effortlessly propels the verse, and the chorus whirls in and barrels through a harmony-drenched series of hopes ending with "I wish I lived in a shopping mall". In one sense I assume this is sarcastic, as a shopping mall would be a pretty awful place to live (there's a good reason those kids in *The Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* (sp?) chose to hole up in a museum), but there is an element of sincerity there, too, a wish that the offensive artificiality of shopping malls could be fixed not by bring the dirty, disorderly real world into the mall, but by spreading the bright, cheerful, climate-controlled oasis of the malls over the rest of the world. Taken naively, this makes a certain sense, exactly as does the idea of making every day

Saturday, and like those two charming wishes, the song is all "good parts".

"The Likes of You" and "Pretty Is as Pretty Does", two of the four solo compositions here by drummer John Poe (who had previously only been a collaborator), show a new side of the band, just to make me regret their passing all the more. The southern country drawl gets flattened out and rammed through a few more distortion boxes to create a blistering sound that would verge on hard rock if it weren't for Poe's snappy cowbells and triangles.

By way of collecting the band's various impulses, "Whiskey Talk" is a raucous stomp, "Ten Laws" is a slow ballad in the vein of "Kumbayah" and "3 AM", "Fade Out" is a dense, churning epic, similar in mood to 2x4's "Lips of Steel", and "...Vista" is just plain silly (and features a rare lead vocal by bassist Rhett Crowe). This is where I recommend starting your experience of Guadalcanal Diary, if you're interested. It is both their best album and the most representative of their style's span. It touches on their musical similarities to the dB's, REM, the Connells, and the Swimming Pool Q's, but also shows the ways in which their range was wider than any one of those four.

Why Guadalcanal Diary broke up I have no idea, though I rather expect that it was the usual story of frustration at a career that couldn't seem to pull above "underrated".

## **Murray Attaway**

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### *In Thrall, 1993 CD*

After a pretty sizable delay, Murray Attaway emerged from the breakup of Guadalcanal Diary with a solo album. None of the members of his former band are in evidence, but a full complement of studio players are on hand, including Benmont Tench and percussionist Alex Acuna. Tony Berg, who produced Michael Penn's first two albums, produces this one, too. Aimee Mann sings backing vocals on "Under Jets", and Jon Brion, who produced *her* first solo album, plays on almost all of these songs. I don't know which of these many people is responsible for the resurgence of interest in the odd instrument, the chamberlain, but there are some on all three artists' albums. I rather suspect Tony Berg, as Brion doesn't play on Michael Penn's albums but Berg did produce one song for Aimee Mann.

Attaway himself avoids the temptation of trying to become a multi-instrumentalist, and sticks to writing songs, playing guitar and singing. The album's overall feel (as the various influences at work might well lead

you to expect) falls somewhere in between Guadalcanal Diary's southern edge and Penn's more mainstream sound. (Penn has a song called "Evenfall" on his first album, Attaway has one called "The Evensong". Coincidence? Perhaps.) It is a very solid album, but not nearly as immediately striking as Attaway's former band.

Once I stop hoping that this will be more Guadalcanal Diary (I can't escape that sort of expectation with solo albums by ex-leaders of bands whose demise I considered very premature), I appreciate the record a lot more. With Attaway as the sole songwriter it quickly becomes clear that the manic, country/rockabilly edges of Guadalcanal Diary were somebody else's doing, and that Attaway's own strengths are much more in the dramatic, emotional moments. It's also interesting to see how these arrangements come out, as without a fixed band Murray is free to use fewer or more musicians than four. "More" is his answer, and the average number of musicians on each of these songs is eight, with none using fewer than a skeletal six (drums, bass, guitar, guitar, piano, guitar/vocal), and "Under Jets" crediting the presence of drums, bass, guitar, Mellotron, 6-string bass, vocal, guitar, organ, guitar, piano, percussion, chamberlain, Casio, percussion and background vocal. What sort of instruments "Tamboura" and "Iraqiran" are, as appear on some other songs, I have no idea.

For all the people and instruments, though, this does *not* seem like an overwrought album. If anything, it is richly *understated*, the interplay of elements allowing Attaway to create arrangements whose structure is cohesive enough for the song as a unit, not any one part, to be the musical focal point. Lyrically, the album is more introspective and thoughtful than Guadalcanal Diary tended to be, with Attaway's spiritual, almost religious ("No Tears Tonight" contains the line "And we keep on looking for something that we must have lost two thousand years ago"), mood ruling out anything as bizarre as "Watusi Rodeo" or as lighthearted as "Always Saturday". In "Home" Murray sings "There is a memory I carry close to me / Like a trusted friend", and these songs give me the suspicion that there are a lot more than *one* of these memories. He runs the risk, I guess, of seeming pretentious or overbearing, but none of these songs strike me that way.

I *strongly* recommend this album to Guadalcanal Diary fans, even more than vice versa, because regardless of how much you *like* this record (and I find myself liking it more each time I listen to it), hearing it gives you a very cool new inside perspective on the tensions in the old band. Now, if only the other three members would make solo records, things would *really* begin to make sense. And then they could get back

together, and take off their makeup, and make songs with only one bass note! Or am I thinking of somebody else?

## The Swimming Pool Q's

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### *The Swimming Pool Q's, 1984 LP*

Another Georgia band (this one from Atlanta), the Swimming Pool Q's definitely make the same *sort* of music as Guadalcanal Diary or the Connells, but bring their own quirks to it. The most distinctive feature of this, their second album (Trouser Press lists an earlier one that I've never seen, on DB records, the same label as Guadalcanal Diary's first one), is the dual vocals from guitarist Jeff Calder and keyboard player Anne Richmond Boston. Why more pop bands haven't tried to use dual leads is a real mystery to me. Even the ones that do often hedge their bets by using a male singer with a feminine voice (like Paul Kantner) or a female singer with a somewhat masculine voice (like Exene Cervenka), or turning the whole thing into camp, like the B-52's or the Human League. The Swimming Pool Q's avoid all these things. Jeff Calder's nasal drawl isn't stunning, but it is easily good enough to support the band on its own (as it would, eventually), and Anne's voice is fabulous. The combination makes these songs instantly remarkable.

The Swimming Pool Q's show a little of the tension between countrified jokiness and southern-pop grace that drove Guadalcanal Diary, but on this album they steer almost completely clear of the rockabilly rave-up. The smooth, supple music soars along with Calder and Boston's harmonies, evoking the range of emotions from desperation to quiet triumph. "The Bells Ring", the first song, is narrated from the point of view of a woman on a bus, riding away from a failed relationship that still pulls at her, even though she knows that leaving is the right thing to do. The bells that are ringing are in her mind only, drowning out the sounds of the brakes and the road and the engine. "Some New Highway", whose title comes from a Eudora Welty quote the band thoughtfully provides, is an enigmatic tale whose exact significance eludes me. The sound of cars on a new highway, what does it mean, exactly? I think it is supposed to be annoying, a rural complaint that there is nowhere to find peace and quiet and solitude. But I can also hear a sense in which the sound of traffic is the sound of hope and action, people off chasing dreams, and the fact that they are passing the narrator by is what is sad. About the only thing I'm sure of is that sadness is involved somehow.

Every song has some hook like that. The music centers on Calder and Bob Elsey's smooth, melodic guitar playing, with bassist J.E. Garnett and drummer Billy Burton holding up a solid, but not showy, rhythm section. Burton's credits list electronic drums, as well, on almost every song, but I don't hear any percussion that *sounds* synthetic. Acoustic guitar, electric autoharp, electric sitar, electric 12-string and very occasional keyboards (Anne plays them on one song, Ed Stasium on one other) add to the ringing, lush arrangements. "Pleasant" may sound like unenthusiastic praise, but in this case it is not. This album is seamlessly appealing, and listening to it invariably leaves me feeling calmed, focused and refreshed. Very highly recommended.

### ***Blue Tomorrow*, 1986 LP**

The next Swimming Pool Q's album goes in two directions at once, much like Guadalcanal Diary's *Jamboree*. Unlike *Jamboree*, though, I think on this one the experiment's successes outweigh its failures.

On the latter front, this album has two songs that are precisely the sort of southern-boogie caricature that they avoided on the previous one. "She's Lookin' Real Good (When She's Lookin')", and "Big Fat Tractor" (and to a lesser extent "Corruption" and "Laredo Radio") are really appalling, and I find them devoid of charm. Not that there aren't people who will think both songs are great, invigorating rockers, but neither are what I wanted to hear from the Swimming Pool Q's.

The trade-off, though, is that concentrating all that raucous energy in a few songs allows the others on this album to be even more transcendent and upliftingly melodic than before. Electric dulcimer, octave guitar and additional keyboards fill out the band's sound even further, and Anne's voice is better than ever. "Now I'm Talking About Now", "Pretty On the Inside", "More Than One Heaven", "Blue Tomorrow" and "A Dream in Gray" are better than anything on the previous album, which for me is saying something. Mike Howlett's production complements the band's sound, and why none of these songs became huge hits I don't know.

To add further insult, neither this nor the previous album were released on CD, and with the band apparently defunct as I write, it looks unlikely that this unfortunate situation will be righted. So the fact that I can't decide which of these two records to recommend makes little difference. Either are worth the considerable diligence and negligible amount of money required to locate and purchase a copy.

### ***The Firing Squad for God*, 1987 EP**

After *Blue Tomorrow*, Anne Richmond Boston left the band, and the safe bet would have been that that

was the end of them. A&M dropped them, and when they resurfaced back on DB records with this 5-song "EP", my pessimism seemed justified. These songs are terrible, taking the corniness of "Big Fat Tractor" and "She's Lookin' Real Good" to an even uglier extreme. The four b-sides are completely forgettable, and the title track is only slightly less so. The .99 I paid for it was fair, but to call this record dispiriting is an understatement. If the personnel weren't the same, and Anne wasn't credited with the cover design (and pedal steel on "Working in the Nut Plant"), I could easily convince myself that this was some other, unrelated, band that simply appropriated the Qs' clever name.

### ***World War Two Point Five*, 1989 CD**

Rather than vanishing from my life completely, however, the Swimming Pool Q's surprised me by returning two years later with an album that shows that there *is* life after Anne's departure. Produced by Brendan O'Brien, who would also produce Anne's solo album in 1990 (see *The Border*), *World War Two Point Five* accepts the band's new configuration and proceeds unapologetically. Calder shifts his own vocal style to fill some of the spaces that Boston left, Elsey takes over on keyboards, and both Garnett and O'Brien help out on backing vocals. "1943 AD", "I'd Rather Feel This Pain (Than Be Nowhere)", "In the Place of Milk and Honey", "The Common Years" and "More Often Than Never" come the closest to recapturing the grandeur of "The Bells Ring" or "Now I'm Talking About Now". Several of the others, like "You Don't Wanna Grow Up to Be Like That" and "The Lord of Wiggling", are closer in spirit to "The Firing Squad for God" (which is itself included here as a bonus track, as well), but after *Blue Tomorrow* I'm used to this tradeoff.

I don't know that this album is good enough to attract very many *new* fans, but existing Swimming Pool Q's fans should take the trouble to seek a copy out. Although it appears to be out of print now, it was, at least briefly, available on CD, so copies may drift through cut-out bins and used-CD stores for the benefit of the vigilant. If you're new to the band, however, *please* hold out for one of the earlier albums.

## **Webb Wilder**

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### ***Doo Dad*, 1991 CD**

We now move into the "Miscellaneous Southern" section of Boylan Heights, with a few more stray bands who have sonic ties to the dB's/Let's Active/Guadalcanal Diary axis.

This Webb Wilder album I bought because for months I'd been hearing adoring praise of it from Webb Wilder fans on CompuServe's RockNet. *Doo Dad* had shown up on several people's top ten lists for the year, and a major Webb Wilder cult seemed to exist. I figured there must be *something* to this, as most of the people involved seemed to have decent taste otherwise.

It's an okay album, sort of like a less-gimmicky Mojo Nixon, but how this record would lead to a cult-like level of enthusiasm for Webb himself I can't imagine. He sings, but his voice is hardly remarkable. He plays some guitar, but not lead. He doesn't write the songs (in fact, producer R.S. Field wrote most of them, and plays a number of instruments as well).

I guess I'm missing something.

## The Reverbs

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### *The Happy Forest*, 1984 LP

Eric Menck and John Brabeck, who make up the Reverbs, appear to be from Illinois, but they sound like they've been rehearsing next to REM and Let's Active. Thin, reedy voices and chiming acoustic guitars drive slightly-enigmatic songs with undeniable pop charm. "Picture an Eye" is my favorite, but most of these seven songs have a certain appeal. There's neither the murky depth of REM, nor the buoyant catchiness of Let's Active, but listening to this, *Afoot* and *Chronic Town*, it is by no means obvious which of the three bands would go on to become megastars. I don't know of any other Reverbs albums, though, so with hindsight this one seems weaker than it really is.

## Primitons

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### *Primitons*, 1985 EP

In fact, if I had to guess at later success from first albums, this Mitch Easter-produced debut by the Primitons shows more promise than *Afoot*, *Chronic Town* or *The Happy Forest*. Like a southern version of Translator with more personality, singer/bassist/guitarist/organist Brad Dorset, drummer/accordionist Leif Bondarenko and singer/guitarist/organist Mots Roden, with guest vocalist Garri Meighen, make kinetic, thoughtful, richly harmonized pop. Lyricist Stephani Truelove Wright, who doesn't play any instruments, provides intriguing texts like "Picasso's alive in the sand somewhere. / He's reading our lines, he's drawing us there", "You'll never know what to do if Jesus or the atom bomb break

through", and "You say 'Even the ocean doesn't stall on the shore, / Even it can't go on like before'", and the band makes every word count.

Like the Swimming Pool Q's or, even, Knots and Crosses, the Primitons' slow harmonies tend to give their songs a legato grace, and this is an album you'll sway and pulse to, not one for pogoing or slamming, despite the many upbeat rhythmic moments. Even "You'll Never Know", whose verse guitar part sounds very much like Let's Active, switches gears for the chorus, accordion underscoring the singing.

The Primitons evidently made another album and at least one single, but they've so far eluded me. I bet they're good, though.

## Winter Hours

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### *Wait till the Morning*, 1989 CD

For two songs here, Winter Hours had ahold of something magical. "Hyacinth Girl" and "Wait till the Morning" are utterly gorgeous songs, with achingly beautiful vocal harmonies between singer Joseph Marques and bassist Bob Messing, the music following in tow, supporting the vocals without distracting from them. Both songs capture that rare quality that makes me want to hear them while looking out over a sleeping city at four in the morning, the air slightly cool, the anticipation of dawn evident, but no visible sign of dawn yet apparent. These songs are the soundtrack for a few moment of profound awareness and peace.

The other three songs that made up the original 1986 five-song *Wait till the Morning* EP are okay, but don't appeal to me nearly as much. The CD adds the five tracks from the 1985 EP *Churches*, and while the cover of "All Along the Watch Tower" is interesting, otherwise the music sounds too listless for my taste, too much like Wire Train. The few subsequent songs I've heard from Winter Hours have sounded more in character with the eight songs here I'm not crazy about than with the two I adore, and so I've declined to dilute my appreciation of the band's moments of inspiration any further.

## The Connells

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I got hooked on the Connells after hearing a five-second promo sound-bite on a radio ad for a concert here in 1989. I didn't realize it until later, when the memory of the bit of song I heard wouldn't get out of my mind, so I didn't pay close enough attention. As a result, I couldn't decide whether the clip was really as

great as I seemed to remember, or whether I was revising it in my mind. And how much can you tell about a band from a single five-second clip, anyway? And who's to say that sound clip was the Connells', even? It could have been one of the other acts'.

At any rate, the Connells' name stuck in my mind, and one day not long after I broke down and bought *Fun and Games*, just to find out what they really sounded like. I couldn't decide which song I'd heard a piece of, but this was *definitely* the band, and they were definitely amazing. I quickly snapped up the two previous albums, and the fourth one appeared shortly thereafter.

I've placed the Connells at about the center of this chapter, and named it after them, because although there are at least two bands here I like more (Game Theory, of course, and Pop Art), the Connells really define the style this chapter is intended to revolve around. They are the purest of the pure-pop bands, and at their best they make the most seamless, flawless pop melodies I've ever heard. They show some similarities to the southern bands that populate the first half of this chapter (they're from North Carolina, themselves), but the southern element isn't as overt as with many other bands, making them an excellent transition to the non-southern portion of the chapter. They do all this largely without the sort of quirks that distinguish bands like Game Theory, Let's Active or Guadalcanal Diary, and I presume there will be some who find the Connells, for this reason, less remarkable than I find them. If you want to hear what I think is the most selflessly perfect implementation of the modern guitar-rock-pop aesthetic, though, here are four albums of it.

#### ***Darker Days*, 1985 CD**

The first Connells album is their transition out of the alternative mainstream (whatever *that* is). The songs themselves are fully-formed, but the band's sound is not yet as resolved. This is (appropriately enough, given the title) their darkest, edgiest album. The guitars are more clamorous, the drums more frantic (and louder in the mix), the vocals more strained than on the subsequent albums. Producers Dave Adams, Steve Gronback, Rod Dash and Don Dixon all seem to be trying a bit too hard to make the Connells *rock*, which isn't their true forte.

The band's appeal isn't completely eclipsed, by any means. Particularly on the choruses, these songs defy the production and strike at pop purity anyway. "Unspoken Words" and "Darker Days", with ringing acoustic guitars and slightly more-muted drums, are particularly intoxicating. The music, centered on the guitar playing of George Huntley and songwriter Mike

Connell, and Mike's brother, bassist David Connell, and driven by fast drummer Peele Wimberley, swirls around singer Doug MacMillan as if it were emanating from a single, wonderfully-rich instrument. MacMillan hasn't quite found his best voice on this album (nor his best reverb unit), but he sounds enough like Dave Steinhart of Pop Art that I'm hardly going to count that against him.

In a way, the Connells are the American complement to the Housemartins. They play fast pop music, with strong melodies and harmonies, but where the Housemartins' miscellaneous penchants are for social criticism and a sort of whirl-a-gig, maniacal, punk-derived energy, the Connells' are for introspection and a smooth, shimmering melodicism that owes more to folk than punk. Fans of one are definitely recommended to the other, though, with as much confidence as I give any such advice.

#### ***Boylan Heights*, 1987 CD**

The second Connells album, just to firmly connect them with the southern pop scene, is produced by Mitch Easter at his Drive In studio. Although the sound Mitch crafts for this record isn't quite as good for the band as those that later producers find for *Fun and Games* and *One Simple Word*, it demonstrates several critical insights without which the fully-mature Connells sound probably wouldn't have been possible. The first is that the Connells are not out to blow anybody away with sheer force. Without muffling the band's strong rhythm section, Mitch pushes the drums just enough back into the mix that they blend with the music instead of standing out through it.

The second is that Doug MacMillan's voice is far more effective if he eases up on it a bit and it gets less processing. Where on *Darker Days* MacMillan has a emotive, almost stentorian, delivery, which echoes heavily around the music, here his voice begins to sound lighter, closer to the angelic tones that highlight the third and fourth albums, and it is left drier, standing out better in the mix. This changes the effect of the whole arrangement. On *Darker Days* MacMillan was trying to use his delivery to keep up with the band, an understandable impulse probably formed and fostered in rehearsal. Here he lets the production put him on an initial even-footing, from which he can simply sing. This transforms much of the first album's nervous urgency to wistful charm.

Perhaps the best example of the band's progress here is the duo of "Pawns" and "Over There". "Pawns" begins with a single guitar part, soon joined by a light drum shuffle and quiet bass line. MacMillan's singing edges in softly, building towards the chorus, where the band storms in with acoustic

guitars, keyboards and piano. After the chorus the band drops away again, but each time less far, so that each verse is fuller than the last. The oblique lyrics investigate the competitiveness that creeps into relationships, saying "And when I rise / And when you fall / That's the part that weighs me down".

"Pawns" dies away, and "Over There" begins like a fresh start. Rather than using the vocal verse structure to build the musical arrangement, "Over There" sets up the musical cast first, bringing in a trumpet to accompany the deep, rumbling bass, picked acoustic guitar and shimmering synthesizer. When the singing does start, it is with harmony all the way. The instrumental theme, a stirring march-like reveille, bounces from the bass and the keyboards, acting in concert, to the trumpet. The lyrics are against war, but from a personal perspective, not a political one. The singer *understands* "the joy when your boys hit distant soil", understands the visceral appeal of power and glory, and instead of trying to argue the soldier out of it (a fruitless endeavor, since the soldier and the pacifist's *premises* differ), simply declines to participate.

Together, the two songs cover a striking amount of dynamic ground, as well as a spectrum of subjects and instruments, but it is only on close inspection that you discover all of this. The primary impression is holistic, of these two songs as just two more stages of the melodic course along which the whole album runs. The lyrics and arrangements and so forth can only be separated into individual components with effort.

"Choose a Side", in fact, when you read the lyric sheet, offers another perspective on war, claiming that asking "Who won the war?" is itself meaningless, that wars are essentially sideless structures that form around those willing to fight, and that attempts to impose order on the process are foreign to it. The song is sung to an unidentified fighter, saying "When they said to choose a side / It made you want to hide" and "When they said 'Who won the war?' / It made you smile." It is an odd perspective on war, but more empathetic and no less pertinent than any other.

"I Suppose" offers one explanation for why the Connells songs seem more observational than prescriptive. "Oh well, I suppose / I've gone beyond caring for those / Who think like you." By the end of this record, I am a full believer in the Connells' aesthetic, and just as willing to dismiss anybody who isn't similarly entranced.

### *Fun and Games*, 1989 CD

To record their third album, the Connells ventured to Cambridge's Fort Apache, and entrusted themselves to the sure hands of Bostonites producer Gary Smith and engineer Paul Q. Kolderie. To everybody's credit,

*Fun and Games* is yet another improvement. The production matches the band's style fully for the first time, and the confidence this adds to these songs is palpable. The drums blend right into the bass, which eases into the guitars, which merge into Doug MacMillan's singing. The occasional guest instruments merely extend the range of the band, as if it simply occurred to one of the guitars to make a bell sound as well, or MacMillan decided to sing like an organ.

"Something to Say", which begins the album, is an affecting tale of the way ambition comes and goes. It is probably the most cohesive Connells song to date, a creature of perfect proportions stretching and flexing in the glow of some alien sunset. It was #5 on my top ten song list for 1989 (the album was #4 on the album list). "Fun and Games" is less epic, moving from a simple acoustic-guitar accompaniment to a straightforward rock surge. Together they set the tone for the whole album. Other songs rearrange their components, reaching pop nirvana from a series of slightly different angles. "Upside Down", the CD bonus track "Fine Tuning", "Hey Wow", "Ten Pins" and "Saturday Nite (USA)" are all among the band's finest songs.

The clear standout on this album, though, is "Uninspired". Over a slow, quiet background, Doug MacMillan's lyrics sketch the life of a musician who is getting nowhere, but the words could apply just as well to a child, or indeed anybody, who seeks in music the encouragement and support that they don't get from other people. "They tell him he's uninspired, / In some weary absent way. / They tell him he's simply hired here. / Then the sound rolls in / And lifts him up and in / To the place he should've been." The Connells music is exactly the kind that rolls in and lifts you up. It moves in almost effortlessly, proving without any sense of combative insecurity that one of the most effective ways to be unusual is to not *try* to be consciously unusual in any specific way. The Connells' very lack of gimmicks is what, combined with a good deal of practice and persistence, makes them so unique.

This album also has the first substantial body of songs written not by Mike Connell but by guitarist George Huntley, who also takes lead vocals on them. "Sal", "Motel", "Inside My Head" and "Lay Me Down" all have a distinctly different feel than Connell-written songs like "Something to Say" and "Upside Down". And, to be honest, it is the latter's compositions I am usually referring to when I talk about the Connells in general. Huntley's songs are smaller, more personal, less sweeping and jubilant than Mike Connell's. On Connell's the band sounds like a single entity, while on Huntley's songs they sound more like a band backing a singer. (Having seen them in concert, I can report that that's exactly how it seems in person, too. Something to

do, no doubt, with the bond between Mike and David, who *look* like twins.)

That's not to say that the album would be better without them. In fact, the album's pacing and contrasts rely heavily on interspersing Huntley's songs with Connell's, and they are a significant part of why this is a substantially better album than its already-strong predecessor.

### *One Simple Word*, 1990 CD

After *Fun and Games* it was too much to ask that *One Simple Word* be better, or even as good. In bald defiance of aesthetic gravity, though, it continues the enjoyable trend of every Connells album improving magnificently on the previous one.

Some albums, when you listen to them over and over again, begin to resolve into individual songs, like you see smaller and smaller details when peering more closely at an enlarged photograph. This album refuses to do that for me. I've listened to it over and over again, taped it and brought it on long car trips, played it during naps, or at work (or during naps at work), or when nothing but it was going on, and still it is to me a single musical work. I can look at the song titles and recognize that they come from various lyric moments over the course of the album, but even when I try I can't feel this album as a series of separate songs. My top ten song list for 1990 lists "Set the Stage" as #1, and "Stone Cold Yesterday" as #4, but even though that is only the second time I've had two songs from one album on the top ten (the Divinyls' "Back to the Wall" and "Temperamental" were #9 and tied for #10 in 1988), they were there less because I thought of them as isolated songs, but because the 48-minute song this album feels like deserved at least two slots compared with the much shorter songs that filled the rest of that year's chart. The album itself was #1 on my album chart, edging out the first two Beautiful South records at #2 and #3.

I'm somewhat at a loss to *explain why* this album hangs together so well. It isn't a concept album, and the songs don't literally blend into each other, nor do they all sound the same by any means. In fact, this is the most varied Connells album of them all. George Huntley has three songs here, including one that is just him singing and playing piano, but his song "The Joke" could easily be one of Mike's. Mike has some of *his* most adventurous compositions, as well, particularly "Too Gone", with its bristling trumpet, and the slow "Waiting My Turn", which sounds like one of Huntley's. There's even a Doug MacMillan composition, "Another Souvenir", which makes good use of Caroline Lavelle's cello. The presence of keyboard player Robert Lord on six songs (and Lavelle

on two) adds another strong musical element to the group's sound, which wasn't exactly thin to begin with. Despite having some of the band's quietest, calmest moments, the album opens and closes with two of the Connell's strongest rock songs, "Stone Cold Yesterday" and "Take a Bow".

So, as I said, I can't point to any factors in particular that are responsible for the way I experience this album, and every detail I examine would seem to produce the exact opposite effect from the one I feel, but there it is: this is, to me, *the* definitive document of pure pop. I waver between including it on my DID lists, because it is so important to me, and *not* including it, because I've already internalized it so thoroughly that it is now implicit in other records in my mind. Whichever mood I'm in when my ship wrecks, *One Simple Word* will be with me in spirit. At least on a desert island I won't have to explain what the shirt means any more...

## Pop Art

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Pop Art are partially responsible for my having retained as much sanity as I have. Actually, in a sense this whole book is about how I keep my sanity. Pop Art are more specifically responsible than most. The summer after my freshman year of college I spent at home with my parents. They had moved from Texas to New York the same week I left for school, so I knew no one and nothing in their new home. Westchester County, New York is, I realize, hardly cultural exile, but after a year in Cambridge, that's what it felt like. I felt pathetically cut off from the world, lonely on various levels.

The thin thread I clung to (over-dramatically, I'm sure) was Western Connecticut State University's student radio station, WXCI, broadcast from nearby Danbury, CT, and only barely reaching my radio. As with all college stations, WXCI had a chaotic programming schedule, prone to springing six-hour reggae shows on me at the worst possible times. For most of the day, though, it broadcast the blend of alternative rock that has come to epitomize college radio. In my memory that summer has been reduced to just five songs around which I centered myself: Shriekback's "Faded Flowers", Rubber Rodeo's "Heartbreak Highway", Map of the World's "Big Business", Tirez Tirez's "Set the Timer" and most of all, Pop Art's "Mark Came Home".

When the summer finally ended and I returned to civilization, I sought out all of these. Shriekback was easy to find. Rubber Rodeo was a Boston band, so that was easy, too. Nobody seemed to know who Map of the World or Tirez Tirez were, but used record stores

coughed both up after a token hesitation. Pop Art, however, remained a mystery. Not only were their records not available anywhere, but I couldn't find anybody who'd ever *heard* of anybody who'd heard of them.

Many months later, though, *Snap Crackle Pop Art* came out, and I bought the two copies I ever saw in the world. "Mark Came Home" wasn't on it, but that was a minor concern.

Years later, idly flipping through the cutout bin at Tower, I was dumbfounded to find *three* earlier Pop Art albums, for .99 *each*. Since Tower had never admitted to knowing of the band's existence, I can't really believe that they made a good faith effort to sell the things at list price. Not in the mood for quibbling, though, I shelled out my \$2.97+tax, and hurried nervously home, paranoid that the records would turn out to be mislabeled, defective, or merely some strange delusion caused by eating too many meals of only white and beige food.

None of these were the case. Pop Art was already one of my favorite bands just on the basis of *Snap Crackle Pop Art*, which shows up frequently on my DID lists, and with an actual body of work to support my fascination their stake was only more solid.

### ***Pop Art, 1984 EP***

The band's debut EP is a six-song disk produced (as are the other three) by California music-scene notable Ethan James, at Radio Tokyo in Venice, CA. The band consists at this point of Jeff, Dave and Rich Steinhart (brothers, one would guess), playing guitar, vocals/drums and guitar, respectively, and bassist Tony Ortega and drummer Steve LePatner.

The first way it occurs to me to describe the music is Los Lobos without the Hispanic influences. This is not very helpful, I admit. What I mean is that the band writes pop songs with a simple folkish bent to them, using both acoustic and muted electric guitars, and the singing is the musical focal point. It was Dave Steinhart's voice that drew me to the band in the first place, for the good reason that it sounded to me like what my *own* voice sounds like *to me* when I'm singing. The rhythm section provides beats in various places, but you are unlikely to mistake this record's jittery drumming for manic dance thrash. Instead, a bit like Game Theory, the movement of these songs is largely created by Dave Steinhart's narrative vocal delivery, as he bend his singing drastically to fit the lyrics into the space allotted them, often singing straight through the spaces between lines or even verses. This creates a dramatic tension by the simple fact that you never know when he's going to stop singing. The lyrics are a

fascinating blend of insight, wordplay and short-story-like clarity.

"Now you laugh when you see my new girl, / And though she's fat I know that she really does care. / Your skirt's shorter each time I see you, / And though I swore never again, / The attraction's still there. / And all the plans that we made before / Don't mean much now" goes "Sweet & Sour". Dave has a gift, both through the words and the way he structures them, of painting incredibly vivid pictures of domestic strain, hypocrisy, longing, and a host of other such subtler emotions. These songs are the opposite of anthems: quiet, intensely personal and profoundly, powerfully *small*. Yet they move me at least as effectively.

### ***A Perfect Mental Picture, 1985 LP***

My copy of *A Perfect Mental Picture* is signed by all five band members. It was that way when I *bought* it, in the clearance bin, so either I got a lucky one, or so few were made that the band signed them all.

Pop Art songs are concise, so there are 14 of them on this album. They are, on the average, a bit more upbeat and musically varied than the six on the debut EP. Jeff contributes some mandolin, Ethan James plays some keyboards and Kenji Haroutunian some percussion. The production is clearer than the EP's, but still understated. A little reverb fills out the tones of Dave's voice and the acoustic guitars, and the drums aren't quite as brittle and shuffley as on *Pop Art*.

Another couple remarkable things about the way Dave sings. He has a way of drawing out the syllables of words that you don't expect, and although extending syllables is a common rock singer's technique, most singers lose the definition of the rest of the syllable when they do it. Dave manages to enunciate clearly through even the longest note, so words never fall apart. The other thing is that he has a way of holding on to the sounds that form the *spaces* between words, and often uses them to drop or climb the scale, similar to the way guitarists will keep their fingers on the strings as they slide their hand up or down the neck when moving from chord to chord. When he inhales I don't know.

Although the slightly simpler songs on *Pop Art* are stunning in their own way, the expanded aural palette here is also used to good effect. An experiment with double-tracked vocals on "Wanted Man" works well. Tony Ortega's bass burbles restlessly through the song, and its final moment comes with a country-like shout. Some harmony on "Four Long Days" gives an airy cheer to a basically depressing song. Another Pop Art oddity, which comes up at the beginning of "Reduced", the next song, is that they use single-note guitar parts on many songs, but they aren't at all what you'd



usually call guitar solos. For one thing, the notes tend to be played without even a hint of vibrato, and without bent notes or any of the usual conventions of lead-guitar playing. The competence of the guitar playing on the album in general makes it clear that this is an intentional style choice. It is oddly arresting, forcing you to listening the notes.

These songs are again filled with observations that are almost painful in their intensity. "She has a nice way about her, / And with the sun in her hair you'd swear she's a beautiful girl" ("Trapped in a Fire"). "And if I fall, we'll call it love" ("Planting"). "And it's only seven miles from the border to our house, / And I travel every single day" ("Anxious Call").

I still don't know quite what to make of the precise line-drawing of a factory that adorns the cover. A Polaroid photo of the band in front of it appears on the back of the jacket, but I still don't have idea what its relevance is. Maybe they live next door. Or, it could be their day job. A mystery.

### *Long Walk to Nowhere*, 1986 LP

For the last two albums, Steve LePatner departs, leaving the Steinharts and Ortega as the core band. The guests here are drummer Steven Weisburd, Ethan James on keyboards again, Harlan Steinburger on percussion, and backing vocals on one song by Lyn Norton.

*Long Walk to Nowhere* is more forceful than the two preceding records. Weisburd's drumming is a contributing factor, but Dave Steinhart pushes closer to the edges of his control here, every once in a while slipping at the end of a word into a ragged snarl momentarily reminiscent of Johnny Rotten. The electric guitars are louder than before, as well, though there is still very little distortion on them. James' rolling piano on the title track lends a half-western flair, and overall this is a louder and less sparse album. The control learned on the first two albums serves the band well, though, and the fuller arrangements are *earned*, if that makes any sense.

"Mark Came Home" is the first song on the album, and it and "Hands and Triggers" ("Life's a series of hands and triggers") are bracing, edgy songs with driving rhythms and angry singing, bracketing the slower "Really Blind Faith" and "Long Walk to Nowhere". The first side ends (only ten songs on this one) with "Relatives", the band's most unusual track. Strange processing on the drums and percussion, keeping them shadowily in the background, gives the song a mechanical, synthetic sounding rhythm. The guitar is muted, and hides beneath the vocals, and Dave's singing is the one normal element. The

combination, especially in contrast with the other carefully balanced arrangements, is mesmerizing.

The tortured, elegant "If You Float" begins side two. Beginning "Well he's a writer who makes explicit films / As a need to show the other half how, / And when you move in with a loser you think / At least it's shelter for now", it slides into a pained love song from a narrator who can't bring himself to believe that his departed love is happy with her life without him. Accelerating, the album moves into "Rest of You", with the vitriolic opening lines "Well I forgot your face. / For a moment I lost your smile. / If I could forget the rest of you / I'd rest a while." Amidst crashing drums, the Steinharts weave quick, delicate acoustic guitar lines, the combination of which is dazzling.

"Feel Right Now", a song about the relationship between dreams and waking, offers the fascinating details "There was a coat and a case and a little man and I'm not sure what it means." A sad synthetic horn swells and fades like a wave rocking the song. "The Unmentionable" retreats to gentler musical territory, with just vocals and acoustic guitar, but the lyrics aren't a retreat at all, a brutal pastiche of infidelity, prostitution and, I think, kidnapping. Mixed amid vague but sinister-sounding moments is the great line "Big money's still the staff of life, and here we are understaffed again." The sinuous, rousing refrains of "We're Going" end the album on a high.

If I hadn't listened to *Snap Crackle Pop Art* a million times before finally finding this one, I would have thought this was a great band's defining album.

### *Snap Crackle Pop Art*, 1987 LP

I would have been wrong. *Snap Crackle Pop Art* is a masterpiece, a brilliant 16-song album that brings all the elements of the first three albums into amazingly poised maturity. The basic cast is the same as on *Long Walk to Nowhere*, with additional drums from Craig Aaronson and Dave Steinhart, keyboards from both Lyn Norton and Ethan James, and backing vocals by Rich Andrews. Every element is in sync. Dave Steinhart's voice has gained range and power without losing any of its distinguishing characteristics. The band is tight and supple, and the widespread but unobtrusive keyboards are invariably perfect. The music is by turns poignant, uplifting, buoyant, despairing and unflappable. The production is unblemished, the performances inextricably interwoven, the band *one*. This is an album worth keeping a turntable for all by itself, and if you ever hear it and don't think it's wonderful, I don't want to know about it.

The song that defines Pop Art for me is here, and it is one that literally changed the way I think about

song lyrics. That's a pretty preposterous thing to say, and so though I'm sure you won't feel the same way I do while just reading it, here it is, © 1987 Stonegarden Music/BMI, straight from the lyric sheet:

### Roommates

I almost blew my cover that night. There we were having dinner by candlelight. And with the wine I started drowning in your eyes. Just as I was about to ask you home, I realize I live in the room you own. You escaped out the back and went to sleep alone. You said so long, good-bye. I'm going to walk away from a big mistake tonight. I felt it was time to move when I took out an ad and rented the room. You took it harder than I thought you would. There was nothing else I felt I could do, living there and feeling like I felt for you. Stronger men might have stayed to see it through, but I said so long, good-bye. I'm going to walk away from a big mistake tonight. We were living on the very top floor and I was falling like a leaf. Like leaving being left out in the pouring rain, I had to hide beneath something till the sun would come out again. I heard it was a nice affair and if I would have been here, I would have been there, and I've been thinking about it and it sort of drives me wild. I've had a series of dreams about a bride and groom, and a TV in a livingroom and a vegetable garden and I think one of them might have been you. So I said...

Of course, it's a completely different experience on paper than on record, but there it is. What hit me clearly for the first time as I listened to this song my sophomore year in college, while taking my first fiction-writing class, was that writing song lyrics doesn't have to be a fundamentally different art form from writing stories.

In high school I'd written reams of poems and song lyrics which were, almost without exception, terrible. They were endearing, if you find over-written, existential teen-nihilism endearing, which most people don't. They were rife with mallet-handed allegory, overburdened with war metaphors, sated with indignant uniformed fury, and as my friend Dave Rose once pointed out, they often didn't even rhyme. Nevertheless, I was the literary magazine editor, so they got published with alarming consistency. I'm

tempted to include one here to prove my point, but that would make a book reviewer's job just *too* easy.

Anyway, in college I ditched poetry and lyric-writing for the most part, and switched to short stories (I omit the embarrassing autobiographical novel I wrote during the summer of exile, since the kindest things that could be said about it were that it didn't "hang together", and that it was less than 200 pages). I managed at least one really good story (somewhere I've still got the rejection note from the Atlantic, with the handwritten note "We really liked this one" on it), one unbelievably long and impenetrable story in which I narrated an entire miniature-golf game hole by hole (*that* one got sent to Gordon Lish, who hated it in a specific-enough way that I could tell he at least *read* some of it, so I win), and some of varying quality in between.

I tended to over-think stories, and found the process of writing them somewhat inexplicably painful, always liking the experience of having a completed story much more than the process of generating it (sort of like the reverse of this book, now that I mention it). But the difference between these stories and the lyrics I wrote in high school did make an impression on me. Story writing involved characters and plot and telling details and emotional conflict and suspense and import and original twists and drama and comedy and sadness and generally lasted for more than a page. Lyric writing, on the other hand, was a science of mixing just the right combination of self-conscious literary allusion, pomp, clichéd rhetoric and metaphor together in a collage whose most redeeming feature, brevity, could easily be overcome in performance.

"Roommates" changed my mind, and made me realize that songs could have characters and plot and original twists and conflict and sadness and all of those things, for all the same reasons you put them into stories. Songs can *be* stories! This may seem both reasonably obvious and plenty prevalent, so that I should have noticed it a long time before 1987, and I'm sure I did subconsciously, but "Roommates" was the first time I put all the necessary insights about both listening *and* writing together, and *realized* I realized.

The album is full of brilliant lyrics. Some of my favorite lines: "I thought you saw something in me but I tend to overestimate" ("Under Your Glove"). "I've written my apology, I'll send it by parade" ("Conditional Thing"). "And this time when you leave here, make sure you close the door. And when you say good-bye, I'll pretend I heard it once before." ("Once Before") "We wait at least a lifetime for these things to start and another lifetime till they end." ("Light Blue Pictures" - shades of "Paradise By the Dashboard Light"'s "and now I'm praying for the end of time to hurry up and arrive") "I miss the little things about

her now. I missed everything I bitched about. And no one single night recalls her as I hoped it might." ("On Her Line") "And he says the best I ever felt was in your arms and the worst I ever felt was in your arms and I can't spend all my life with you" ("Laying Cable"). And how many other songs do you know about the mixture of boredom and the need to belong that dominates a factory worker's life, or about waning fame that include the ex-star's mother's harping criticisms? And if that's not enough, there's "Strumpupphållningsapparat".

That factory from *A Perfect Mental Picture* shows up again on the lyric sheet to this album. The best I can do is relate it to "Half Days", about a packing-plant worker. It doesn't look like a "packing plant" to me, but what the hell do I know?

## various

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### *The Best of The Radio Tokyo Tapes, 1987 CD*

I bought this compilation because it has, as far as I'm aware, the only Pop Art song available on CD, "In My Hands", and because that song appears only here. There are no dates given, but the song sounds like about *A Perfect Mental Picture* or *Long Walk to Nowhere* era. It's excellent, but much too brief to fully understand Pop Art by.

The compilation as a whole is gleefully uneven. There is everything from Alisa's dramatic "Silent Scream" to Phranc's hilarious "My Favorite Women Newscasters", to a :36 magazine commercial done by the Bangles in their previous incarnation as the Bangs, and a cheerful song called "I Hate Lying to Mom", by Wednesday Week. My favorite song, besides the Pop Art one, is Cindy Lee Berryhill's twangy, maniacal "Headin' for the Border Line". As an introduction to bands you would otherwise probably not be exposed to (I'd heard the Minutemen, the Long Ryders, the Three O'Clock, the Bangles, Rain Parade and Pop Art, but none of the other 14), though, it's an excellent investment.

Not that I mean to imply that you should ever sell it.

## David Steinhart

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### *Everything She Says, 1992 CD*

In the pantheon of Harvard Square used record stores, tiny Mystery Train is usually my vote for the least interesting. Its selection is a fraction of Second

Coming's, Looney Tunes' or In Your Ear's, and it seems to have no particular forte, unless proximity to Oona's counts. Nonetheless, once every year or so I run across something there that I never expected to find. All my Map of the World records came from there, as well as a Tirez Tirez single and the double-12" of Big Country's "Hold the Heart".

One day, I was flipping through their "S" section, and passed idly over a CD by David Steinhart. "Hey," I said, with my characteristically-quick uptake, "wasn't that the last name of those guys in Pop Art, too?" I levered it out of the bin to take a look at what this other Steinhart was up to, and it wasn't until I saw the Stonegarden insignia that my pulse jumped into double-time. I flipped it open to check the credits, and when I saw two more Steinharts and Ethan James on the list (and Lyn Norton on cover design) I knew it was the same guy.

I hurried home, ecstatic, put the CD on, settled in for another Pop Art record, and was quickly disappointed, as was inevitable. There is a reason, generally, why solo albums are solo albums, after all, and it usually is that the music is not exactly like the kind the band used to make.

The transition from Pop Art to Steinhart's solo work is actually pretty similar to that from Guadalcanal Diary to Murray Attaway's album *In Thrall*. Steinhart leaves behind the simplicity of Pop Art's band arrangements, and with it many of the quirks that identified Pop Art's sound. He plays guitar, drums and percussion himself, Ethan James contributes guitars, hurdi gurdi and harmonium, and others provide piano, organ, keyboards, bass, more drums and guitars, saxophones and clarinet. Dave's songs are both more versatile and less focused than Pop Art's. At times he swings into blues ("Untouchable"), honky-tonk piano jive ("Garage Sale of Love") and straight piano-schmaltz ("Nathan Lee"), none of which appeal that much to me, but elsewhere on the record his vocal style and simpler delivery take over, and I hear a new version of the old charm.

His gift for great lines remains: "She said she needed time to find herself, / She said this house, it feels like a tomb, / And then I said if you ever found yourself / You'd run screaming from the room" ("Almost Lost Her"). "She says I get involved / But usually leave my socks on" ("Everything She Says"). "One more rude waitress and I swear I'll kill them all" ("Dawn on Me"). His singing is more conventional here, but it's clear that his phrasing is at least partly ingrained, and it comes through often enough to keep me excited. Even taken on its own terms, this album isn't as impressive to me as any of the Pop Art albums, but it's great news that David Steinhart is still there somewhere, writing songs. There's hope.

## Tommy Keene

Tommy Keene is also dead-center in my definition of pure pop; he and Jules Shear are clearly the two preeminent solo pop songwriters in my mind. Where Shear has largely conducted his career behind the scenes, writing songs that other artists ride onto the charts, and been pretty successful at it, Keene performs his material himself, and for reasons I really can't fathom, has mostly labored in commercial obscurity.

### *Back Again (Try...), 1984 12"*

The earliest Tommy Keene record I have is this four-track single/EP on Dolphin Records. The jacket claims that "Back Again (Try...)" is "From the forthcoming LP *Songs from the Film*". The fact that *Songs from the Film* wouldn't appear for two years, and when it did it was on a different label and didn't contain "Back Again (Try...)", leads me to believe that some strange label unpleasantness went on behind the scenes.

The songs here are anything but unpleasant, though. "Back Again (Try...)" itself is a smooth, catchy pop song with chirpy backing vocals, lithe guitars and solid rhythm. "Safe in the Light", the other original composition, is a little more sedate, but just as appealing. The last two songs are covers of Brian Ferry's "All I Want Is You" and the Rolling Stones' "When the Whip Comes Down", recorded live at the Rat here in Boston (a frightening prospect, if you've ever been there). They are much rougher than the two studio originals, both in recording and performance, and largely tangential to Keene's appeal and career, but they're still fun.

Don Dixon and T-Bone Burnett produced "Back Again (Try...)", and Don and Steve Gronback produced "Safe in the Light" (and Dolphin Records are based in North Carolina), but Keene doesn't display much in the way of overt southernisms. The strangest detail on this album for me is that the bass player is Ted Niceley. Now, either there are two Ted Niceleys in the D.C.-area music scene, which is possible, or else he is the same person who co-produces Fugazi records. If this is true, Ted is a versatile man indeed, as Fugazi's stark assaultiveness is almost 180 degrees removed from Tommy Keene's polished pop charm.

### *Songs from the Film, 1986 LP*

*Songs from the Film* eventually surfaces in 1986 on Geffen, with the same band but a different producer, Geoff Emerick, who I know from Big Country's *Restless Natives* soundtrack. This album is, in my opinion, Keene's finest moment. Part of that, I admit, is that he's

only managed two full albums in the 8 years I've known of him, and I like this one better than the other, but even if the singles and EPs had been whole albums, this one would probably still stand above the others. The twelve songs here are superbly crafted, aching melancholic and irrepressibly melodic. The production is thick but appropriate. The bass and drums thump enthusiastically, while Keene and Billy Connelly's acoustic and electric guitars weave around Keene's plaintive voice, which sounds something like Michael Quercio on half-speed (or more accurately, Quercio sounds like Keene sped up, since voicewise Keene is the "normal" one of the pair). Keyboards fill in the gaps, but don't get in the way.

"Places That Are Gone", "In Our Lives", "Paper Words and Lies" and "The Story Ends" are all clear stand-out songs, but the album's high point for me is the masterful "My Mother Looked Like Marilyn Monroe". The desperate sadness in Keene's voice when he sings "I swear that it's true" is practically palpable, as he insists on something that it feels like he knows isn't true but wishes to believe anyway, trying to construct something noble or notable in his mind to make his past a less-painful memory, or perhaps to give the pain a grander-sounding justification than the more-humdrum truth. I see this as the sort of thing you say, knowing full well that the world's reaction will be "No she didn't", just to expose the reflexive meaninglessly small-minded negativism that that reaction embodies. "My Mother Looked Like Marilyn Monroe" is a plea for grace and transcendence in a graceless, pedestrian world.

Keene rounds out the album with a cover of Lou Reed's "Kill Your Sons", which fits in so well with the rest of the album that I didn't realize it was a cover until I studied the credits.

*Songs from the Film* is a pretty ambitious title for an album that doesn't, in fact, have anything to do with a movie. It implies an ability to transport you, for a few minutes at least, into another world. This album lives up to the title.

### *Run Now, 1986 EP*

The six-song EP *Run Now*, which came out later in 1986, is I think the record that *Songs from the Film* was originally supposed to be. Four of the six songs are 1984 tracks produced by T-Bone Burnett and Don Dixon, including "Back Again". The other two are a 1986 Bob Clearmountain production of the title track, and a live version of "Kill Your Sons".

Keene's songwriting has been unwaveringly marvelous throughout his career, so whether these songs are old or new makes little difference from that perspective. Little differences in production, however,

have big effects on the mood of his songs. Emerick applied a pretty thick layer of studio gloss on *Songs from the Film* that I thought was nearly perfect. Burnett and Dixon are somewhat more restrained, and those songs are thus just as catchy but not quite as moving to me as the ones on *Songs from the Film*. Clearmountain's production of "Run Now" is even less obtrusive, and it makes for a very accessible song that, on the other hand, doesn't make a very strong impression on me.

### ***Based on Happy Times, 1989 LP***

For all I know, external factors are entirely responsible for the long gaps between Tommy Keene records, but it doesn't *seem* like he is a very prolific songwriter. That isn't a criticism, just an observation. Anyway, three years after the first two Geffen releases, he finally makes another album. This one ditches the old band, and Keene and co-producers Joe Hardy and John Hampton play almost all the instruments. Peter Buck guests on a couple tracks, and Jules Shear both sings on a couple and provides lyrics and music co-writing for a couple.

I find this album pretty disappointing. There's nothing wrong with the songs; every song Keene writes seems to be of the exact same high quality. The arrangements and production, however, seem to try too hard to make the music darker and more forceful than Keene's previous records. This proves unwise, as Keene's voice doesn't lend itself to either quality, and as a result he comes out sounding limp and lost, undermining the musical mood that should have been *supporting him* to begin with. The two songs co-written with Shear don't help matters at all, because Keene is even more out of touch singing someone else's words. This album's cover, of the Beach Boys "Our Car Club", is, well, what's the opposite of inspired?

### ***Sleeping on a Roller Coaster, 1992 CD5***

Having failed to mold him into a type of superstar he wasn't, Geffen dropped Keene. What he did with 1990 and 1991 I have no idea, but this 1992 five-song CD (which I didn't actually locate a copy of until 1993) finds him switched to Matador Records, and to, interestingly enough, the Connells' management company (which I didn't notice until *after* putting the two so near each other in this book). He has a new band, and co-produces this record himself with Steve Carr. I like to think that the fact that Keene has a hand in the production of this one is why these five songs sound so great. If there were five more of this quality here, *Sleeping on a Roller Coaster* might displace *Songs from the Film* as my favorite Tommy Keene record. "Love is a Dangerous Thing", "Driving Into the Sun", "Alive" and "Waiting to Fly" are easily as good as

"Places that Are Gone" or "Paper Words and Lies". None of these has that tiny additional spark necessary to lift it above "My Mother Looked Like Marilyn Monroe", but that's hardly a cruel criticism coming from me.

Sadly, Matador has essentially no promotional muscle, and the only reason I knew to look for this disc at all was a one-line mention in Tower's *Pulse* magazine that said Keene had signed to Matador. Tower, in fact, pleads ignorance of the disc. The slimline jewel-case it comes in can't help, either, as it relegates the disc to the CD-single niche, where even people who know to look for it are liable to miss it.

Mind you, if Tommy Keene keeps writing songs I'm willing personally to spend the effort to track them down, but it would be nice, for *his* sake, to see him get some commercial respect more in proportion to his singular talent.

## **Dumptruck**

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### ***For the Country, 1987 CD***

Dumptruck is another big-local-name, low-key Boston band. I missed their heyday (this is their third album), so to me they forever live in the shadow of O-Positive, but to the world the two bands are contemporaries. Stylistically, I find them quite similar. Both take essentially tuneful guitar music, and render it in a murky, lethargic way that for me completely saps it of almost all vitality and appeal.

Dumptruck makes me think of the dB's on valium. There are the seeds of really catchy pop songs lurking in the depths of this album, like the Celtic guitar line in "Carefree", and the cyclic chorus of "Going Nowhere", but it all gets submerged in a sort of body-temperature, sensory-deprivation-tank viscous wash that utterly nullifies drummer Shawn Devlin's attempts to move the music along. Songs sometimes drift to a near stop, and Kevin Salem and Seth Tiven's indifferent voices do little to shore them up. Like O-Positive, Dumptruck clearly have some notion of how to play their instruments, and are well-regarded locally, but also like O-Positive, they opt for a studied languor that leaves me clammy, restless and unsatisfied. Perhaps your trip will seem more colorful.

## Jules Shear

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### *Unplug This, 1991 CD*

Jules Shear, as a songwriter, crops up in a number of places in my collection, writing songs for Cyndi Lauper and the Bangles and with Tommy Keene and 'til tuesday, for starters. This bonus CD, included with early copies of *The Great Puzzle*, and intended as a response to his tenure as the original host of *MTV Unplugged*, back when it was interesting, includes his acoustic renditions of "All Through the Night" and "If She Knew What She Wants", and I bought the album mainly to get this disc.

Shear's voice is quite nasal, and his guitar accompaniments are unremarkable in their own right, but this is a fascinating set of songs. His versions of the two songs I knew are very cool to hear, and the acoustic versions of "Jewel in a Cobweb" and "The Sad Sound of the Wind", both from *The Great Puzzle*, are fascinating to compare to the album versions. The implicit message of the record, that *this* is what *MTV Unplugged* was supposed to be like, not Rod Stewart and a thirty-piece band, is plain, and I'll take this over Mariah Carey, Eric Clapton, Tesla or the slew of other recent *Unplugged*-spawn any day.

### *The Great Puzzle, 1992 CD*

It's an odd transition from *Unplug This* to *The Great Puzzle* for me. Jules' voice is the same, but here it is surrounded with musicians (the credits list four *other* guitar players!) and studio production. This will probably sound cruel, but I think this album demonstrates that Shear is better off writing for other artists.

You see, these are great songs, but not for a single moment do I feel that Shear has a coherent performance style of his own. The arrangements here feel to me like for each song Shear thought to himself, "Well, who might do this song?", and then tried to make his version sound sort of like theirs would have. The results are usually pleasant, but an album of them badly lacks direction. Ironically, the fact that Shear has now released these songs himself makes it *less* likely that they'll get remade by other artists, so even though I don't consider this the ideal setting for these songs, the album becomes important simply because it's the only place to find them! "The Trap Door", "We Were Only Making Love", "The Sad Sound of the Wind", "Dreams Dissolve in Tears" and "Bark" are all clear classics, and until somebody gives them the performances they deserve, they will keep this album firmly on my Recommended list.

## 'til tuesday

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### *Voices Carry, 1985 CD*

In a rare and welcome example of the good guys winning one, Boston's 'til tuesday had a huge hit with the bewitching and harrowing title track from this, their first album. The video for the song was, no doubt, a significant factor in this success. Coming at a time when almost all the strong female personalities in rock were essentially glorified sex-symbols (and, come to think of it, when hasn't this been the case?), singer/bassist Aimee Mann stood out immediately. With her short, spiky blond hair, long, braided tail, black clothes and the fact that she not only played a bass but actually *carried* it, along with the domestic violence subject matter of "Voices Carry", chillingly well-rendered in the video, Aimee became instantly recognizable, and the rest of the band only had to tag along.

The band's debut album is packed with great songs. Both "Love in a Vacuum" and "Looking Over My Shoulder" got some airplay, and the ringing "No More Crying", "Winning the War" and "Sleep" are at least as good. If you buy the album for "Voices Carry", I think you'll be very pleased. Mann's high, waifish voice is fragile but very compelling, and the band accompanies her singing with lithe and eminently hummable music. She and drummer Michael Hausman provide the snappy rhythms, and guitarist Robert Holmes and synthesist Joey Pesce weave gauzy hooks around her. The result is a unique vulnerability and honesty very much unlike both Aimee's female musical peers like Cyndi Lauper, Dale Bozzio and Terri Nunn, and the much rawer punk-edged rest of the Boston music scene. The CD adds one track "Are You Serious?", which isn't on the LP; it's good, but not great.

I'd feel obliged to say more about this excellent album, but since "Voices Carry" is probably the biggest hit in this entire chapter, save only REM, you either have your own opinion about it already, or you probably skipped the chapter.

### *Welcome Home, 1986 CD*

The same lineup returns for 'til tuesday's second album, but where the first album credited words to Aimee and all music to the band, this one increasingly reflects the fact that Aimee is more central to the band than just being its singer. Three of these songs' music are credited to the band, and one song to keyboardist Joey Pesce, but the other six are all Aimee's.

Just about every individual element of the band is improved on this album. Aimee's voice has deepened enough that she can cover a full dynamic range without having to switch in and out of falsetto. The band's playing is as close to pop perfection as all the money in the world could buy you in LA studio players, but still mostly avoids the bland competence that is usually the downside of session bands.

The title of the album is drawn from the lyrics of the second song, "Coming Up Close", which as you might have noticed in the soundtrack to this chapter, I consider one of the greatest pop songs ever. A bittersweet song about love just beyond the singer's grasp, it is one of the most achingly beautiful things I've ever heard, and was for most of college the song I played first whenever I was reunited with my record collection after a long absence (i.e., more than a day).

This album is also more varied stylistically than *Voices Carry*. On the first record Joey Pesce's keyboards stuck mostly to synth sounds, but here he branches out to horns, strings, bells and other less-synthetic timbres, as well as playing actual pianos. This makes the band's overall sound move away from New Wave towards the mainstream, and while this record sounds more confident and accomplished than the previous one, I do miss the quirkier, more dated sound of *Voices Carry*. A bit of the band's edge has been smoothed away, and even as I recognize that the band is better for it, I realize that the small awkwardnesses they occasionally displayed on their earlier songs made a big difference in how much I liked them.

### *Everything's Different Now*, 1988 CD

Two years later, 'til tuesday is now firmly Aimee Mann's show. Hausman and Holmes are still around, and Hausman co-wrote two of these songs, but Pesce is gone, and Aimee finds other sources for the music, including picking up an acoustic guitar herself. Remnants of her well-publicized (heck, I heard about it), but ill-fated, romance with Jules Shear provide some material both directly and indirectly. The title track was written by Shear and Matthew Sweet, and "(Believed You Were) Lucky" was co-written by Aimee and Jules. "'J' for Jules" is *about* Shear. Elvis Costello, thinly disguised by his real name (Declan MacManus), co-wrote "The Other End (of the Telescope)" and sings on it, and I don't know who Kit Hain is, but he/she assists with "Crash and Burn" and "Rip in Heaven". Various other players appear, but the only person on the cover, and the only presence that matters here, is Aimee herself.

The conventional wisdom about this album, which didn't do very well commercially, seems to have become that the emotional subject of Aimee and Jules'

romance was just too affecting for most people—that Aimee baring her soul this way drove squeamish consumers screaming away from the "T" section of their local record stores, and frightened unstable DJs into not playing her songs. Now, as much as I *hate* to contradict other reviewers, this theory is completely stupid. First of all, for the average music fan a song's lyrics are like the ingredients list on a cereal box; good reading for idle moments when you would otherwise have to make intelligent conversation, but *not* a major determining factor in cereal purchases.

Secondly, unless you knew because some reviewer explained it to you, you'd be hard pressed to deduce the romantic plot they claim pervades this album by inspection. Sure, several of these songs are about broken relationships, but post-WWII Western culture has produced about as many songs about broken relationships as it has cheeseburgers. The only real clues are the title "'J' for Jules" and Jules' presence in the songwriting credits, and finding *those* requires reading the liner's small print, which I feel safe in claiming most people do *not* do, and most especially not *before deciding to buy* an album.

Having conclusively dismissed this theory, I put forth the decidedly less-glamorous hypothesis that, like everything else in the music business, the commercial downfall of 'til tuesday was for no particularly good reason at all. They had their moment, picked up some devoted fans and lots of casual ones, and gradually lost most of the latter and some of the former, just as a million bands before them have, and a million after them will.

Which is a shame, because *Everything's Different Now* is easily the best of the band's three albums. *Welcome Home* felt too much like the band was mainly trying not to blow the opportunity, hinted at by *Voice Carry*'s success, to become fabulously wealthy rock megastars. When this attempt resulted in an album that sold fewer copies than the first one, Aimee was free to say "Screw *that*, I'll make music the way *I* want to." This album then aspires to neither the New Wave spunk of *Voices Carry*, nor the smooth commercial sheen of *Welcome Home*. In fact, it is utterly devoid of gimmicks, and fits into no particular sub-market niche (and *that's* probably part of why it wasn't a huge hit). It's an album of great songs by a great pop songwriter with a beautiful voice and a nice knack for lyrics and a still-improving ear for balanced arrangements and, above all, for melodies that cling tenaciously to the part of your mind reserved for such things.

## Aimee Mann

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### *Whatever*, 1993 CD

By 1993, this should have been about the sixth or seventh 'til tuesday album, the fifth with the band basically a stage name for Aimee. After the artistic re-centering of *Everything's Different Now* should have come two or three albums of steadily improving songs, more and more celebrity-studded, firmly establishing Aimee as a first-class songwriter, and the 'til tuesday albums as consistently satisfying and successful. Along about 1991 or 1992 there would have been a best-of, and in the wake of it the usual rumors would have circulated that Aimee was thinking about retiring, or some such thing, and there would have been grumbles that stardom was starting to get to her, and that she was starting to run out of inspiration, becoming reliant on her famous co-writers.

Then, in 1993, *Whatever* would have been the triumphant, back-to-basics record that would muzzle the niggling naysayers, conclusively reestablish Aimee's artistic street-credibility, and reaffirm that she doesn't need help from anybody to write stunning songs.

Well, nightmarish legal squabbles with 'til tuesday's label, Epic, erased the middle chapters of this story. *Everything's Different Now* was the last 'til tuesday album, but Aimee found herself lost in a maze of contractual clauses that prevented her from releasing anything *not* on Epic, but gave them the right not to put out her albums if they didn't want to. Finally, after five years of that, poison got the lawyers, or the contracts ran out, or Congress intervened or something, and Imago won the very enviable privilege of releasing her first official solo album.

Despite the intervening parts of the story never happening, *Whatever* is exactly what it should have been. Instead of coming back from success-fed complacency, she was coming back from five years of exile. Instead of needing to silence critics who thought she had lost her edge, she had to reawaken critics who had begun to forget about her. *Whatever* does all that. In ways it picks up where *Everything's Different Now* left off, and in ways it pretends that 'til tuesday never happened.

Aimee's voice sounds better than ever, and the fact that it is her name on the cover, not a band's, merely acknowledges how much she has matured as a *presence*. She still plays bass on a few of these songs, but more often plays acoustic guitar, as befits her solo status. Producer Jon Brion, who also figures prominently on Murray Attaway's first solo album (which Aimee also appears on), provides most of the rest of the instruments

(including chamberlain, Mellotron, optigan, glockenspiel, vibraphone, harmonium, pump organ, kazoo, Hammond organ, *Indian* harmonium (for when your regular harmonium is just too boring!), bass harmonica, "tambourine piano", cottage organ, B-3, celeste, "tack piano", Wurlitzer, piccolo, bottles, turtle guitar, toy piano, marimba and pipes—no wonder the Cavedogs thanked Brion "for the toys" on *Soul Martini*), with additional help coming from Michael Hausman and Jim Keltner, Roger McGuin, Buddy Judge and assorted associates. Jules Shear and Marty Wilson-Piper help with the writing of "Could've Been Anyone", just to show that there are no hard feelings.

And what all these pieces combine to produce is a record that is more direct, more versatile, harder, louder, quieter, uglier, prettier, smarter, simpler and more ambitious than any of 'til tuesday's records (though not all of these at once). "I Should've Known", the first song, opens with a few seconds of chaos, sounds drifting in without knowing quite what to do with themselves, drums trying to start and then hesitating, guitar starting to come in too early. Suddenly everything snaps into place, and Aimee and her friends slam into the powerful first single. "I don't know what else you hear", she sings, "but it's not me weeping." Providing her own "ahh-dot-dot-dot" harmonies, she surges confidently through the song, announcing nothing more clearly than "I'm back! Did you miss me?" (Yes!)

"Fifty Years After the Fair" settles into a steady groove, the album getting down to business with no further ado. "4th of July" is a sad, slow acoustic ballad highlighted by the eerie line "and she's got the river down which I sold her", a grammatical moment in rock history worthy of Morrissey's "who will swallow whom".

"Could've Been Anyone" kicks back into gear, as if the "ve"s signify "loud pop-rock song". "Put Me On Top" is of similar tempo, but its querulous Mellotrons give it a strange tang. "Stupid Thing" starts out quietly, like "4th of July", gradually building and plugging in not entirely unlike Dire Straits, but at the moment when Knopfler would probably have broken out in a soaring 8-minute guitar solo, this song just steps back, letting Aimee's quite voice bring it back to earth.

The rest of the album follows a similar course. There are forceful rock songs, airy pop songs, folk songs that suddenly make me think that Aimee could be around making music for a *long* time, moments of pain, glory, fun, anger and hope. Even for a dedicated 'til tuesday fan like me, already favorably disposed, this album is breathtaking.



### *I Should've Known* (US), 1993 CD5

The single of “I Should’ve Known” includes two extra tracks. “Take It Back” is an enjoyable upbeat pop song by Aimee and Jon that would have fit in just fine on *Whatever*, but without which the album is hardly fatally flawed. “Baby Blue” isn’t a Mann tune, and may be a cover of an old Dusty Springfield hit, though I’m just guessing at that. Either way, it’s pretty cool, and it shows that Aimee can do quite well with other people’s own material, which isn’t necessarily obvious from her albums, where she is almost always at least a collaborator. Neither of these songs are earthshaking, but they complement the album very well, and the fact that this is, for once, a *domestic* CD-single with extra tracks, makes it a pretty easy decision to recommend it to anybody who likes the album.

## Young Snakes

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### *Bark Along with the Young Snakes*, 1982 EP

Before Aimee was in ‘til tuesday, she was in this obscure Boston trio. I bought this EP *way* long after the fact (1994, to be exact), just because I was so amazed to actually come across a copy. It’s of some historical interest to Aimee Mann fans, simply because she’s here singing, and it’s three years before “Voices Carry”, but I can’t say that there’s too much else to recommend it. She’s trying *much* too hard here, trying to be a cross between Exene Cervenka and an opera diva, and the music is of the painful, discordant, semi-intentionally-minimal/semi-simply-bad sort that Boston’s version of early New Wave produced too much of. No matter how popular Aimee gets, don’t expect this record to be reissued.

The oddest coincidence relating *me* to this record, other than that I have it, is that Young Snakes guitarist Doug Vargas ended up working at ZDI with me, and it was only through a comment of his, mere days before I found this copy, that I even knew Aimee was in a band before ‘til tuesday.

## Del Amitri

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When I first heard of Del Amitri, I entangled them in my mind with the Del Lords and the Del Fuegos, neither of whom I like. And to further confuse things, I then heard they were from Scotland, which would have given them a few points right away, except that they didn’t sound even slightly Scottish. Unable to make up my mind what to do about this situation, I filed “Stone

Cold Sober” in my mind as “promising song by questionable band”, and moved on.

For reasons that are now lost to time, the song resurfaced in my mind just as I was passing the D section some time in 1991, and I bought the album on impulse, definitely half-expecting to dislike it. It is now firmly ensconced on my DID list, and Del Amitri are one of my favorite bands.

### *Del Amitri*, 1985 CD

That said, the first Del Amitri album might as well be by somebody else. It’s a jangly, jittery, folky record, like a thinner, more upbeat *Winter Hours*. I find it interesting for historical reasons, but it has nothing at all to do with why I like the band.

### *Waking Hours*, 1989 CD

The four years before the second Del Amitri album were sufficient time to completely reconceptualize the band. Although three of the four members are the same, this incarnation sounds nothing like the band that made *Del Amitri*. If you didn’t know that they were from Glasgow, you’d never ever guess; they sound more thoroughly American than any American band I can think of, because most American bands sound like they come from somewhere *in* the US (which they probably do), while Del Amitri sounds like they come somehow from the country at large. Howling electric guitars, whirling organs, harmonica, picked and bottleneck acoustic guitars, rolling piano and Justin Currie’s bluesy voice seem to spring simultaneously from American blues, bluegrass, folk and rock, while the smooth bass and drums are what the best LA session players are hired to produce but seldom actually manage. And these elements all converge on immaculate melodies. Musically, the Connells, Pop Art, Tommy Keene and Del Amitri are very much of a set, artists whose songs are so perfectly formed, so completely centered on the melodies and harmonies of the music that the artifacts of their performance fade into transparency, and I can’t for the life of me imagine why anybody who cared at all about music wouldn’t be immediately captivated.

And not only is this one of the most musically perfect albums ever recorded, in my opinion, it is also the absolute best collection of relationship songs. Given how many millions of failed/strained-relationship songs have been written in popular music in the last thirty years, you might reasonably presume that little enough creative territory remains that any one album is unlikely to have even one original perspective, much less several. And perhaps, after all, these verses are all cribbed from some songwriter I’ve never heard, or from

Aeschylus for that matter. Nonetheless, to me they are breathtakingly original things to hear in pop songs.

Thus this is simultaneously one of the most uplifting and most depressing records I know of. These two things go together quite well: only music this awe-inspiringly empathic could counter-balance texts this bitter beyond melancholy; in the other direction, only stories this insidiously painful could wrench your attention away from the music's hypnotizing allure.

"Kiss This Thing Good-bye" starts the album with harmonica, banjo-like acoustic guitar arpeggios and a simple, deep, throbbing bass part. The song is a soliloquy from a lover who realizes that his relationship has not worked out, but who isn't sure he can find the courage to end it. He knows they should break up, and he thinks she knows it too, but he feels the emptiness of his mental resolution to "go through the motions for the last time tonight", and in the end he admits that "I'm hoping tonight that I'll open the door / And you'll stand here and say / 'Come on babe, let's kiss this thing good-bye'". The tragedy of the song is the clear implication that *neither* of them can break it off, even though they both see the crash it is headed for.

"Opposite View" zooms in for a closer look at the day-to-day dynamics of a relationship driven by a childlike contrariness, in which the participants choose sides as if unaware that there is any other way to behave, as if each other's company is an externally imposed condition to be fought routinely, not something they have chosen themselves. This is the danger of relationships gone one step past even complacency.

Leaving relationships for a rare moment, "Move Away Jimmy Blue" turns Justin Currie's attention to the claustrophobia of small towns, or more importantly, small *worlds*. "Move away Jimmy Blue", he sings, "Before your small, small town turns around / And swallows you". The implication, of course, is that Jimmy Blue has *already* swallowed the town, and in fact, one suspects that in his effort to carve out a chunk of the world small enough for him to *control*, Jimmy has created the very smallness that will in the end destroy him. How many petty tyrants have failed to learn this lesson? The downfall of dictators is not ambition but the *lack* of it.

Then comes "Stone Cold Sober", the song that originally got me interested in the band. I'm quite satisfied to let the song stand on its own musically. The way the verses simmer along on bass and drums, with just a simple, oscillating piano part, building into the dramatic soaring choruses will either win you over or not, and if it doesn't I can't think what I'd have to say about it.

The lyrics are a bit subtler, though. You're liable to fix on the chorus, "Stone cold sober, looking for

bottles of love" and dismiss the song as sillily romantic. Indeed, as *Waking Hours* began to make its initial impact on me, the depth of the lyrics was surprising precisely because they hadn't seemed particularly noteworthy in "Stone Cold Sober", which I just liked listening to. When you read it, though, which you are about to (© 1989, 1990 Polygram Music), it's pretty amazing:

### Stone Cold Sober

Everybody in the funhouse  
Says they want out  
But we're taking our time  
'Cause we're in love with time  
Whole generations thinking of  
themselves  
As infidels and pop stars  
While the bomb loses patience  
We line up and just lean against the bar

Stone cold sober, looking for bottles of  
love.

Caught in the headlights  
Wide-eyed and ready to receive  
We are the dead life  
Locked in dogfights, lost in disbelief  
And these dark days  
Make the nights seem brighter than they  
are  
So while Fleet Street rolls and the moon  
glows  
In the funhouse the fun starts

Stone cold sober, looking for bottles of  
love.

Born in the half-light  
Of threats and bribes  
In a hopeless porn parade  
We get the dogs' life, titbits train us  
What to wear, what not to say  
When you're footloose but you just feel  
limbless  
Life gets in the way  
So we get loaded or totally legless  
But stay the same

Stone cold sober, looking for bottles of  
love.

I would have just quoted the parts I particularly liked, but they formed most of the song, so there it is. The images of the bomb losing patience and the

willingness of the eyes in the headlights, and the equating of love with alcohol, as something that society has constructed to be thought of as a remedy, though it solves nothing, resonate for me. To be sober and want to drink is to be unhappy. True happiness must be *sustainable*. Psycho-ecology!

Perhaps realizing how close to the center of things "Stone Cold Sober" has brought the album, "You're Gone" intertwines the pain of the recent breakup that the title implies with images of television, religion and consumerism, so tightly that I begin to think the refrain of "And you're gone" applies not to a departed lover but to God, driven away by the thrashings of a race bent on self-destruction, leading lives that only along the edges, on the "back page, column five", show any real hope. "Sunday night's the night for forgiving; / Maybe that's why / They shut the shops." Hard to tell if this is hope or despair. You begin to wonder if hope and despair are really different.

Either the band felt the mood needed some relieving, or they got worried that I'd go completely off the edge in interpreting it, so the next two songs back off a ways, and return to the aftermaths of broken relationships. "When I Want You" is cheerful, with just a sinister hint veiled in "I'm not trying I'm just rehearsing / For the perfect day". "This Side of the Morning" is one of my two favorite taxi songs (Jane Siberry's "The Taxi Ride" is the other). This is a pretty resilient song, which makes me think I've misunderstood it, but I love the first verse: "Nobody's perfect, and that's something that / I'm sure she'll know, / 'Cause trying to tell her lies from the truth at times / Is like trying to divide ice from snow. / When I knew it was over, I jumped into a taxi / And said, 'Just guess where to go', / And the driver turned about and said, / 'Finding what you want is like / Trying to divide ice from snow.'"

Then again, maybe "This Side of the Morning" is *meant* to seem hopeful, to balance "Empty", which I find the album's most disturbing song. Sung from the unusual perspective of a new lover to his lover's *old* lover, this song lashes out in different ways at all three participants. The chorus is unique in my experience. "We do not lie side by side / And mock the thought of you / And I don't take her hand and ask / Is this what he used to do? / 'Cause I just want to free her from / Your jails of jealous dreams, / 'Cause at least a house when it's empty / Stays clean." Between the old lover's crazed jealousy, the woman's inability to save herself, and the fact that the new lover realizes that succeeding in making the woman self-reliant again will write *him* out of the picture as well, everybody in this song gets hurt, and I find it incredibly affecting and disquieting.

"Hatful of Rain" is another resilient song, which you *need* after "Empty". The album then spins to a conclusion with one last track. Wisely deciding to let the last four relationship songs stand on their own, "Nothing Ever Happens" returns to subject of small towns and the mundanity of everyday life. "Close-circuit cameras in department stores / Shoot the same movie every day, / And the stars of these films neither die nor get killed, / Just survive constant action replay".

The album ends, in what seems like the only way it could, with the sobering farewell, "And we'll all be lonely tonight and lonely tomorrow". *Waking Hours* is this fear's greatest explication, and part, to me, of the eternal effort to defy it.

### *Change Everything*, 1992 CD

I was very apprehensive about the next Del Amitri album. The danger in being so overwhelmed by *Waking Hours* was that I would build expectations on the basis of one album that another album would disappoint bitterly. My apprehension was heightened when I discovered that guitarist Michael Slaven had been replaced between albums by Robert Cummings, and original drummer Paul Tyagi by Brian McDermott. Andy Alston, a guest on *Waking Hours*, is now a full member, leaving Justin and guitarist Iain Harvie the only constants in the line-up.

And, in fact, the first time or two I listened to *Change Everything*, I *was* disappointed. It didn't immediately wrench my musical world around the way *Waking Hours* had. Only slowly, as I continued listening to it, did I remember that *Waking Hours* grew on me gradually, and did I realize that before long I began to forget which album any given song was from. This last finally convinced me that *Change Everything* was a worthy successor. If you don't like *Waking Hours*, you won't like this one, either. And if you thought *Waking Hours* was okay, but not great, you'll probably think this one is just "more of the same", but for me, "more of the same" is absolutely fine. As far as I'm concerned, Del Amitri can keep making albums exactly like this for the rest of their natural life, and I'll buy every one and think it's great. (Actually, I guess if I'm going to buy albums I better restrict that promise to *my* natural life.) *Change Everything* made #6 on my album top ten for 1992, and "Always the Last to Know" was #9 on the song list, both of these excellent showings in what I considered a very strong year.

Justin Currie's vein of new angles on broken love affairs runs deep, or deep enough at least to carry him through a dozen more without showing any signs of giving out. The album begins with the acoustic jangle of "Be My Downfall", in which Justin seems to confront

his lyrical predilection for misery by *inviting* the song's unnamed subject to ruin his life. Clearly the rewards of relationships (not pictured here!) make their costs reasonable, after all. In retrospect it seems to me that I should have known from the first moment of "Be My Downfall", as what sounds like a mandolin underscores the opening phrase, "The bus is pulling out", that this album would be marvelous. Currie is the master poet of busses, of a whole segment of society that lies between those who never travel and those who can afford to ride trains and airplanes.

"Just Like a Man" turns up the musical intensity for a slithering bluesy moment inside a genre-stereotype prison, as the narrator wishes for a way out of jealousy, feigned toughness and competition, but realizes that those things are unfortunately part of his nature. Simmering organ and fiery guitar leads course through the song, despite its sadness, and that too, is just like a man.

"When You Were Young" isn't actually a relationship song. That is, it's sort of a meta-relationship song, about a person's relationship with everything, and with themselves, not with another individual. "Look into the mirror, do you recognise someone? / Is it who you always hoped you would become / When you were young?" It's 10pm, do you know where your dreams are? Do you even remember *what* they are?

Two songs away from love lost are about all that Justin can manage, though, and "Surface of the Moon" finds him back on familiar ground, investigating a city that without the departed lover's presence seems to have no life at all any more. "Now we're lit up like a cathedral in our frozen concrete ruin, / And without her it might as well be the surface of the moon." He wanders through the city (cities on this album tend to be *part* of the relationship tales, not breaks from them), searching for the memories of their relationship that it should hold, but they don't seem to materialize. He can't figure out why, but *I* know. The memories are so densely packed into the voice in which this song is sung that there are none *left* to be evoked by architecture, streets, or city noises. The whole relationship exists inside this song, inside the singer, and it's no wonder then that he cannot seem to find signs of it outside himself.

"I Won't Take the Blame" seems like the converse of "Kiss This Thing Good-bye". Where "Kiss This Thing Good-bye" found the narrator unable to let go, this song finds him unwilling to hold on, unwilling to take any action to forestall the break, knowing that nothing he can do can prevent it and that any attempt will only make it hurt more. His very insistence on not sharing the responsibility becomes a shield against the real pain of the breakup.

This intentional distance leads logically into the lecture on "The First Rule of Love", a softer song that mostly subsists on strummed acoustic guitar and some careful slide-electric. The band's irrepressible drive can't be contained for very long, though, and "The Ones That You Love Lead You Nowhere", next, is probably Del Amitri's most rousing song yet. Galloping drums and hi-hats, slashing guitar, throbbing bass, percolating organ and Justin's limber voice all stampede to the near-gospel chorus. The band then lays back a bit for the lighter "Always the Last to Know", in which Brian McDermott's articulated hi-hats (against a rock-steady mid-tempo kick-snare beat) are particularly impressive. *This* relationship song finds the narrator having fully accepted that the love affair is over, and simply wishing to still be *part* of his ex-companion's life. This song gets more interesting right at the very end, where the narrator admits that when his relationship broke up, ostensibly because he cheated on his companion, it was really because "you were the last to know", because he had stopped treating the other person as important at all, let alone a lover, just as they have now apparently done to him. This bit of painful honesty about his own culpability makes the rest of the song's plea much more convincing, and if it was me this was being sung to, I'd give the friendship another chance.

"To Last a Lifetime", the next song, is more like "The Ones That You Love Lead You Nowhere", in that its lyrics are rather simple, and its catharsis lies in its *music*. This one doesn't have the choir sing-along, but the way Justin's voice soars through "But I've had enough bad news / To last a lifetime", there's really no need for anybody else. This is a song for exorcising demons, a song to sing frequently, just to reassert your unwillingness to be buried in tragedy. More will come, of course, but it's important not to let them feel *welcome*. "As Soon As the Tide Comes In" is another song that leans on the music for support, this time fiddle and a sort of half-Celtic reel intermingled with the rock shuffle. This one could be being sung to the narrator of Billy Bragg's "Mother of the Bride".

"Behind the Fool" is somewhat slight, mostly a short, old-fashioned, catchy, soulful, piano-bar song (though it doesn't have *much* actual piano) with a double-time chorus. The album then ends with its longest song, "Sometimes I Just Have To Say Your Name", which recapitulates just about all of *Waking Hours* and *Change Everything*, throwing a few Dylan-esque vocal-isms for good measure. "And the headlines proclaim everything has changed, / Love can't save you now, / As each little motion of my wristwatch / Holds up my faith somehow. / But as day turns to night there's this hopelessness to fight, / When I think that I might not make it through." Piano, bongo

drums and slide guitar contribute to this finale, and Del Amitri ride out the album on a mystical jam that fades out like a party of good friends receding into the distance behind you.

For all the personnel changes, this album *sounds* much the same as the previous one. Gil Norton, who produced “Move Away Jimmy Blue”, produces this album with engineering help from Steve Haigler, whose name looks familiar so I mention it here in case I come across it somewhere else later. If anything, there may be more guitar on *Change Everything* than on *Waking Hours*, and intellectually I think this album is bluesier, but I normally react very badly to bluesiness, and this sound just goes straight to an aural pleasure center, so there must be more to it than that.

I got to see Del Amitri play here in Boston on tour for this album. Justin Currie would have killed himself long ago if he tried to tour with the same emotional intensity that the albums display, so the band is actually quite upbeat and good natured in person, and doesn’t let fidelity to the songs’ often-dour moods get in the way of playing rock and roll like they actually enjoy it. So, while they put in a good show, seeing these songs done live was a very different experience from listening to them on record, with the record being by far the more impressive of the two to me.

#### ***Just Like a Man*, 1992 CD5**

The single for “Just Like a Man” backs an edit of the album track with three covers: Neil Young’s “Don’t Cry No Tears”, the Go-Betweens’ “Bye Bye Pride” and the Faces’ “Cindy Incidentally”. I’m not familiar with any of the original versions, but I know the three bands well enough to tell that these versions sound a lot more like Del Amitri than anything else. You have to look at the songwriting credits printed on the disc itself to realize that Currie didn’t write the first two, though to be fair there are *moments* in each that might arouse suspicions. “Cindy Incidentally” is the only one that *sounds* like a cover. I can’t see Currie writing a line like “Cindy, incidentally, baby I ain’t puttin’ you on”, and so I’m not that fond of this track. You aren’t missing anything earth-shattering by not having this single, but it’s worth a search if you grow anywhere near as fond of the band as I am.

#### ***When You Were Young*, 1993 CD5**

Besides the “Radio Mix” of “When You Were Young”, this single has two unreleased Currie tracks, and one written by Iain Harvie. Of Currie’s, “Long Journey Home” is a slow acoustic ballad that switches into electric eventually, but stays slow throughout, and “The Verb To Do” is a simple, pretty acoustic-guitar-and-voice song. Harvie’s “Kestrel Road” is a bluesy,

folksy and slightly trippy instrumental jam. These three songs are good enough that I consider this disc less a bonus novelty than a coda to *Change Everything*. Or maybe an epilogue. These songs feel like outtakes, like unfinished scenes originally slated for the album, and it is not only their quality but precisely their rawness that makes them an interesting perspective on the polished finished works on the album. “Ah,” say I to myself, hoping nobody else is listening. “That’s what Del Amitri songs sound like without a full band behind them, or without lyrics.”

## **American Music Club**

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### ***Engine*, 1987 CD**

Would you believe that there is a songwriter even more morose and even more brilliant than Justin Currie? No? Well, Mark Eitzel of American Music Club is damn close. Imagine (to humor me if for no other reason) an American Ian McNabb fronting a country version of Big Star, or Del Amitri steeped in Emmylou Harris and This Mortal Coil instead of blues, or Thin White Rope, Translator and Guadalcanal Diary backing up Neil Diamond. Now, wasn’t that fun?

I believe that American Music Club will turn out to be this era’s Big Star. Toiling in obscurity during their actual career, they will become seminal in retrospect, and the hottest groups of 2006 will line up to enthuse over what an influence AMC was to them. In the meantime, beat the rush and the annotated reissues, and start establishing your iron-clad early-twenty-first century musical credibility by becoming an AMC fan the first time around.

There is one AMC album before this, but it doesn’t exist on CD and I’ve never heard of anybody other than Trouser Press that has actually seen a copy. I’ll pretend, then, that this one is their debut. This is a hard thing to pretend, as *Engine* is *way* too good to be a debut. You have to start somewhere, though, and this album doesn’t sound like a *second* any more than it sounds like a first.

Singer, guitarist and songwriter Mark Eitzel is the spiritual and creative center of American Music Club. His voice is deep and rich, unusually so for a rock singer, and he is capable of arcing it into a beautiful, soaring mid-range, or dropping it to a bass whisper. His lyrics fall somewhere in between Richard Thompson, Raymond Carver and Charles Bukowski, small tales of weakness, pain and entrapment. Like Alex Chilton in Big Star, he seems almost constitutionally incapable of writing a weak song, and on the few occasions where AMC manages *not* to sound

marvelous, they sound like they're *trying* not to, and trying *hard*.

Eitzel's main musical sidekick is Vudi, the lead guitarist, who also sings and plays accordion and keyboards. Dan Pearson and producer Tom Mallon fill out the core of the band, along with a handful of drummers, a cellist, and another keyboard player whose role is unclear to me. Together the band produces several distinct stylistic moods. The most memorable of these songs have a driving country-ish twang, and the sparkling vocal harmonies on the choruses of "Outside This Bar", "At My Mercy" and "Clouds" are among the greatest moments in pop music. In fact, those are three of the best songs, period.

The second mood is slower, more melancholy and introspective, with "Big Night" and "Nightwatchman" drifting wispily along like slow sunsets. "Mom's TV" starts out slowly, and then the guitar turns ugly, distorted and squalling, driving Eitzel into sudden arresting ecstasies. "Electric Light" and "Asleep" warp even further, roaring guitar noise punctuating silence not unlike some moments of Talk Talk's *Spirit of Eden*, or Big Star as they began to implode (to become Big Neutron Star?). "This Year" seems like it's *about* to do the same, and that a blast of guitar noise will erupt from it at any moment, but somehow it doesn't.

The last mood is silly. The cynical waltz, "Gary's Song", is one of these, but the best example is "Art of Love", of which two versions are included here. The one that ends the disc is subtitled "(Goof-Rock Version)", but I'd wager that I could play you the "normal" version of "Art of Love" and you'd take it for "goof-rock" without a moment's hesitation. Steroidal drums, absurd chugging guitar distorted almost beyond the point where notes can be distinguished, and Eitzel doing a possessed Buster Poindexter imitation, this song shatters the depressed calm of "Mom's TV" devastatingly, showing all sorts of jagged angry edges protruding through the band's fabric near the seams. The actual "goof-rock" version finds the band limping through a drunken swing, and Eitzel impersonating an autistic revival preacher, and ending the album this way leaves no doubt in *my* mind that as timeless and gifted a songwriter as Eitzel proves himself elsewhere on the album, there's a dangerous lump of insanity lodged in his skull somewhere, and when the humidity rises or something, it swells up and all sorts of disturbing things happen.

### **California, 1988 CD**

*California* is much like *Engine*. Neither the personnel nor the moods have changed, and the balance of song types shifts only slightly. "Firefly" and "Somewhere" (and in a gentler way, "Western Sky")

are the only songs with the melodic power and country stride of "Outside This Bar" or "At My Mercy". "Somewhere" seems like a *sequel* to "Outside This Bar", the former crying "Outside this bar / There's no one alive" and the latter plaintively insisting "Somewhere there's people living". There are correspondingly more quiet songs here, the soft, hurt, bitter, acoustic love songs "Jenny" and "Last Harbor" being the most moving. "Laughingstock" and "Blue and Gray Shirt" are more depressed, with lines like "You're just another couple of strangers in a bar / Giving me a chance to explain my life away" and "I'm tired of being the spokesman for every tired thing". Eitzel plays the dejected, angst-ridden singer role to the hilt, and while it's hard to believe intellectually that someone with as clear and incisive an understanding of his own depression as these songs exhibit would be unable to *fix* his life, he never seems insincere in the least.

This album has its share of strange songs, too. "Pale Skinny Girl" is a quiet song that turns noisy, kin to "Asleep". "Bad Liquor" is "Art of Love" redux, a furious blaring two-minute assault of incoherent rage. The more intriguing touches here are the *three* waltzes, "Lonely", "Now You're Defeated" and "Highway". Okay, I haven't actually *tried* waltzing to them (and don't intend to), so perhaps they aren't technically waltzes, but they have three-beat measures, which is sufficiently rare in the sort of music that I listen to that distinguishing between that and "waltz" would be a badly misplaced attention to irrelevant detail.

As a whole album, *California* isn't quite as impressive or inviting as *Engine*. It's quieter, thinner, and sometimes oppressive. On the one hand, this makes these songs not quiet as captivating, at least initially, as many on *Engine*. On the other hand, it's easier here, with more of the songs' skeletons exposed, to tell what a remarkable songwriting talent they arise from. Gripping hand, the more I listen to this album, the more it soaks into me and I find myself swimming in the music like an isolation tank. And that's cool.

### **United Kingdom (+California), 1989 CD**

The packaging of *United Kingdom* with the entirety of *California* as a "bonus LP" should immediately tell you two things. First, *United Kingdom* is barely half an hour long on its own, and it and *California* fit comfortably on a single compact disc. Second, you have to give people some extra incentive to get them to buy *United Kingdom*. If you thought *California* was static and depressing, believe me, that was nothing compared to *this*. I don't think anybody in the band cracks a smile even once during these nine songs. That doesn't mean there aren't memorable moments—"United Kingdom" is especially haunting—but getting *California* as a "bonus"

with this album reminds me a lot of this idea I have for a restaurant where innocuous items like grapefruit all “come with” some imposing thing like a pitcher of beer or a medium pizza (“I’d like a chicken salad sandwich, some onion rings and a Coke, please.” “Certainly. The sandwich comes with waffles, the onion rings come with eggplant parmesan for three, and the Coke comes with your choice of onion soup, cotton candy or an uncooked squash.”).

The way I prefer to think of this is as *California* with an extra half an hour of depression tacked on the beginning. My Scottish ancestry encourages me to recommend it to you as a better value than just buying *California* for the same price, but I’m not sure that’s really a good idea. You’ll put it on, and you’ll forget to skip to track ten, and then *California*, which struck a delicate balance between motion and stasis, will get elbowed over the edge by the weight of *United Kingdom* and you’re liable to write the whole thing off as too numbing for anything but medicinal purposes. And I think that’s unfair to *California*.

Actually, it’s unfair to *United Kingdom*, too. When “Animal Pen” gives way to “Firefly”, the opening track of *California*, the carefully somber mood of *United Kingdom* is called into question, and you suddenly realize how claustrophobic you’ve been feeling, and from the tingling embrace of “Firefly” and “Somewhere”, looking back, you won’t see the reasons for the dark, brooding nature of the first nine songs. Claustrophobia has its place, though, and *United Kingdom* taken on its own terms is a fascinating study in the war between emotional release and desperate control. Go ahead and buy them both at once like this, I say, but program each album separately, and play something else in between. I think you’ll like them both better that way.

### *Everclear*, 1991 CD

Another album like *United Kingdom* and AMC would probably have expired from vitamin deficiencies. Someone must have explained this to them, as the next album, *Everclear*, rebounds decisively. Former producer and player Tom Mallon takes his leave, and his place is filled by Bruce Kaphan, who played lap steel on *California* and plays all sorts of miscellaneous instruments here.

*Everclear* actually does start quietly, with the anxious “Why Won’t You Stay”, but “Rise”, the second song, is the most forceful, melodic AMC song since “Outside This Bar”. “Miracle on 8th Street” is still and spacey again, but “Ex-Girlfriend” manages to channel the echoey space into a tortured, but mid-tempo, rock song. These first four songs find the band incorporating audible production elements into their sound for about

the first time, as the three previous albums’ production was essentially transparent.

The obligatory joke song crops up next, the bouncy “Crabwalk”. Things get quiet again with “The Confidential Agent”, which reminds me strongly of “Last Harbor”. “Sick of Food” starts to feed energy back in, with nervous, shuffling drums and guitar feedback stabbing through Eitzel’s self-indulgent whining, and by the end of the song I believe that he’s added bulimia to his list of maladies. “The Dead Part of You” takes off from the angry racket that “Sick of Food” ends in, and slams through a short, howling song in which hammering acoustic guitar chords batter against swarming electric feedback, and Mark sings like he is momentarily aiming to compensate for the lame record the Alarm made in 1991.

After getting rid of so much tension on “Sick of Food” and “The Dead Part of You”, the album then settles back and relaxes into the jangling, comfortable lope of “Royal Cafe”, sort of like a faster “The Western Sky” with rimshots on every downbeat. This is one of AMC’s more cheerful songs, actually, and a nice median between the silent and the angry.

True allegiances will hold sway, though, and the last two songs, “What the Pillar of Salt Held Up” and “Jesus’ Hands”, the jittery mandolin on the latter notwithstanding, are as somber and bleak as the best of them. It’s clear from this album that AMC has no real intentions of ever returning to the catchy accessible style of *Engine*, but it’s also pretty clear that they understand that *United Kingdom* was another extreme, and that their equilibrium point will be somewhere between the two. *Everclear* doesn’t quite feel like they’ve found it yet, but they’re closing in.

### *Rise*, 1991 CD5

“Rise” actually had a video made for it, which I saw the one time MTV played it, and it was the song that prodded me to actually buy my first AMC album, as before that I’d only read about them. It’s not representative of *Everclear* at all, and so it took me a while to undo my expectations and come to terms with the album. It’s not even representative of its own single, to be honest. “Chanel #5” is a beautiful slow song, “The Right Thing” a twangy stomp reminiscent of “Gary’s Song”, and the acoustic version of “Crabwalk” is a surreally atmospheric remake of the rowdy album original. The three b-sides certainly convey that AMC can do other things than “Rise”, but I suspect that anybody who liked “Rise” and bought this single hoping for reassurance that the band had more great songs like that won’t have bought any more AMC releases.

### *Mercury*, 1993 CD

"See!", I exclaim, barely two songs into *Mercury*. "I knew that *Everclear* wasn't quite right yet!"

This was AMC's major-label debut, and I was apprehensive about it, wondering whether Reprise would try to force the band to do a dozen rehashings of "Rise" in an attempt to achieve commercial palatability. I should have relaxed as soon as I saw Mitchell Froom's name next to the words "Produced by" on the back cover. Not only is this album not compromised in any way by its Time-Warner imprint, but with Froom's help AMC delivers a record that easily eclipses even the best moments of anything they'd done previously. Noisy, harrowing, beautiful, poignant, oblique, perverse, involving and sometimes downright scary, *Mercury* is the announcement of a unique musical force reaching maturity.

The album opens with the soft piano and meow-like guitar of "Gravity Walks", a stunning 3/4 introduction to the band's new guise. Froom clears away the debris from the production experiments on *Everclear* and gives the band a clear, detailed sound much closer to *Spirit of Eden* than most bands have the courage to go. Eitzel is center-front, with virtually no processing added to his voice, which is more than capable of holding attention all by itself. Around him the rest of the band's instruments are all carefully articulated. The drums (I assume new member Tim Mooney is the drummer) are especially pristine, sounding neither dry nor augmented, as if you're listening to them in a deserted Platonic cocktail lounge ideal with flawless acoustics and perfect (and silent) climate control and lighting. The band's awesome control over their playing, which I wasn't always sure of on the other albums, is never in question here, and this may be the only place *outside* of *Spirit of Eden* or *Laughing Stock* that I've heard anybody sound good enough to have played on those albums.

"If I Had a Hammer", the second song, has nothing to do with the folk song of the same name. I'd half hoped that it *was* a cover of that, as I bet AMC would have done something interesting with it, but the song actually turns out to be the return visit to the ghost of "Outside This Bar" that finally lays it to rest. The chorus, "Maybe I'm almost there", even sounds like it could be, shudder, optimistic. Eitzel sounds more wistful than depressed, which is a surprising but not unwelcome change.

And while they're tearing up old song forms, the next song, "Challenger", is the agonizing contortion of noise and pain and rapture that "Asleep" and "Pale Skinny Girl" wanted to be, but weren't. Vudi's guitar howls as if its heart is being ripped out by that guy in *Temple of Doom*. I think the song has something to do

with the shuttle that exploded, but I don't know what stewardesses are doing on it.

"I've Been a Mess" is a comforting reassurance that Eitzel hasn't lost the knack for putting true misery into his lyrics. He chews through this song as if shouting it in the ear of whomever he holds responsible for everything that has ever gone wrong for him. The band does well just to stay out of his way. They try to get back at him on "Hollywood 4-5-92", with a goofy carousel waltz, but Mark manages to twist even that to angst, opening with the oppressively vulnerable line "My revenge against the world is to believe everything you say". His vulnerability *is* his defense, it is only just becoming clear to me. Relentless fabricated depression is a cloak that makes it impossible to tell when he's *really* depressed.

One of the album's two best titles is next, "What Godzilla Said to God When His Name Wasn't Found in the Book of Life". I defy *any* song to live up to this title, though this one comes ominously close. The steady, rattling, wooden drum pattern is like what I imagine drum machines would sound like if they were grown like plants, not built out of plastic and computer chips.

Lest you slip away, "Keep Me Around" extends a hook to make sure you don't want to, a shuffling beat and ambling bass line supporting a chopping guitar and another amazingly plaintive vocal performance from Eitzel. "Dallas, Airports, Bodybags" settles back a little and lets Mark meander a little for a couple minutes. "Apology for an Accident" brings the proceedings almost all the way to a halt, with Eitzel tiredly pronouncing the death of a relationship with the numb epitaph "It's a little weak for my taste". His exegesis of his state is bewildering but obviously accurate, with admissions like "Well I've been praying a lot lately. / It's because I no longer have a TV" that I can't think of any justification for other than their being true.

"Over and Done" begins to pick up the pieces. A strong, pulsing bass line and relatively little noise make for an accessible song that is especially appropriate at this point, as it leads from the two rather cryptic tracks that precede it into the album's most amazing moment (#2 on my 1993 song top ten, in fact), the overwhelming "Johnny Mathis' Feet". An utterly inspired, sweeping, orchestra-backed triumph, "Johnny Mathis' Feet" is Eitzel confronting the glittery, Vegas-showbiz side of his musical instincts squarely, and blowing them halfway to Proxima Centauri. The song is a fictional narrative of Eitzel presenting his songs and his life to Mathis and asking for guidance, and the advice that he gets back. "Why do you say everything as if you were a thief, / Like what you stole has no value?" he asks through Mathis. I don't think I ever



seen better self-analysis in an art work of any form, and I've rarely heard a better song.

It's hard to concentrate on the album after "Johnny Mathis' Feet", but thankfully there isn't much left. "The Hopes and Dreams of Heaven's 10,000 Whores" is the other great title, and again the song isn't quite up to it. The thirteenth track, called "More Hopes and Dreams", you would expect to be a reprise of it, but it's actually two minutes of random, infrequent beeps, and the occasional click as the person holding the tape recorder shifts in the room. I read somewhere that the noises came from a power plant near where the album was recorded, but it really doesn't matter. Their inclusion is a great conceptual touch, and one I vastly prefer to the joke songs that served a similar purpose on the other albums.

The last song, "Will You Find Me?", is Mark mostly alone again, acoustic guitar and a few other extraneous noises accompanying him quietly though another mournful confessional. There's a note of hope in the question, though, as if the mere fact that the question *can* be asked implies that there is a chance, after all, that the answer will be "Yes". Who knows, perhaps the next album will be dance songs about healthy puppies and precocious children.

### ***Johnny Mathis' Feet (1 of 2), 1993 CD5***

The first half of the UK single for "Johnny Mathis' Feet" backs the album version of the title track with the home demos of "The Hopes and Dreams of Heaven's 10,000 Whores" and "Apology for an Accident", and an "Ahuja Mix" of "Will You Find Me" that also sounds like a demo. It's interesting hearing these songs this way. Eitzel sings them like he's afraid of waking up his neighbors if he raises his voice above a whisper, and afraid of breaking a sweat if he exerts any energy in doing so. The album versions are *much* better.

### ***Johnny Mathis' Feet (2 of 2), 1993 CD5***

The second disc has the home demos of "What Godzilla Said to God When His Name Wasn't Found in the Book of Life" and "Dallas, Airports, Bodybags". Both have wimpy drum machine tracks on them that are painfully out of place. I'm glad I heard the album versions first, because these limp performances don't do the songs justice at all. The other track is a plodding outtake called "The Amyl Nitrate Dreams of Pat Robertson" that might have been better off outtaken farther still.

### ***Keep Me Around, 1993 CD5***

The second single from *Mercury* improves AMC's single record a bit after the disappointing demo b-sides

on the other set. This one has three new tracks. "In My Role As the Most Hated Singer in the Local Underground Music Scene" is the one real AMC song here, and it has some excellent moments, notably the chorus, which goes "Oh god I loved you, / Oh god I loved you, / I should have killed you when I had the chance". "Memo from Aquatic Park" is a Vudi showcase, written by Mark Pankler and Tim Mooney. It's slight, and charming, but it's really not American Music Club as I know them. The last song is a Daniel Pearson composition called "Walking Tune". This one, too, is kind of cool, but it doesn't sound anything like AMC.

I'm forced to admit at this point that as much as I like American Music Club, they just may not be a b-side band.

## **Mark Eitzel**

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### ***Songs of Love, 1991 CD***

This bizarre record is a 1991 solo performance by Mark at the Borderline in London, doing AMC songs with just himself and a borrowed guitar. He does "Outside This Bar" and "Gary's Song" from *Engine*; "Firefly", "Western Sky", "Blue and Gray Shirt", "Last Harbor" and "Jenny" from *California*; "Kathleen" from *United Kingdom*; "Crabwalk", which showed up on *Everclear* later; "Chanel #5", which later appeared on the "Rise" single; and an early version of "What Godzilla Said to God When His Name Wasn't Found in the Book of Life" called "Nothing Can Bring Me Down". There are two songs, "Room Above the Club" and "Take Courage", which aren't on any of the AMC albums I have; perhaps they were on the early one I've never seen.

This is a very impressive album. Eitzel as a solo performer is worth comparing to Richard Thompson and Tori Amos, and every one of these songs is mesmerizing. He's a competent guitarist, but doesn't try anything particularly fancy (and apologizes bashfully when he screws up an intro), and the few times where he stops playing entirely ("Room Above the Club" and parts of "Crabwalk" and "Outside This Bar") are actually some of the most intense. The quality of the songs, stripped of instrumentation as they are here, is undeniable. The review of the show that appears in the liner notes says, offhandedly, "That Eitzel is one of the greatest living songwriters is beyond question." Anybody who listens to this album and *doesn't* think the comment is merited probably has flawed judgment in other areas as well.

## Toiling Midgets

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### *Son*, 1992 CD

In between *Everclear* and *Mercury*, Eitzel loans himself out as singer and co-writer to the band Toiling Midgets, who also feature Tim Mooney, producer Tom Mallon, and AMC collaborators Lisa Davis and Carla Fabrizio. This album, whose expanded title is *Sketches tO make you ruN away*, is sort of like a whole album of the noisiest moments of AMC albums. This is an interesting premise, but a somewhat monotonous one, and not the best setting for Eitzel's delicate songwriting. He's *there*, and he's singing, and those two factors elevate this album a comfortable distance above most music, but I wouldn't swap any of these songs for even my least favorite AMC track.

The liner has a collection of unpleasant pornographic sketches whose significance is unclear to me.

## Too Much Joy

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It wouldn't be fair to close Boylan Heights, an essentially optimistic place, with music as potentially depressing as Del Amitri or AMC's, so I'll end instead with perhaps the most adorable band making music today.

I first saw Too Much Joy, appropriately enough, opening for the Go-Go's reunion tour. I had no idea who they were, and they were hardly a polished stage act. Lead singer Tim Quirk hadn't quite internalized the way his microphone worked, and he tended to get his mouth close enough to it only around the middle of lines, the rest of the time being too busy charging around the stage like a berserk wind-up toy. Bassist Sandy Smallens was wearing a pair of shorts that looked like they had been made out of those big hats that the guards at Buckingham palace wear, and which *couldn't* have been comfortable under the Orpheum lights. Guitarist Jay Blumenfield was also big on "charging around". Only drummer Tommy Vinton seemed relatively sane, owing to his being rooted to the kit.

It was not, truthfully, the best-played live show I'd ever seen. The band's boisterous energy and irresistible puppy-dog charm was plain, though, and by the end of their set I was a convert, at least to the extent that I was willing to contribute a CD's worth of royalties to the cause.

### *Son of Sam I Am*, 1990 CD

Too Much Joy's first album was the hilariously-named *Green Eggs and Crack*, on Stonegarden records (the same label as Pop Art, who get thanked for a "jangly guitar loan" on this album), but I haven't been able to locate a copy, so for me this major-label debut is their first.

*Son of Sam I Am* is a masterpiece of smartass white-suburban brat-punk pop (a sub-genre that badly needed a masterpiece, if you ask me). It opens with the sampled dialog fragment "Here are some *loud* sounds", and wastes no time slamming into "Making Fun of Bums", which was #7 on my top ten song list for 1990. The song is hilarious, but the *sound* is what instantly convinced me I was going to be a *big* Too Much Joy fan. The drums are viciously compressed to the point where they sound too punchy to possibly be real, though I'm pretty sure they are. Jay's guitar somehow provides enough music for three or four people. Multi-tracking could account for it, but the fact is that he does the same thing *live*. Tim Quirk's singing is the ultimate in annoying white-guy whine, but he carries it off because you can tell that he *knows* it, and because Jay and Sandy contribute enough nice backing vocals to balance him out. Producer Michael James adds some keyboards to fill things out, but they're hardly necessary.

Comparing this to the Posies *Failure*, way back at the beginning of this chapter, makes some sense, because Too Much Joy are definitely set on making chirpy pop songs despite that being somewhat out of vogue. Where the Posies are sincere by being sincere, though, Too Much Joy are sincere by being unrelievedly cynical and unwilling to be seen as taking themselves seriously for even a moment. The lyrics are hilarious, the liner notes are hilarious. Some of my favorite lines: "Clowns run all the record companies that ever said we're bad" ("Clowns"). "Every great band should be shot / Before they make their Combat Rock" ("Hugo!"). "There's a six foot squirrel named Grip. / He lives under my bed." ("Connecticut") "People talk by *talking*" ("That's a Lie").

The songs vary from more gimmicky ("My Past Lives", "If I Was a Mekon") to less ("Life is Flowers", "Worse"), but every song is at least partly ridiculous and mostly delightful. The covers of L.L. Cool J's "That's a Lie" and Terry Jacks' "Seasons in the Sun" add even more fun to an already joyous collection of songs. There's not much coherent about this as an *album*, but with songs like this it hardly matters.

### *Cereal Killers*, 1991 CD

Too Much Joy sound even better a year later on *Cereal Killers*. There are still plenty of gimmicks on this record, including a guest appearance by KRS-One, but

the songs are good enough that you could love the album without even speaking the language, which is probably not as true about *Son of Sam I Am*.

The best thing about *Cereal Killers* is that it has "Crush Story" (#10 in 1991, but that was a much better year for songs than 1990; the album itself was #9 on my album list). For a while I was so obsessed with this song that I would program my CD player to play it after each other song on this album, including itself, so that the album lasted over an hour and a half and, at one point, played "Crush Story" three times in a row. I bet it would have done even better on my top ten if I hadn't listened to it so much.

The silliness on this album, like passionate attacks on "Long-Haired Guys from England", a poignant portrait of "Thanksgiving in Reno", and a scathing defense of *Catcher in the Rye*, are just as silly as anything on the first album, but in between the jokes here are more things that are seriously interesting. "Gramatan, / You crazy Indian, / You thought you had the best of us. / No man owns the land. / Now these houses cost five hundred K, / We wouldn't sell you one anyway." "I'll give you a coloring book; / You can draw outside the lines." "There's no one famous from my hometown, / Unless you count one astronaut / Who's never been to space / and probably never will, / But he's our hero still."

More importantly, the *music* on this album is *much* less jokey than on the previous one. Even the songs with the silliest lyrics are cheerful hook-filled speed-pop epics. "Pride of Frankenstein", a song about the village idiot, is one of the most kinetic, changing tempos effortlessly and making nice use of a cowbell on the chorus. "Sandbox" works up a jazzy swing, complete with producer Paul Fox's synth-horn stabs. And the band even slows down, once, to sing the Too Much Joy theme song, an inspired acoustic number that casts the band as a cross between Johnny Rotten and Robin Hood. Every band should be required to make a theme song, I think, just so you can see what they think of themselves. And, frankly, any band who has the guts to include the line "we drive around in our moms' cars" deserves all of our support.

### ***Besides, 1991 CD5***

This five-song sampler is labeled "Promotional Copy. Not for Sale.", but this turns out to be an empty assertion, and I bought a copy. It contains an edited version of *Cereal Killers'* "Nothing on My Mind", an acoustic version of "King of Beers", a studio outtake called "Take A Lot of Drugs", a song called "Drum Machine" from *Green Eggs and Crack*, and another called "Soft Core" from between that and *Son of Sam I Am*.

The acoustic version of "King of Beers" is pretty cool. The other songs are pretty bad, albeit amusing. The disc is definitely of historical interest, but the idea that it was sent out as *promotion* baffles me.

### ***Mutiny, 1992 CD***

Too Much Joy's albums just keep getting better, though this one represents a smaller improvement on *Cereal Killers* than it did over *Son of Sam I Am*, in my opinion. The band now has the knack for writing pop songs that can be either funny or touching, or both, and they continue to do it, but they don't show any clear signs of ever going much beyond that, not that I necessarily think there *is* much beyond that. Most of the improvement here is, I think, due to better attention to details. Producer William Wittman resists the temptations to bulk up the band's sound with keyboard fills, like both Paul Fox and Michael James did. Peter Wood contributes organ on two songs, but otherwise Too Much Joy are left to their own devices, which are more than equal to the task. Stripped down like this, Too Much Joy begin to show some true *rock band* potential for the first time, but they're still simply too damn cute and clever for their rock drive to conceal their pop hearts, and much too smart and self-conscious for the somewhat dense abandon usually required for complete rock indulgence.

The album just managed a tie for tenth on my album top ten list for 1992. As I've said before, though, Too Much Joy is a *song* band, and I had the hardest time narrowing my short list down further than "Stay at Home", "Unbeautiful" and "Donna Everywhere". The fact that I'd only included one Tori Amos song, though, meant that there's was *no* way I could justify more than one TMJ tune, so I finally settled on "Stay at Home" for the sheer bravado inherent in its giddy BTO-like classic-rock party-anthem self-indulgence. "Unbeautiful"'s chorus roar could blister paint, though, and "Donna Everywhere" is vintage joyful TMJ puerility, a teenage pipe-dream fantasy that could be this decade's version of J. Geils' "Centerfold". "White teeth, red hair / She hated underwear. / Is this real, / Or in my head? / Donna's dancing on my bed." Other unusual songs here include the crazed RHCP-like jamming of "Just Like a Man", the hilarious half-mocking, half-serious acoustic pomp of "In Perpetuity", and a raucous cover of "Starry Eyes", originally by Will Birch and John Wicks (as usual I have no idea who these people are, or even if I *should* know them).

The bulk of the tracks, however, are more great songs in the mold of all the band's *previous* great songs. The berserk "Parachute" compares a new relationship to jumping out of a plane (fun, scary). "What It Is" is slower, gentler, a story of small, inexpressible truths

lurking in shopping malls and graffiti. "I don't know what your words for it are, / I just know what it is." In a way, this is pop music's meta-message, reduced to one sentence. A musicologist can easily point out what a narrow segment of the musical spectrum Western pop music occupies, how closely nearly every song complies with one of a very small number of song structures and chord patterns, and pop music in response can only say "I don't know how to *explain* this to you in words, it's just something you have to *feel*." Mind you, it's *possible* to throw words at the question (indeed, this book represents rather a large pile of such words), but these are mostly attempts to *evoke* the feeling that listening to this music creates, not to explicate it.

"Magic" is another good-natured stomp that reveals Too Much Joy's heart particularly well. "If I had a magic wand / I'd wave it once and fake the rest". This is precisely why Too Much Joy will never be a straight rock band. "I'm ahead of my time-but only by a week", they say, in "I Don't Know". "Show me a millionaire / Who don't play the lottery. / Show me a DJ / Who don't stutter in company." ("Strong Thing") They know themselves too well to be good rock stars, know rock stardom too well from outside to fit inside it. Perhaps they'll learn, but I hope not.

If you like the other albums, you ought to like this one. If you like this one, you should like the others. Start wherever you like, just *start*. Too Much Joy are either a national treasure or a terrible family secret, and the more I listen to them the more I think those two things are really the same.

An amusing related story: in early 1993 I posted my 1992 top ten lists on CompuServe. One member, commenting on it, said that he hadn't liked *Mutiny* near as much as *Cereal Killers* (one vote against my theory that you'll like one if you like the other, I guess), and went on to fault the production. Another member responded asking him what, exactly, he thought was wrong with the production. A not very coherent argument began, which got even more incoherent when the hapless critic, who was probably some 14-year-old using his parents' account, finally realized (as I had immediately, due to having memorized thousands of trivial facts like this) that the person asking what was wrong with the production, William Wittman, *was* the producer.

# The Suburbs

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from the Suburbs (band name)

## Soundtrack

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Modern English: "I Melt With You"

Yaz: "In My Room"

Ultravox: "Dancing with Tears in My Eyes"

The Knack: "Good Girls Don't"

Jon Astley: "Jane's Getting Serious"

Thomas Dolby: "Europa and the Pirate Twins"

Devo: "Through Being Cool"

Gary Numan: "You Are in My Vision"

They Might Be Giants: "Ana Ng"

The Bobs: "Lady Cop/Take Me In"

## Introduction

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This chapter represents my third definition of pop. Where Hull collected a segment of British New Wave with jazz, show-tune and atmospheric leanings, and Boylan Heights rounded up the jangly American wing, The Suburbs are, in a way, "other". The primary mood here is just *fun*. Melodies are important, good sounds are important, sometimes the words are important, too, but the *most* important task of most of this music is to make you feel good. From New Wave to synth-pop, power-pop and quirk-pop, the panoply of styles that make appearances in this chapter all have a cheerful, puppy-like exuberance lurking somewhere not far beneath their surfaces, often actually bounding around on the countertop getting in your way while you're trying to make a sandwich.

To a sad extent, this is a chapter locked in time. These cheerful sorts of songs are no longer in vogue, which is a kinder way of saying that people who try to make them generally get laughed back to whatever ill-connected bog they arose from. Or, perhaps, they still get made but I don't like them any more. That wouldn't make much sense, but I frequently don't, so maybe it's so. Yaz, certainly, has been succeeded by Erasure, who make the same sort of songs, but who I don't like. For example. Still, I think there is a quality to period pieces like the Knack that is not contained in much music currently being made, but that may still come again. (This chapter, then, is in memory of the first coming, and in anticipation of the next.) The Suburbs strive for a particularly glorious breed of musical ephemera, a song-creature that rises above its

melody, sales, instrumentation or style, and leaves plenty of its allotted 15 minutes for conversing among yourselves, or better yet, playing it four more times.

Like the real suburbs, in some ways this music is as bad as music gets, carefully mowed lawns and clean sidewalks and picture windows behind which trivial people live out empty lives. At the same time, both the real suburbs and this music can be seen as our culture's *finest* achievements. They are clean, comfortable, safe. They are peaceful, and the people there are as often as not *happy*. You can certainly argue that their happiness is illusory, or that they *shouldn't* be happy, but why bother? Wouldn't you rather be happy, yourself? (Perhaps not. There are many quite defensible moral systems under which happiness is not the overriding goal. In fact, *most* moral systems aren't built around happiness, as best I can tell. I'm not asking you to run your life around this chapter, though, or even move there. Just listen and don't grumble and don't ruin my fun.)

Also, note that because of the emphasis here on individual songs, the generally short lives of many of the artists, and an often-sporadic interest on my part, this is a chapter with nearly as many records as recorders. Many artists here are cruelly slighted, others rescued perhaps unnecessarily from obscurity. Which are which I will leave as an exercise to the reader. Please show all work, and if you send indignant letters, print your name neatly at the top of each page.

Thank you. Arpeggiator on. Take it, Vince.

## Yaz

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### *Upstairs at Eric's*, 1982 CD

Yaz is, for me, the quintessential synth-pop band. Even calling them a band almost misses the point. There are only two people in Yaz, and one of them just sings. Vince Clarke, the other one, controls an impressive array of computers and sundry electronic sound-making devices, using them with an incredibly light touch to create airy, melodic, and crisply mathematical songs like pointillist Mondrians. Don't expect orchestral washes out of these keyboards; Clarke builds his compositions primarily out of several monophonic patterns, more like a robotic Bach than a virtual Mozart. Two or three lines bounce merrily around in counterpart, or flutter around the image with eerie precision. The programmed drums are often quite spare, and make no attempt at all to mimic human-drummer conventions. It is an approach that seemed novel in the early Eighties, and more than a decade later the novelty has given way in my mind to

a realization that Clarke *really* knew what he was doing. The best of these songs weave gossamer-seeming strands of music into sparkling, steel-hard lattices whose strength you would never guess from their parts.

*Upstairs at Eric's*, the first Yaz album, is composed of three basic sorts of songs. The first sort, typified by "Don't Go", "Goodbye Seventies", "Situation" and "Bring Your Love Down (Didn't I)", is the fast, peppy dance song. These keep the mechanical beats coming fast enough to keep a crowd moving, and virtually beg for extended DJ remixing. They are, to me, by far the least interesting tracks here.

The next sort slows down, doesn't mind if the crowd stops dancing, lets singer Alison Moyet's chilly voice circle around itself in a vocal counterpoint to match the music, and goes where the wind takes it. These songs, particularly "Too Pieces", "Midnight" and the band's biggest hit, "Only You", show Clarke's songwriting finesse most clearly. "Only You"'s phenomenal popularity with a cappella singing groups is due, I am sure, to the fact that it creates a classic pop song out of so few simple voices. I actually like "Too Pieces" even better, as it presents Clarke's fundamental aesthetic even more plainly, with Moyet's voice providing a legato line to counterbalance all the pizzicato synth parts.

The third sort are the conceptual pieces, and they range from painful to awe-inspiring. The slow piano and sheet-metal dirge "Winter Kills" lies somewhere in the middle. I don't feel myself going crazy listening to it, but I'm definitely bored. "I Before E Except After C", a seriously over-long voice-collage, is the painful one. There are many fascinating moments in it, where the dialog fragments interact in poetic ways, and the characters of the voices seem to take on lives of their own. 4:39, however, is too much of this by a factor of at least nine. The last conceptual piece is my favorite Yaz song of all, "In My Room". This mesmerizing song is performed by six musical parts: a spare drum machine; an elastic bass synth; a high, thin synth part; another chattering dialog montage; a deep male voice reciting, of all things, the Lord's Prayer (which I know, now, just from listening to this song many times); and Alison's voice delivering the song's main text, a pained, lonely, introspective musing. The prayer and the lyrics play off each other, and the paranoid mumblings on the other vocal track change the meanings of both. The musical parts are the least possible glue necessary to hold the voices together. The whole I find riveting.

### *You and Me Both*, 1983 CD

Yaz only made two albums, and this is actually the better one. The strengths and weaknesses of *Upstairs at*

*Eric's* seem to have been clear to Alison and Vince, and this time around they have virtually no missteps. The dance songs, like "Sweet Thing", "Knocking for a Good Time", "Walk Away from Love" and "State Farm", are even more danceable than the ones on *Eric's*, and at the same time are more interesting musically. There are no "I Before E"-type concept pieces, and "Anyone", which comes closest to "Winter Kills", doesn't strike me as lethargic the way that "Winter Kills" does.

The rest of the songs are just great. My two favorites, I believe, are "Nobody's Diary" and "Mr. Blue". They take the careful appeal of "Only You" and fill it out, making "Only You" itself seem somewhat brittle and trebly in comparison. "Nobody's Diary" is the faster of the two, rhythmic enough to dance to in a pinch. "Mr. Blue" is slower, more lurching, like a beautiful ghost wearing extremely heavy shoes. The hesitant bass line has a sad cadence to its progress, and it underscores the chorus ("I'm Mr. Blue / And I'm here to stay with you, / And no matter what you do, / When you're lonely I'll be lonely too."). Profound? Well, perhaps not, but empathetic, which is almost as rare, and in some moods even nicer.

Which isn't to say that there aren't some interesting lyrics here. "Unmarked" is another entrant in a peculiarly British sub-genre of songs about boys going off to war. This one is the opposite-view to Kate Bush's "Army Dreamers", taking the perspective of the excited soldier (albeit sarcastically). It ends with the dying line "I'm glad 'cause all I wanted / Was to kill another man." Moyet's "Anyone" starts off with the intriguing phrase "Fate took a freeway to my room". Rooms seem to be a fascination of Yaz's, perhaps because their music suits itself to being made in small ones, a music of desks and easels, rulers and compasses, not stages, sweat, amp cords.

*You and Me Both*, and Yaz's short career, end with the dark, but hopeful "And On", which proclaims appropriately enough, "I'm so glad that you left us now, / Before you had the chance to die." It's Alison's song, and though I don't think that it is intended to be autobiographical, it relates well to such peers as Del Amitri's "Kiss This Thing Good-bye", and Richard and Linda Thompson's "Walking on a Wire". It's sad that there aren't any more Yaz albums. If every band made exactly two records, I can't decide if this book would be harder or easier to write.

## The Assembly

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### *Never Never, 1983 7"*

Before going on to form Erasure, who I never really cared for, Vince Clarke started an abortive project, as the Assembly, to record a series of singles with various different singers. This was the first and, I think, the last. It's also the best. Vince and Yaz producer E.C. Radcliffe provide the music, and Feargal Sharkey lends his distinctive quavering voice to "Never Never", a song that sounds like it could have opened a third Yaz album. The flip-side instrumental, "Stop/Start", is even cooler, and makes me wish Clarke would do *more* instrumentals.

Why this project didn't go any further, or if it did why it vanished so thoroughly into obscurity, I can't tell you. I'm glad I got this one.

## Ultravox

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### *Ultravox!, 1977 LP*

Ultravox eventually became one of the defining synthesizer bands, virtual creators of the "New Romantic" movement, which a number of bands in this chapter could be seen as falling into. This, their first album, is not part of what made that reputation. Produced by Brian Eno, Steve Lillywhite and the band, this is a record of painfully off-key Bowie-esque glam rock that considers punk an excuse to not tune very carefully. Original singer John Foxx has a certain vocal presence, but Midge Ure *is* Ultravox to me, and this just sounds wrong.

The second and third albums are more of the same. I skip them.

### *Vienna, 1980 LP*

Midge Ure replaces John Foxx for Ultravox's fourth album, and almost instantly takes over the band completely. He brings trucks full of synthesizers, and his voice sounds more than a little synthetic itself. Weeding all the punk components out of the band's initial sound, Ure and the band retain some of glam's sense of drama, but little else. Instead, they stack on layers upon layers of keyboards for a huge, panoramic sound that seems to drift across some alien plain, whistling through crystal spires, metallic arches and all those other impractical architectural features which comic-book visions of Mars end up riddled with. Ure's voice is piercingly clear and cold, about the perfect

compromise between the stark mechanism of Gary Numan and the sexual throatiness of Terri Nunn.

Although Ure's arrival changes the band's sound considerably, the whole band participates in the metamorphosis enthusiastically. Bassist Chris Cross and drummer Warren Cann lay down an entrancingly precise rhythm groundwork, bolstered by sequenced bass-synth lines and surprisingly little programmed percussion. Main synthesist (and violinist) Billy Currie is as much architect of Ultravox's new lush sound as Ure, and in fact Ure himself contributes slashing guitar, perhaps the album and band's most humanizing feature. I don't know whether it's Ure or Currie who is the pitch-wheel maestro, but the frenetic solo-bending that goes on at such moments as the coda of "Private Lives" has probably never been equaled.

The lyrics contribute, too; it's all a package. Europe is the clear spiritual center of the New Romantic movement, which is avowedly international, and "New Europeans", "Western Promise" and "Vienna" all play into this affectation, as does recording the album in Germany with Conny Plank. Other songs, like "Sleepwalk", "Passing Strangers" and "Mr. X.", play up the sense of humans living in a mysterious, largely mechanized world, often prisoners more than participants. Ultravox don't delve into this particular vein with the intensity or disconcerting incisiveness of Gary Numan, but their oblique references fit the genre just fine.

"Vienna", the record's high point, is also one of the finest moments in Ultravox's career. A slow, completely mechanical, carefully damped drumbeat and terse bass-pulses form the base. A few airy synths drift through the verses, but it's when the chorus rolls around that things really get magical. A bank of swelling synths rise up, a majestic piano kicks in, and Ure cuts loose with a spine-tingling wail of "This means nothing to me. Ah, Vienna". Some more drums kick in, and eventually there's a fast instrumental section, but the moments the song lives for are when Ure's aching cry soars out, saying nothing particularly isolatable, but capturing powerful, real emotions none the less.

### *Quartet, 1983 CD*

For some reason I've never gotten around to buying *Rage in Eden*, Ultravox's fifth album, so we jump ahead to *Quartet*, number six. It is like *Vienna*, only more so. The synthesizers stack higher, wash more orchestrally across the tight rhythms. Ure shows a wider range, but the same dramatic flair. The album's mix of fast dance songs and slow, austere ballads is very much the same. There is more piano here, and the songs are more ambitiously executed all

around, but the differences are definitely of degree only.

At the time, Ultravox was leading a virtual musical revolution (or felt they were), and so it makes *sense* that they would hold to a single, carefully-defined style, or more than a style even, an aesthetic. A decade later, though, when the flocks of new-romantic buzzards that stormed in behind Ultravox and pecked to death all the tourists have more or less worn out the movement's welcome, I find it hard to see *Quartet* and *Vienna* as anything other than redundant. They are both fine albums, but in exactly the same way, and so there is little need for both. No doubt this is also why I haven't bought *Rage in Eden*. I think *Quartet* is the better album by a bit, but "Vienna" remains my favorite song, so I'm torn. Buy the *Collection* compilation instead, unless your nostalgic longing for New Romanticism's glory days is *really* painful.

### ***Lament*, 1984 LP**

Ultravox finally perfects their style for three near-perfect songs to open what for most practical purposes is their last album. "White China", "One Small Day" and "Dancing with Tears in My Eyes" form a trio as powerful in its way as the opening of U2's *The Joshua Tree*. All three are mid- to fast- tempo dance songs, but the powerful, spacious production here, by the band themselves, makes their earlier songs of this variety sound unpleasantly cheap and thin by comparison. "White China" is a worthy companion to Thomas Dolby's "White City", proving that random word-association is often as good an organizing principle as anything else (which in turn makes me wonder whether all the work I put into ordering this book is really time well spent). Ure's guitar playing drives the awesome "One Small Day".

It's the third song, though, which ensures Ultravox's beautification once I take over the saint-anointing business. "Dancing with Tears in My Eyes" captures the elusive blend of emotions that combines joy, triumph, the sure knowledge of futility and inevitability, despair, joy again despite the intervening impulses, and triumph again for managing joy, and joy for achieving triumph, and sadness for the loss of joy this great, and joy for having felt it at all, and finally trans-hysterical calm acceptance born of the realization that only the inevitability of death could bring all the other emotions into such sharp focus. It is the song to sing as the world ends. When the bombs fall, I used to say (back when that didn't seem as unlikely), I will put "Dancing with Tears in My Eyes" on repeat, and wait for the flash. If there is a song in the world that says more powerfully than this one that whatever happens,

life was worth it, I haven't heard it. Tears come just thinking about it.

The rest of the album is, unavoidably, less spectacular, but easily good enough to make this Ultravox's best work, and perhaps the only one that can challenge their best-of as an entry-point for new fans and curious bystanders. "Lament" is a slow, almost liturgical dirge. "Man of Two Worlds" is "Dancing with Tears in My Eyes" Jr. "Heart of the Country" is a slightly more relaxed take on the edgy buzz of "Sleepwalk". "When the Time Comes" and "A Friend I Call Desire" recycle the other songs as if waiting (albeit agreeably) for the record to end. Presently it does. Taking it off my turntable I am sorely tempted to flip it over and start again.

### ***The Collection*, 1985 CD**

*The Collection* summarizes the Ure/Ultravox glory days with a solid selection of fourteen singles that represent the band better than any one album can. The sampling is spread evenly over the preceding four albums: "Passing Strangers", "Sleepwalk", "Vienna" and "All Stood Still" from *Vienna*; "The Thin Wall" and "The Voice" from *Rage in Eden*; "Hymn", "Reap the Wild Wind", "Visions in Blue" and "We Came to Dance" from *Quartet*; and "Dancing with Tears in My Eyes", "One Small Day" and "Lament" from *Lament*; with "Love's Great Adventure" serving as the token new song to boost compilation sales. "White China" is a sad omission, especially as the disc comes in well under an hour, but "Love's Great Adventure" is a gem to have displaced it for, so I won't complain *much*. This is *definitely* the place to start your Ultravox explorations, and even if you don't go any further, it's a sterling condensation of some essential early-Eighties musical history.

### ***U-Vox*, 1986 CD**

Drummer Warren Cann departed after *Lament*, and the band looked dead. When this final album finally leaked out, I could only find it as an import, and that plus the fact that the actual word "Ultravox" appeared on only the spine of the jacket made me rather suspicious of the whole affair. Eventually I broke down and got it, and it *is* Ultravox, all right. What's more, or what would *seem* like more, Cann is replaced on drums with Big Country's Mark Brzezicki. The Chieftans help out with a song. Reading the credits I expect to *adore* this album.

It doesn't quite work out that way. I *like* it, for sure, enough to replace the LP with a CD (albeit for \$1.99), but it is a pale imitation of Ultravox's earlier work. The production drowns the band under a thick swamp of reverb, Mark's galloping style never quite



syncs with the band's sparer, more mechanical approach, and Ure sounds like he delivered the vocals while asleep buried under a pile of coats on the guest room bed. Production-number brass on "Same Old Story" is a jarring intrusion for a band whose style was previously so self-contained. Most of the individual elements of Ultravox's genius are present here in some quantity, but this time around they don't seem to add up. As long as I concentrate on component parts the music seems to be up to their old standard, but the moment I try to step back and appreciate whole songs or, better, the whole album, everything turns insubstantial and I'm left empty and unsatisfied, wishing I had the aural equivalent of a big, dense loaf of bread to take the edge off my hunger. It's perplexing. And then I wake up and my pillow is gone.

## Midge Ure

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### *The Gift*, 1985 CD

Lest you think that production limpness was all that held *U-Vox* back from greatness, Midge Ure's first solo album (done between *Lament* and *U-Vox*, before Ultravox's final demise) has strong, clear production, and still isn't that great. Where *U-Vox* seemed to bury Ultravox's sparkle in sonic crud, this album must have sanded it off; you can *see* where it should be, but it isn't there. The music is too slow, there aren't enough guitars, the drumming is spiritless, there's no low end, there's no high end; it's *one* of those things.

Mind you, it's still Midge Ure, so the synthesizers fly in perfect formation and the voice is still uncanny, but the best moments here sound like early drafts of good Ultravox songs, and the worst sound like early drafts of Ultravox songs that were quickly abandoned as showing no particular potential. From someone else this would be an impressive solo debut, but from the mind of Ultravox it's nothing special.

### *Answers to Nothing*, 1988 CD

With Ultravox finally gone for good, Ure was in the perfect position to run his career into the ground reprising his former group's expiring listlessness. Mark Brzezicki returns to the drums, bringing his brother Steve along to play some bass (at least I assume they're brothers, given how unlikely two "Brzezicki"s would seem otherwise), and Midge gets Mick Karn and Level 42's Mark King to provide bass elsewhere. This, too, looks great on paper, but after being disappointed with *U-Vox* I was leery. Robbie Kilgore gets a number of "Additional keyboards" credits, but otherwise Midge

plays everything else himself. This might have made me even less hopeful, but I actually heard this album before *The Gift*, so I didn't have any lingering solo-career cynicism at the time to color that particular aspect of the album.

Anyway, any reservation you develop in advance of hearing *Answers to Nothing* are a waste of your anticipatory energy. This record finds Midge Ure starting almost completely from scratch. Tossing out Ultravox's wall of keyboards and reverbs, he builds a new, shockingly *dry* sound around a heavy dependence on Mark's complex but precise percussion and the various bassists' complicated extensions of it. His own voice leaps forward to be the focal point, not like Ultravox's pumped pomp, but in a much more personal way, like a detailed portrait-painting instead of a fantasy-sunset landscape. His vibe-family synth patches get a lot more use than they used to, and the big string pads are used only sparingly, and even then almost never as a foreground instrument. His guitar, which largely gathered dust and coffee-cup rings on *The Gift*, gets a cleaning and new strings here, and works into the mix nicely, especially on "Dear God" (not an XTC cover). Ultravox used guitars mostly to play against the synthesizers, but here Ure blends the two, as if more interested in getting the *song* right than in making a big deal out of its instrumentation. This is one of the first clear signs that Midge's *general* musical instincts are more than those of a highly talented specialist.

In a move calculated to prompt Peter Gabriel comparisons, Midge even gets Kate Bush to contribute guest vocals to the duet "Sister and Brother". The song is a painfully obvious "Don't Give Up" knock-off, not that that's such a bad thing. (It's also interesting to me to note that this makes Mark Brzezicki one of the only people to play on *two* non-Kate songs with Kate singing. Also, both *Answers to Nothing* and *The Seer*, the Big Country album she sang on, have (unrelated) songs called "Remembrance Day", which seems like an odd coincidence.)

And lest I seem ingenuous or just unobservant, there are a couple songs here that should help assuage any Ultravox-ache that you may still be feeling. "Just for You" is the closest to a straight Ultravox track in style, but "Lied" may arrive at the best approximation of Ultravox's characteristic drama through entirely different means. It's an auteurial excursion on Midge's part, with Steve's bass the only instrument he doesn't play himself. It starts hushed and low, like the near-spoken verses of "Answers to Nothing", and as it builds the burbling bass and drum program get it moving. About the time it hits the second or third chorus, Midge flips into his upper register, punches "violin" on the keyboard, and lays back into an effortlessly-matched

guitar part. He doesn't try to draw out the notes like "Vienna", but he hits the same highs in passing, and the macro-pulse of the song's repetitive structure gives each arc into the chorus seemingly greater drive. Very cool. New beginnings are almost always a good idea.

### *Pure*, 1991 CD

My first question about this album comes from looking at the fine print of the liner notes. Mark Brzezicki appears here courtesy of *Atlantic*. Uh, what was Mark doing on Atlantic? Big Country was never on Atlantic, or at least they never released anything with Atlantic written on it. *No Place Like Home* came out in 1991, and Mark isn't listed as appearing *there* courtesy of any other label. Maybe this is an international thing. Maybe Mark's surreptitious American liaison with Atlantic is why *No Place Like Home* wasn't released here. Maybe it's just a typo.

Anyway, returning briefly to the subject of *this* album, Peter Gabriel comparisons become increasingly appropriate on *Pure*, as Midge seems bent on skimming off some of Peter's share of the world-conscious sophistopop market. In particular, he seems to be aiming at the dramatic, less dance-centric pre-"Sledgehammer" phase of Peter's music. "I See Hope in the Morning Light", the opening track here, strikes me as a pretty bald "Biko" rip-off. Dramatic chorus vocals create the maximum dramatic catharsis, Uilleann pipes and tin whistle provide the requisite multi-cultural timbres, and the shuffling drumbeat even reminds me of "Biko". Of course, "Biko" is a classic, and Peter himself doesn't make 'em like that any more, so the news is hardly all bad.

And, to give this album balanced credit, none of the other songs remind of any *particular* Gabriel track. There is a similarity of approach, but all that really means is that this music is intricately rhythmic, nonsynthophobic, generally mid-tempo, pristinely produced ("clean", "fresh", or, actually, "*pure*") intelligent modern pop, sung by a man you'd be unlikely to mistake for Joe Cocker. After seeming not to progress much at all during his Ultravox days (and I include *The Gift* in that era), *Answers to Nothing* and *Pure* suddenly find Midge developing rapidly, maturing as a songwriter and arranger most-notably, but as a producer and singer as well.

*Pure* builds on the structure established by *Answers to Nothing*. Mark and Steve Brzezicki both return, as does keyboardist Robbie Kilgore. Simon Phillips shares time with Mark on drums (an interesting detail given that Simon would take Mark's place on Big Country's album *The Buffalo Skinners*), and Jeremy Meehan with Steve on bass. A few other players (Paddy Maloney plays his pipes on two songs) and a

bevy of singers fill out the cast, but Midge himself still provides most of the music other than the rhythm section. Of course, the rhythm section is *key* to these songs. Ure and the Brzezickis have established an impressive rapport, and spare, careful drumming is again the spine of almost all of these songs. Having stripped away all his residual fat rather effectively on *Answers to Nothing*, though, Midge here begins to build his sound up again. There are more keyboards and guitars than on the last record, richer vocal processing, more *space*. It all feels like it's done from the bottom up, though. Ultravox records often sounded like three guys wheeled their keyboard racks into the studio, powered everything up, assumed their stances in front of the keys, and *then* said, fingers poised, "Now, what shall we play?" Mind you, I think that's a pretty cool way to proceed, but here Midge definitely gives the impression of having written the songs *first*, and added only those musical elements that the songs actually called for, rather than whatever happened to be plugged in and functional. The album, as I often find when comparing band and solo efforts, is thus less of a single cohesive style, but each song sounds more carefully thought-out.

In fact, lest you take the Gabriel comparisons the wrong way, I actually think this album (and Peter's contemporaneous *Us*) marks the point where the graphs of my likes of Midge and Peter pass each other, the former ascending and the latter on the way down. *Answers to Nothing* and *So* were pretty closely matched, but *Pure* excites me as thoroughly as *Us* bores me. The core tracks, like the pop epic "Cold, Cold Heart", the slower, jittery "Pure Love", the smooth "Little One" and the especially Gabriel-esque "Waiting Days" (check out the bird sounds straight from "Excellent Birds"), are clearly accomplished, and some of the stranger songs, like the understated, percussion-heavy "Sweet 'n' Sensitive Thing" and the churning "Hands Around My Heart", I like even better. The only song I can't really say I like is the last one, a waltz called "Tumbling Down", whose one-two-three accordion sound gets on my nerves almost immediately, a situation which Ure's uncharacteristically-lackluster half-spoken vocals doesn't alleviate much. Cut this album off after 10, though, and you really have something.

## Pet Shop Boys

### *Please*, 1986 LP

Freshman year in college I met a girl (Stacie, who I later went out with for some time, twice) who claimed

that her favorite band was some bizarre Dead Milkmen-ish group nobody had ever heard of called the Pet Shop Boys. Later that year this album came out, and there wasn't much else for her to say than "Hmm, never mind..."

I don't know whether these Pet Shop Boys had a more interesting underground period before emerging, or whether the band she heard was someone else entirely. These days the Pet Shop Boys have long since wandered off into the desert of neo-disco vaudevillian camp, but back when this album came out they seemed to me very much like part of the same synth-pop tradition as Yaz and Ultravox, combining the former's dance-sense with the latter's maximal arrangements. "West End Girls", their first hit, is a charming, if slight, piece, merging little bits of Propaganda's minor-key synthesis, T'Pau's "Sex Talk" talk/rap spoken verses, and a drum-machine pattern filched out of New Order's dustbin during the night. If you don't sync with the song instantly, though, you will hate it, because it really does little more than jog in place for a few minutes.

The following song on *Please*, "Opportunities (Let's Make Lots of Money)", moves closer to Depeche Mode, with metallic percussion sounds and a steroidal kick/snare pattern. The lyrics are cynical and sardonic, without actually being particularly clever, as in fact most of the Pet Shop Boys songs are. As with "West End Girls", this is a song in the time-honored AAAAAAAA structure, and you'll either like it some or not like it very much at all. I like the drums. It's okay.

The rest of the record, though, I'd pitch. When Neil and Chris put their mind to it, they can be limp enough to make Spandau Ballet sound like Oingo Boingo, and for most of its length this album is boredom personified. Or vinylified, or something like that.

### *West End Girls*, 1985 7"

I don't know why I have this single. I don't remember buying it before *Please*, and I certainly wouldn't have bought it afterwards. It has a non-album b-side called "A Man Could Get Arrested".

## Our Daughter's Wedding

### *Moving Windows*, 1982 LP

Being simultaneously a poor man's Orchestral Manœuvres in the Dark and a poor man's Kraftwerk is rough, thankless work, but ODW bear up relatively well on this album. "Auto Music" and "Elevate Her"

are solid ultra-mechanoid robo-dance numbers. "She Was Someone" and "Moving Windows" work more melody into the mixture. The sad truth, or my sad opinion at any rate, is that none of the three members (identified only as "Keith", "Scott" and "Layne") can sing or play anything of note. Their drum machine never seems to get past the presets, and the sounds are painfully cheesy. When they treat their awkward stiffness as a virtue, as on the dark "Longitude 60", they improve to the level of a bad Gary Numan cover band (imagine!), but when they try to cover it up they end up merely inadequate.

## Ministry

### *Twitch*, 1986 LP

This is where I would mention New Order if I liked them, but I don't. New Order would lead to early Ministry, which I don't have any of, either. So, we move on to mid-transition Ministry. *Twitch* is the beginning of Ministry's industrial phase (still underway as of this writing), but this album still shows remnants of the band's earlier dance-pop instincts. Basically, the percussion tracks are heavily industrial, big pounding factory noises with usually little connection to "real" drum sounds; the keyboards are closer to dance music; and the vocals fall somewhere in between, brutally distorted by dance standards, but relatively tame compared to later Ministry or Nine Inch Nails.

I'm not crazy about where Ministry came from or where it went to, and this midpoint doesn't make me feel much differently. For one song, the frenetic "Over the Shoulder", it all makes sense to me, but the rest of the time this just isn't music I would want to *listen* to. As club fare, either dance or anti-dance, it's fine, maybe even inspired, but I just don't listen to that stuff at home.

## Depeche Mode

### *People are People*, 1984 LP

Much more creative and light-handed use of scrap-metal noises is made by Depeche Mode. This album compiles some singles and album tracks from their first three (?) albums, but as it's the only DM record I have, and there are no liner notes to speak of, I can't provide details. By a few albums after this, Depeche Mode had been nastily consumed by the sort of stardom-bloat that has come to afflict U2, INXS and REM, among others. These songs are from a younger, less-pretentious time

when they still had to work for a living. I doubt I'd be able to sit still through an entire Depeche Mode studio album, but this collection keeps the energy up throughout. The bulk are very good songs, like "People are People", "Love in Itself", "Work Hard", "Get the Balance Right" and "Leave in Silence", that combine inventive rhythm programming and lots of samplers with a keen enough melodic sense that if their lives depended on it some of these songs could probably eke out a subsistence without the clanging, crashing sound effects.

*People Are People* also has one of Depeche Mode's two truly great songs, the epic "Everything Counts". Although Vince Clarke had departed to form Yaz by the time Depeche Mode made this song, it shows his influence plainly. It's use of several intertwined monophonic keyboards lines is very Yaz like: the bwah-bwah-bwah bass-synth, melodica-like recorder-y sound, synth-marimba and analog brass combine with the inexorable drum pattern, and the vocals add some melodic adhesive. For over seven minutes, this combination simmers along, rarely changing pace. Each of the parts drop out in places, but the remaining ones show no signs of noticing. Ardent fans of intra-band dynamics may find this hateful, as it's pretty obvious it's accomplished by just punching mute on one synth or the other at the appropriate times, but it doesn't bother me. Long as it is, "Everything Counts" seems to go by me in a minute.

### *Shake the Disease, 1985 12"*

Depeche Mode's other truly great song is "Shake the Disease". This time around I knew what to do: rather than getting the album and having to sit through the not-so-great tracks, I went for the 8:44 extended remix, on marbled vinyl no less, so as to extract the maximum protracted aural and visual pleasure from the article.

Where "Everything Counts"'s appeal I consider mostly instrumental, it is the singing in "Shake the Disease" that I love. There is something about the articulation of the chorus phrase that I find absolutely captivating. The melody seems to glide from note to note effortlessly, and though it telegraphs its chorus intentions measures in advance, I always feel like, when it actually makes its move, I didn't expect it after all, as if the inevitability of it had lulled me into believing that the build-up really would repeat forever, never paying off.

I don't quite feel like this as I do about some Sisters of Mercy songs, which I think I could listen to for an hour non-stop, easily, but I could definitely stretch this one to twice its extended length without tiring of it. Getting the extended version was definitely a good

move. (The flip-side, "Flexible", is okay, but it's precisely the sort of song I imagined the album would be filled out with, and since that was the other half of why I bought "Shake the Disease" on a single, I don't listen to it much.)

## Gardening By Moonlight

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### *Method in the Madness, 1983 LP*

Gardening by Moonlight takes Depeche Mode's basic strategies and does them all a quantum level better. Everything: the drum programming is inspired, the noises of a wider range than Depeche Mode's rather standard collection of lead-pipe and gear-grinding sounds; the synth instrumentation stakes out its own territory, rather than trying to reproduce Vince Clarke; and Bram Tchaikovsky sings backing vocals on a few songs. GbM are less dance-oriented than Depeche Mode (though "Method in the Madness" and "Whistling in the Dark" are perfectly serviceable in that regard), and concentrate more, I think, on making songs that can stand on their own. The muted dialog-snatches on "Strange Views" remind me of some early Chameleons stuff, and this album also reminds me of the Lucy Show, but mostly because it is obscure and the band is basically two people. Also, this album has one of the many songs I have or know called "Chance", none of which are covers of the other ones. *This* "Chance" is a warped, cacophonous composition with lots of eerie piano, odd squeaky window-washing noises and tentative percussion, that breaks into a smoother (by comparison) chorus at odd intervals with very little warning. It's not the most accessible song here, but I think it's my favorite. It also serves as an effective half-stop for the album, which then picks up again with the more-rhythmic "Strange News" and then ends for good with a remixed reprise of "Method in the Madness", called "Method Again" to forestall confusion.

There must be some story behind this album and band. Its two members, John Johnson and Duncan Bridgeman, must be known for some other reason, but I don't know what, and so no amount of scrutiny of *this* book will reveal it, and since none of *my* sources list GbM, I'll simply have to leave it a mystery. I don't know of any other records by the band, and I've never met anybody else who has heard of them (at least, nobody whom I've *asked*, which isn't actually that many people, come to think of it), and this is all the more mysterious given how good the album is. Perhaps this is simply my naïveté, or my misunderstanding of market forces, but I can't help thinking that if Depeche

Mode could become mega-stars and Tears for Fears could make a living, both doing what GbM does, only with a fifth the genius (if that), that with proper handling Gardening by Moonlight could have led a happy, profitable career, and I'd have more of their albums to love and cherish.

But, it was not to be.

## The Opposition

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### *Intimacy*, 1983 LP

While I'm on the subject of obscure bands in this general vein, here's another from the same year as Gardening by Moonlight. I discovered the Opposition when they opened for Thomas Dolby on his tour for *The Golden Age of Wireless*. They had a cool sound, anchored by great powerful bass-pedal synths, and I made a note to get "their album". As best I could tell at the time, though, they didn't *have* an album. Years later, having long since ceased to search for it, I found this album, which I *assume* is by the same band. You wouldn't know from listening to it, though. *This* band sounds like a sullen Dream Academy. Now, maybe they sounded like a sullen Dream Academy back *then*, too, and I just used to like that more than I do now. Whatever the case, my impression is that this dark, moody album sets out, at best, to depress me, and doesn't even accomplish that.

## Eurythmics

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### *Be Yourself Tonight*, 1985 LP

The Eurythmics were another pillar of New Wave, Annie Lennox a vocalist with as much personality as Alison Moyet, and, eventually, a great deal more success. Her voice has a coldness that almost always turns me off, which explains why there aren't very many Eurythmics records in this book. I made an exception, however, for *Revenge*, which explains why there is one. Having liked *Revenge* so much, I tentatively stepped one back, to see if the experience was replicable. That explains why I have two. The experience wasn't, and that's why I have *only* two.

Although I don't much like this album, it is plenty interesting, and if this is the *sort* of thing you like, you will probably like this very much. Besides the hit "Would I Lie to You", there are duets with Aretha Franklin and Elvis Costello (neither of whom do I care for, either). It doesn't have the grating monotony of some of the Eurythmics' early work (like "Sweet

Dreams"), but neither does it have the pure pop grace of *Revenge*, though a couple songs ("Conditioned Soul" and "It's Alright-(Baby's Coming Back)") approach it.

### *Revenge*, 1986 CD

This is the one Eurythmics phase I wholeheartedly connect with. On their way from grating to ingratiating, they pass through most of an album's worth of material that absolutely fascinates me.

"Missionary Man", the explosive first track, finds Annie and Dave venturing into a strange land where metal and gospel are one. Dave's guitar surges through power chords to the heavy beat of Clem Burke's drums, while behind them backing vocalist Joniece Jamison rips off blistering gospel vocal riffs. Annie only has to ride the gap between these two poles to knit the song together, which she does with ease.

"Thorn in My Side" changes moods abruptly, bringing in acoustic guitar and a saxophone for a gentle, lilting pop song. Annie warms up her voice, and if I squint my ears I can almost believe that this is the demo version of some unreleased Patty Smyth song (which, from me, is a compliment). "When Tomorrow Comes" turns the drums up a bit again, brings the electric guitar back, and pushes Annie back a ways into her usual cocoon of reverb. The resulting song is about halfway between "Missionary Man" and "Thorn in My Side", an exultant tune that makes me think of the Swimming Pool Q's at their best (again, that's good).

I skip over a couple songs then, and jump ahead to "Let's Go!", which might be "Missionary Man"'s dance-happy alter ego. Patrick Seymour's keyboards do a credible sawing-violin impersonation, and the wailing harmonica from "Missionary Man" returns. I skip the repetitive "Take Your Pain Away" to get to the sparkling "A Little of You", which manages to remind me simultaneously of Joan Armatrading and the Parachute Club.

And, skipping the bluesy "In This Town", I get to the last song, the slow, stately "I Remember You", which combines a shuffling martial drumbeat with a full orchestra, and lets Dave, Annie and Annie and perhaps a few more tracks of Annie raise their voices in a stirring strained chorus of the soaring "Bridge Over Troubled Waters" variety. I think if the Eurythmics had retained the orchestra full time, and made album after album of songs like this one, their entry here would have been much, much longer.

## The Adventures

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### *The Adventures, 1985 LP*

Still on the subject of synthesizer-based pop bands with women in them, the Adventures take what, compared to the Eurythmics two-person core, must seem like the maximalist approach to constructing a band, employing no less than seven full members, who inadvisably appear on the album jacket in identical denim work shirts, looking like Devo's Midnight Runners (they *are* Irish...). Beside the usual cadre of guitar/bass/drums/keyboards, there are *three* singers, and for all that the album still features eight guest musicians and a choir, as well as three different producers and a remixer.

Whatever ideas you might get about the band's music from the imposing album cover, the Adventures are actually anything but imposing. A more persistently agreeable set of shimmering, shiny pop songs you are unlikely to find. Lead singer Terry Sharpe's sweet, high voice complements guitarist and principle songwriter Pat Gribben's tunes with a charm that brings to mind Vince Clarke and Andy Bell right away, but the replacement of sequencers and dance rhythms with actual humans (especially the other two singers, Ellen Gribben and Spud Murphy), a sense of sweeping beauty, and a touch of schmaltz, makes the Adventures' sound more satisfying to me than Erasure's, though admittedly less striking at first.

"Send My Heart" was the single from this album, and I think it and "Another Silent Day" are the best songs here. I will always associate them with Real Life's "Send Me an Angel" and the Silencers' "Painted Moon", for both musical and lyrical reasons. The Adventures are less gimmicky than Real Life, but less somber than the Silencers. This is a light album that it doesn't do to make too much of, but it's very enjoyable and showed that the band had a good deal of promise.

### *The Sea of Love, 1988 CD*

The band wasted very little time fulfilling the first album's promise. From the arresting a cappella chorus that begins the title track, *The Sea of Love* has whatever punch *The Adventures* lacked.

Member attrition, a seemingly irreversible trend for the Adventures, has begun already here. Keyboardist Jonathan Whitehead is no longer part of the permanent lineup, though he plays as a guest on seven of this album's nine songs. A horde of other guests help out, from synth programmers to a tin whistle player and, as if the Adventures were in need of such things, additional backing vocalists. The

ensemble is well-managed, though, and produces a smooth, flowing stream of music over which the many singers' voices intertwine marvelously. If the first album was a pleasant breeze, this one is one of those magical tornadoes that sweeps the heroine and her dog off to emerald castles, and drops retributive houses on evildoers.

The Adventures are a solidly mid-tempo band, shying firmly away from speed heroics or morose dirges. On the first album, this sometimes worked out to songs that weren't fast enough to perk you up, nor slow enough to make you sit down, and which didn't provide any effective substitute for these two conventional motives. Here the problems have all been solved. Someone employing wholly mathematical criteria could well slate these songs for one of those office radio stations that seem to be called "Magic" in every city I've been to, but listening to them my impression is that they tend to interrupt work rather than encourage it. If you can imagine combining the stadium-pomp of Journey with the acoustic-punk anthemic exuberance of the Alarm, you might be able to come up with some better analogy than that to describe this album, but it's the best I can do.

Once, in college, towards the beginning of a new relationship (not that there were lots of these, mind you), when my then-girlfriend Nora had just left my room, I rushed to the stereo and put this album on, fast enough that as she was leaving the building she could just hear the opening line, "I'm drowning in the sea of love!", blast out. It wasn't really accurate, of course, but it was a nearly-perfect moment nonetheless. This is definitely the kind of album that would make an apt soundtrack for the life of a *joyous* person, were all lives movies.

And shouldn't they be?

### *Trading Secrets With the Moon, 1990 CD*

Drummer Paul Crowder gets the short straw this time, leaving a five-piece Adventures (still with three singers, though!) to make the band's third record. He appears to have taken all the band's electronic gear with him, as this album admits only once to a potentially synthetic instrument ("keyboards" on "Sweet Burning Love", played by Housemartins/Beautiful South/Proclaimers collaborator Pete Wingfield, who also produced the track). The balance is taken up with piano, organs, accordion, violin, Uilleann pipes, bodhran, bouzouki, horns, harmonica, harpsichord and who could forget the whistle?

My initial response to this album was profound disappointment. I had really gotten into the slick airy flights on *The Sea of Love*, and a folksy back-to-basics

was not at all what I wanted. But as with Jane Siberry's album *Bound by the Beauty*, the previous year, I eventually came to terms with it. Where *Bound by the Beauty*, once it found a way into my favor, has remained there, though, this record has slipped out again. In the end it isn't the lack of synthesizers and elaborate sequencing that I miss here, but the most personal element of all: the singers. In keeping with the quieter mood of this album, Terry Sharpe carries a lot more of this one on his own than he did on the first two, and even when Eileen and Spud *do* sing, they are firmly in the background, and someone coming to the Adventures for the first time with *Trading Secrets with the Moon* would probably be somewhat mystified as to why they are listed as band members, when the more notable contributions of Jonathan Whitehead, drummer Neil Conti and percussionist Luis Jardim are only granted "additional musician" status. Thick multi-part harmonies were what made *The Sea of Love* so powerful, and without them the Adventures are again merely charming.

#### *Lions and Tigers and Bears*, 1993 CD

Another album, another member down. Spud Murphy is gone for this one, which I *think* is their fourth, but I might have missed one, as Elektra appears to have abandoned them in the US. Ironically, the four-piece incarnation of the Adventures turns out to be the most self-reliant yet. Besides Whitehead and drummer Martin Hughes, there is only *one* guest, Peter John Vettese, and he plays only on the singles "Monday Monday" and "Raining All Over the World".

Self-reliant is not the same thing as self-sufficient, though. A couple of these songs rekindle the energy of the second album ("Raining All Over the World" and "The Only World I Know" are the ones I have in mind), but the rest of them seem unable to resolve themselves. Where the songs on *Trading Secrets with the Moon* sounded like the Adventures not playing up their real strengths, the ones here often don't even sound particularly like the Adventures. The cover of the Mamas and Papas' "Monday Monday", which begins the album, sounds completely gratuitous to me, and "Perfect Day" sounds like an attempt to disguise Sharpe's voice in the hopes that its high pitch was all that was really keeping them off the charts. It didn't work for the charts, and it certainly didn't work for me. Even worse than that, Eileen Gribben is almost invisible on this album. The small picture of her on the back of the case is her most prominent contribution, so hopes of a return to *Sea of Love* form seem completely baseless at this point.

That's not to say that this is a bad album. Pat Gribben remains a solid songwriter, the band plays

well, and the production is good. You might like it a lot. For me, though, the Adventures were a band with one killer twist, and without it they are basically unremarkable.

#### *Raining All Over the World*, 1992 CD5

Though I like to list singles after the album they appeared on, this one came out quite a ways in advance of *Lions and Tigers and Bears*. The title track, as I said in the album review, is excellent. "Straight to Heaven" was renamed to "Too Late for Heaven" for the album, and "Say I'm Sorry" also ended up there, so the fourth track, "In the Garden", is the only one unique to this single. Don't bother; it's a throwaway, even if you *can* hear Eileen on it.

#### *Monday Monday*, 1993 CD5

If I had heard *Lions and Tigers and Bears* before buying this single, I wouldn't have. However, at the time I was in Amsterdam without a CD player, maniacally buying up everything I came across that I didn't figure to ever see again if I didn't get it while I was in Europe, so I got both the album and the single. It contains the album tracks "Monday Monday" and "Perfect Day", and the non-album tracks "Lost Train" and "Queen of Sorrow". The last of these is actually interesting enough that I'm glad I *did* get the single. The verses are pretty hokey, but the chorus breaks into some catchy "oo-wee-oo"s that, if you can get over the Starlight Vocal Band resemblance, are pretty cool.

## The Parachute Club

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#### *At the Feet of the Moon*, 1984 LP

The Adventures (or, rather, the first-album group photo) remind me of another seven-piece ensemble, the Parachute Club. In this one everybody plays instruments, and guests are the exception rather than a standard practice. The Parachute Club are bouncy and upbeat, and use a lot of percussion and synth noises and programming, and lead singer Lorraine Segato's voice slides into and out of notes with a throaty confidence that is a decent remove from Terry Sharpe's vulnerable quaver. Backing vocalists Julie Masi and Margo Davidson are a more conventional presence than Eileen and Spud, and the band doesn't live or die by vocal harmonies.

In my ongoing effort to interrelate every artist in the book by an unending series of "All You Zombies..."-like imaginary couplings, the Parachute Club is close to what I imagine you'd get from crossing

the Eurogliders (up next) with Miami Sound Machine. Another way of explaining the later half of that description is that if you took the Parachute Club, tossed them in a big truck, and drove them from their home in Toronto down to Miami, with a slow trickle of water running into them, by the time you hit the Florida border you'd have a tired, diluted ensemble substituting a mild ethnic influence for its original unique dynamism.

Some of the songs here work better than others. "At the Feet of the Moon" itself is my favorite, with "Sexual Intelligence" and "Middle Child" close behind. The thing that keeps the Parachute Club on my mind, even though I've never seen any other records and know by hearsay of only one more, is the group's sound itself. With the vast majority of current popular music relying on only four-instrument arrangements, or often just three, it is pretty unusual to get a band who are willing to have as much going on *at once* as this. Even the Adventures, with their cast of thousands in reserve, don't *sound* like a lot of people *playing*. They sound, at their best, like a lot of people *singing*, but that's somewhat more common. Complicated instrumentation (as opposed to just *big* arrangements, like orchestras or lots of stacked guitars) is mostly out of vogue, the province of fringe styles like neo-progressive and skacore. The Parachute Club are nearly unique in bringing this many simultaneous elements to bear on pop songs. The album credits timbales, percussion, drums, percussion, a Simmons kit, Linn programming, bass, grand piano, synth, vocoder, synth programming, sax, congas, percussion, syncussion, rhythm guitar, rhythm and lead guitar, synth percussion, bass synth, sonics, DX-7, Linn, sequencer programming and "horn arrangement". And I'm willing to bet that if you'd checked in 1984, you wouldn't have found dust on any of them.

Odd notes connecting them to other things: producer Michael Beinhorn also did Soul Asylum's *Grave Dancers Union*, and the unlisted bonus track "Rise Up" was originally produced by Daniel Lanois, co-producer of U2's *Unforgettable Fire* and *The Joshua Tree* (which this sounds nothing like).

## Eurogliders

### *This Island*, 1984 LP

From the Parachute Club it is a short jump to the Eurogliders, who despite their name are actually Australian. They make do with only six members, and don't produce quite as frenetic a barrage of parts as the Parachute Club, but they share a fondness for

percussion, horns, popcorn bass parts and lots of syncopated synth intervention, as well as multiple vocal lines (mainly Grace Knight and songwriter Bernie Lynch) and irresistible upbeat pop songs.

*This Island* is a somewhat darker record than *At the Feet of the Moon*, though. Sinister bass parts rumble through these songs, and Grace Knight's singing has an ominous character at times, which gives the songs a disquieting edge that the Parachute Club doesn't display. Some of the songs that are the most catchy in parts, like "No Action", also have slower, moodier sides. It is a rare song that doesn't find hooks somewhere eventually, but at the same time it is a rare song that is *nothing but* hooks ("Another Day in the Big World" is closest). The Eurogliders also garner some "serious music" credibility by recruiting new-age trumpeter Mark Isham to play on this album.

I've gone through phases with *This Island*, one year thinking it's thoroughly amazing, and another thinking that there is something strange about Australians that I can't quite place. At the moment, though, listening to it again for this review after not playing the record for quite some time, I'm impressed all over again with it. The arrangements are a bit sparer than the Parachute Club's, but the songs are more sophisticated. Less catchy, but often more interesting. I can't say that I like this or *At the Feet of the Moon* "better", but they each have their points.

### *Absolutely*, 1986 LP

The second Eurogliders album has one really great song: "Can't Wait to See You". It also has all my least favorite songs of theirs: the others. A depressingly *normal* album, it finds the band simplifying their sound considerably, perhaps in an attempt to stake out some of the ground left behind by Missing Persons and Berlin, both of whom released their final albums in 1986. This gambit, whether intentional or not, fails artistically, as they seem to have set their sights on "Take My Breath Away" instead of "Metro" (see Berlin if you aren't sure what I mean by that). It must not have worked commercially, either, as the Eurogliders promptly followed those bands into obscurity.

Much like what happened to the Adventures (listen to me: as if my likes or dislikes are something that "happens" to a band...), in the effort to give their sound a broader appeal the Eurogliders lost too much of what made them unique; listening to *Absolutely* it's hard to believe that this same band made *This Island* only two years before. Gone are the burbling keyboard arpeggios, dueling bass synths and disarming sober/spritley tensions, and in their place are turgid ballads like "What Kind of Fool", and the blatant "catch America's attention" tactic of a song about



the MOVE bombing in Philadelphia. This is more-conventional top-40 material, but who needed more of *that*? This sort of low-key post-New-Wave slow-song bad-dance-club fodder should have been left to Quarterflash and the Motels (though I think I'm screwing up the chronology there).

Now admittedly, that's the sort of supercilious censure I detest other critics for. I *am* sorry about it, but I like to permit myself the occasional small outburst, and besides (he says, missing the point), this time I think it was earned...

## Four-Three-One

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### *Which Way is Up*, 1984 LP

In a drastic jump, 4-3-1 subsist on only *two* full members, though there are a bunch of guests on this album. I don't know anything about this band. I bought the album long ago in Dallas in a cutout bin because I liked the Escher-dollhouse cover. It's on a Dallas-based label called Recovery, so I have no idea what sort of distribution it got.

The music, at any rate, is very much along the lines of the Parachute Club and the Eurogliders, just with fewer people. Programmed drums and synthesized marimba sounds are very much in evidence, and singer Maggie Ryder's throaty voice has a character similar to Grace Knight's. The berserk opening track, "Animal", is infectious and invigorating. "Slow Motion" is slow getting started, but has a good chorus hook. "Water" has some pretty painful lyrics ("water" is rhymed with "ought to", for one thing), but a nice rubbery bass track mostly redeems it. "Susan" has a cool interplay between a popping bass and some chattering synth-vibes.

All told, I have many of the same reservations about this album that I do about the Eurogliders' *Absolutely*, but it's worth at least knowing about if you liked them.

## Tribe

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### *Here at the Home*, 1990 CD

Synth-rock takes a much darker, very Boston-like turn with the jump from 4-3-1 to Tribe. The presence of prominent keyboards make Tribe quite unusual in Boston rock, which tends to be heavily guitar-bass-drums. Tribe also aspires to more complicated arrangements and structures than most Boston bands do, and its divergences from the pop mainstream are

more arty than punk. The net effect, though, isn't *all* that different. The individual notes in Tribe's songs don't take as long to get used to as those in Throwing Muses and Salem 66's, for instance, but some of the *songs* on this album still do.

There were Tribe releases on vinyl and tape before this CD, but forget about finding them. As far as prosperity is concerned, this is their first album. The picture is further muddled by the fact that eight of then ten songs on this album appear again a year later on *Abort*, the band's *major label* debut. Given how much easier *Abort* is to find than this, only dedicated fans will make it back this far.

If you care enough to seek out this disc, though, you'll be pleased. Like the Cavedogs' *Joyrides for Shut-Ins*, this album compiles tracks from several years previous. "Here at the Home", "Jakpot", "Tied" and "Rescue Me" are 1989 recordings, "Daddy's Home" and "Outside" are from 1988, "Lemmings", "Pinwheels" and "Vigil" are from the 1987 *Tribe* EP, and "Abort" is a 1986 4-track basement recording. The performances are all rougher than on *Abort*, which is sometimes good, sometimes bad, but always interesting. The two tracks that did not make it to *Abort*, "Lemmings" and "Pinwheels", are quite good, and I assume that their exclusion was mostly a matter of their age.

The piece de resistance of *Here at the Home*, though, is the original version of "Abort". Tribe is a strong, talented band, but I think their success up until *Sleeper* rested almost entirely on this one song. This is ironic, because it's clearly the least accomplished track here. Lead vocalist Janet LaValley's powerful voice isn't used at all, as she speaks the lyrics to this song. The band mostly plays the same notes over and over, Eric Brosius's guitar is largely reduced to feedback, and David Penzo's drums could easily be a beatbox. The song exhibits almost no development, the title never appears, and the whole thing stops abruptly because, well, it's gone on long enough. The catch is, it's arresting. Precisely because of its repetitiveness and the way it underutilizes the band's talents, it stands out in virtually any juxtaposition. If you hear it, it will not go unnoticed. You may not *like* it, but you won't just ignore it.

Another consequence of the song's strange appeal is that efforts to reproduce it are almost inherently futile. The temptation in remaking it to make it even *more something* is too strong, and the fact is that the song's impact is based on a delicate balance of factors too subtle to effectively isolate. The band must have realized this, and that's why the version of it here is the original four-track recording made years earlier.

### *Abort*, 1991 CD

You can't expect record-label executives to understand something that subtle, though, so a remade "Abort" is the title track of Tribe's Slash/Warner debut. Sure enough, the new version exaggerates all the things about the song that you could plausibly attribute its appeal to. The guitar feedback is louder, the drums heavier, the vocals more echoey, the ending more abrupt. It comes out more imposing, for sure, but it's just another song on this album. I understand why they redid it (they redid *everything* on this album), but if I'd been them I would have seriously considered using the original, like the Jam's inclusion of the original demo of "That's Entertainment" on *Snap!*

On the whole, though, this album is an improvement on *Here at the Home*. The production is vastly improved, and Tribe's approach benefits from this in a way that the more streamlined style of most Boston bands does not. The combination of using mostly proven material but re-recording everything gives *Abort* the strength of a radio-tape compilation, but the of-a-piece coherence of an album made this way from scratch. For people who knew the band before, the album represents mostly a regrouping, a re-centering, and it is hard to think of this as much more than an alternate version of *Here at the Home*. For those who come upon Tribe for the first time with *Abort*, though, this is a record good enough to take your breath away.

The effective center of *Abort*, for me, despite the casting of "Abort" as the title track, is "Joyride (I Saw the Film)", one of the new songs. In a way, "Joyride" actually recaptures the instant impact of "Abort" better than "Abort" itself does. Again, the secret is keeping simple anything that you are in the slightest doubt about. The rhythm section hammers along with rock-solid rigidity, as steady and inexorable when little else is going on as it is when the chorus' gale-force guitars steal the listener's attention away. The monk-like chanted chorus provides the same element of novelty that Janet's mumbled vocals on "Abort" did, but frees up Janet herself to loose her spooky voice. And the explosive guitar on the second half of the choruses gives this song even more kick than the synth blasts on "Abort" gave it. Replicating this intensity without "Abort"'s minimalism also gives the band room to play, and thus "Joyride" is actually a good advertisement for the band, where "Abort" was really only an ad for itself.

The other new songs here, "Easter Dinner", "Payphone" and "Serenade", fit in nicely with the old ones. "Easter Dinner" sort of bridges the gap between "Daddy's Home" and "Joyride". "Payphone" and "Serenade" both start out slow, and build. As for the

remakes (excluding "Abort"), I think all but the most hard-line traditionalists will agree that most of them are improved, some vastly. Tribe effectively synthesizes such influences as Salem 66's eclecticism, a hint of Siouxsie and the Banshees' ethereal eeriness, some mainstream polish and enough raw underground-bred rock energy to cement the other elements together in an impressive musical edifice. *Abort* is not very much like *Voices Carry* stylistically, but the two albums share a confidence and larger-world awareness that make them transcend their local origins. Many Boston bands, even ones I really like, sound when they "get their chance" like a Boston band making a Boston rock album that happens to get national distribution. Tribe, like 'til tuesday, sounds like a great band whose members just happen to live around here.

## Howard Jones

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### *Dream into Action*, 1985 LP

We now return to Yaz and strike out away from them in another direction. The synthesizer was a remarkable social force in music, giving rise to an entirely new variant of auteur, the composer who could actually play all the parts themselves. The form need not define the style, however, and Howard Jones takes a much less modernist, geometric approach to synth pop. Aside from a cellist on one song, some horns on another, and a handful of backup singers, Howard produces all the extremely-pleasant noises on this very successful album. The hits, which you would have been hard-pressed to avoid hearing in 1985, include "Things Can Only Get Better", "Life in One Day" and "No One Is to Blame".

I bought this album because, well, those are very catchy songs. The image of Howard Jones that will stick in my mind forever, though, is his "surprise" guest appearance at the Amnesty International concert at Giant Stadium in the summer of 1986. I forget whether he appeared just after Joni Mitchell was pelted with beach balls, or just before Joan Baez did Tears for Fears' "Shout" with the Neville Brothers backing her up, but whenever it was, he came on and played "No One Is to Blame", which was about the least appropriate song he could have thought of, given the ostensible political agenda of the show. It was just him at a keyboard, and a sequenced backing track, and about a minute into the song the sequencer crashed, leaving him unaccompanied, and he made a painfully lame attempt to compensate by manually arpeggiating the weak chords he'd reserved for his live keyboard, but it came

nowhere near rescuing a song he should have had the sense not to play, anyway.

## Gary Myrick

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### *Language*, 1983 EP

While my affection for Howard Jones has dwindled, *this* heavily synthetic EP has held up incredibly well for me. Gary Myrick was originally a Dallasite, and this connection got his records played there when I was in high school, even though he'd moved to LA. Melissa has two others (two?), as Gary Myrick and the Figures, which I haven't seen since then and never expect to. I was pretty surprised to run across a used copy of this one during college, and snapped it up instantly. It's a short, five-song sampler, but a very impressive one.

Myrick, synthesist Jay Ferguson (the same guy who did "Thunder Island"?—couldn't tell you), and drummer/programmer Curly Smith are all the personnel needed to operate the bank of fat analog synth equipment that gives these songs a glorious warm, buzzy timbre that you aren't likely to hear out of Miami Sound Machine's DX7's in this lifetime. The programmed Linn drums are terrific, squeezing off submachine gun synth-tom rolls across ticking white-noise hi-hats. Ferguson's Arp Bass fits perfectly with the drum sounds, his Moog, Prophet and Jupiter providing the pitch ceiling, and this all leaves Myrick's guitar and voice plenty of room in the mid-range.

The three songs on side one, "Guitar, Talk, Love and Drums", "Lost in Clubland" and "Glamorous" are good, driving, edgy and fast. The two on the back are the jewels, though. "Message Is You" is slower, smoother, slipping into a soft groove that isn't entirely unlike John Waite's "Missing You", which Myrick played on (later), and perhaps this is the song that brought Myrick to Waite's attention. Any Eighties compilation that misses this song has, in my considered opinion, erred. "Time to Win" is bigger, more anthemic, heavier on the guitar and, are those *acoustic* drums? Some of them? Big sinister Numanesque synth-brass, slapback vocal echoes. Why wasn't this huge?

## Havana 3am

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### *Havana 3am*, 1991 CD

Myrick went off and played with John Waite for a while, and the next time I heard of him he had moved

to London and was in this strange "who?" minor supergroup with Paul Simonon, who was in the Clash, and Nigel Dixon and Travis Williams, who I guess I'm supposed to know for *some* reason, but don't. Their album is a mess, and rarely shows the potential that I'm sure the members are, or were, capable of. There's a sort of leather-jacketed motorcycle-rockabilly ambition here, but between the headache-inducing gunshot snare and my knowing that Myrick, at least, *could* help this mock-Latino bravado if he felt like it, I just can't take it. What is a Texan doing in England making Spanish Western music? Baffling. Also, the lyrics are awful.

## Raise the Dragon

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### *Deliverance*, 1984 EP

Much of this chapter's music arose firmly in the middle of the EP age in music merchandising, an era when record companies attempted to convince the public that a \$5.99 EP half the length of a \$7.99 album was a great way to explore new artists who you wouldn't otherwise care about. This didn't make people who weren't interested change their mind for even a moment, and so mainly served to annoy the people who *did* like the new bands, but only got a few songs for their trouble. I fall into both categories of people for *Raise the Dragon*. I may be misremembering this, but I could swear I bought this EP solely on the strength of its title. Then, after listening to it, I wanted more.

*Raise the Dragon* proper was two guys, Richard Spellman and Sean Lyons. On the opening track, "The Blue Hour", they sound like a weaker-principled Blue Nile, but the other four songs pick up the pace and deliver a credible synth-pop. Five supplemental musicians fill out the sound, the bass player Andrew Bodnar's fretless slides being a particularly well-chosen element. Spellman sings, in a sort of cross between Frankie Goes to Hollywood, Spandau Ballet, David Bowie and Tears for Fears, without *any* of the theatrical or emotional excess of those (not a very good description, is it?). Lyons plays guitar, but this music is drum/bass/synth music, and the guitar gets largely lost.

"*Raise the Dragon*" (from *Raise the Dragon*, by *Raise the Dragon* – I love doing that) is my favorite song here, but "White Country" has a slow, strained appeal, and "Deliverance" is nicely upbeat. Anne Dudley produced three of these songs, not that you could tell by listening to them. A small, good record. I like it.

## Intimate Strangers

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### *Charm, 1986 LP*

Spellman and Lyons reemerge, puzzlingly, two years later, with a new name, sounding like a cross between Icehouse and Men at Work. What motivated this transition I can't imagine. The album comes off the press flying at warp speed toward the reclaimed-vinyl melting-cauldron, and what they thought would arrest this unflattering trajectory I have no idea.

The one thing this album makes most clear is that Spellman and Lyons have appalling taste. They ditch Bodnar, the one Raise the Dragon participant who distinguished himself, and remix the spirit right out of the three EP tracks that get rehashed here, "Deliverance", "Raise the Dragon" and "The Blue Hour". "Raise the Dragon", in fact, they completely redo, and the new version is positively awful. You would have trouble doing worse than this if you *tried* to wreck the song. Ach. It's incredible that somebody would do this to *any* song, never mind to their *own* song.

"The Blue Hour" survives a little better, and "Deliverance" only has a thin layer of production Cheeze-Wiz spread on it, but it's enough to make it turn funny colors and start to smell if you leave it around uncovered. Kids, when you grow up, don't do this to yourselves.

## Art in America

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### *Art in America, 1983 LP*

Art in America is another 1983 orphan, a band whose one album appeared and disappeared without ever getting a strong foothold on anything critical or commercial. The title track got played on the radio at least once in Dallas, though, and the line "Let's resolve the question: / Is it live or is it taped?" interested me enough that I picked up the album in the record store, and I liked the cover, the name, and the fact that they had a harp player, well enough to buy it. Also, it was probably on sale.

It's obscurity is sad, borderline tragic. The band proper is three Flynns, Chris (vocals, guitars), Shishonee (vocals, harp) and Dan (drums), with help on bass and keyboards. They take a crisp, agreeable core of good pop/rock songwriting, and augment it with supple drumming and harp playing that fits in remarkably well with an upbeat rock band, filling roles usually handled by keyboards, instead of slipping into Clannad-esque atmospherics. Chris' vocals are likable,

with occasional harmonies from Shishonee, and the guitars have just enough edge to keep the band on a firm rock footing.

There's barely a weak song on this album. "Art in America", the odd grocery-store anthem "The Line" and the surging mock-capitalist "Loot" are quick and energetic. "Undercover Lover" and "Sinatra Serenade" are slower and prettier, the latter reminding me of Everything But the Girl's "The Night I Heard Caruso Sing". "Won't It Be Strange" and "Too Shy to Say" are somewhere in between, light and bouncy, and "Brett and Hibby" is a wistful story-song. Art in America remind me of a less-synthetic Missing Persons, or like an alliance of Aztec Camera, Primitives and Yes malcontents who got together to get in on the New Wave thing. I can understand, I guess, why this album wasn't a commercial blockbuster, as it's not really dance music, and it wasn't dark or heavy enough to fit in any major non-dance niche at the time, either. I find that the album has aged quite well, though, and over a decade later it still sounds fresh and unique. I wonder what became of the band?

## Icehouse

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### *Icehouse, 1981 LP*

"Icehouse" (from *Icehouse* by Icehouse), is a stiff, cold, awkward synthesizer track that, about three-fourths of the way through, plugs in a guitar and turns from very cold to very cool. "We Can Get Together", the other hit, assumes a jaunty pose somewhere in the vicinity of A Flock of Seagulls (with Cactus World News' "ah-oo" tossed in, quietly). Unfortunately, it has some painfully bad lyrics (the chorus goes "You can buckle my shoes, / You can pick up my sticks, / You can knock at my door."), and the yodel noises that singer Iva Davies makes when he turns corners do not lovingly caress my ears. "Boulevard" shows a dramatic urge that is kind of nice, but the rest of the album fails to live up to anything in particular. Davies voice isn't powerful, and doesn't strike me as having any sort of character to carry it instead, and the band isn't a presence at all. Icehouse made a bunch more albums after this one, but you're on your own if you want to pursue them.

## Modern English

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### *After the Snow*, 1992 CD

Modern English made one of the greatest pop love songs of all time, “I Melt with You”, and it’s on this album. That should be all I *have* to say, but I’ll append some ancillary observations.

“I Melt with You” is about as close to perfect as a song can get, in my opinion. It’s got rumbling drums, pristine keyboards, chiming guitar, skipping bass, love-song lyrics that you can quote without sounding either pretentious *or* hackneyed, the right pace for dancing, dynamic- and tempo- variations, a dead stop followed by a crashing-drum-led return (always a good feature), interesting aural effects, it’s simple enough for cover bands to play, and the band never did anything else to compete seriously with it and dilute its appeal.

They did manage to fill up this album with other stuff, though. In fact, this CD reissue (the original came out in 1982) adds six b-sides and remixes to the album’s original eight songs, and so fills well over an hour. *After the Snow* itself is a likable enough album. “Someone’s Calling” and “Life in the Gladhouse” are good songs in their own right, and might have carried the album to minor success even without “I Melt with You”. The other five are of pretty consistent above-average New Wave dance-pop quality, and they fill the space around those three songs amiably, but it definitely feels like it is space, and they are basically filling it.

The added tracks don’t change much. The single mix of “I Melt with You” is barely different from the album version (a little shorter). The single mix of “Someone’s Calling” is a little shorter, too, and mixed a bit drier than the album version. There are two different alternate takes on “Life in the Gladhouse”, both “extended” by the usual dodges of looping some drum parts and throwing in extra percussion and stutter edits. All three versions are nice, but one wonders whether this many versions of this song were really called for. The other two additional tracks are unmistakably b-sides, and only the most devoted Modern English fan will find themselves thanking 4AD for including them here. The doleful twelve-minute concluding track, “The Choicest View”, would probably have been *much* better left off, as it brings the album to a close with somewhat less panache than the band probably intended.

On the other hand, the reissue is a mid-price CD round these parts, and has, like I said, “I Melt with You”, so that’s reason enough, in my opinion, to get it. If you don’t like the rest, well, that’s what the Program button on your CD player is for.

### *Ricochet Days*, 1992 CD

The third Modern English album is better on the whole, but doesn’t produce anything to challenge “I Melt with You”, and so is largely a footnote in my collection. “Rainbow’s End” and “Hands Across the Sea” are good, probably better than “Someone’s Calling” and “Life in the Gladhouse”, and the rest of the record is certainly more assured and appealing than the “other” parts of *After the Snow*. If the band had never made “I Melt with You”, I’d probably be kinder to this album, more charmed by it as being the upbeat end of 4AD records’ spectrum, more willing to patiently extol the smaller virtues of “Machines”, “Chapter 12” and “Ricochet Days”. Having been dragged by their one lucky hit into a much nicer sea than they would otherwise have been able to swim to, though, Modern English is stuck more or less treading water, no matter what they do. This is unfortunate, but if you have to tread water this is, at least, pleasant music for it.

## Red Rockers

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### *Good as Gold / Schizophrenic Circus*, 1995 CD

The Red Rockers’ hit, “China”, is about as close as you can come to “I Melt with You” without being sued for it. It has the same structure, similar melody, similar production, similar ambition. Alas, the drumming isn’t quite as good, the lyrics aren’t as useful, and the rest of the album is too much like Translator with too much reverb. Plus, “China” is the first track, which squashes any incentive to slog through the rest. Great song, dud album. Cost me \$1.

## The Suburbs

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### *Love is the Law*, 1983 LP

You might think, since I named this whole chapter after the Suburbs, that I would have a lot to say about them, or very *good* things, at any rate. Actually, it was just a good chapter name. I have about the same things to say about the Suburbs that I said about the Red Rockers. The title track (again the first) to this album is a faster “China”, better played and less of a lyrical nul. Horns and piano bolster it, and it starts building very nicely right before it fades out. I wish it were longer. The rest of this album doesn’t move me an inch. The Suburbs seem to have had a strong cult following, and a compilation came out in 1992 or so, but for me this is band and an album with one great song and that’s all.

## Payola\$

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### *No Stranger to Danger, 1982 LP*

Payola\$ are a band from Vancouver, whom I would never have thought I'd like from the other descriptions I've read. Ira Robbins makes a big deal out of their similarity to Mott the Hoople, and compares them to the Clash mainly on the grounds of their reggae influences. Well, I only know Mott the Hoople as a silly name, and the Clash's fascination with reggae was exactly what I hated about them.

Fortunately, I had all these Payola\$ records long before I bought a copy of the *Trouser Press Record Guide*. "Eyes of a Stranger", the single from this, their second album, was a sizable hit that crops up on the radio frequently even now, years later, so perhaps you've heard it. It and "Rose" are the closest approaches to reggae that I hear, and even on those the guitar on the backbeat and a slight shuffling dub tendency in Chris Taylor's drumming are the only audible influences. Paul Hyde's voice sounds like a cross between Billy Bragg and Bruce Cockburn, and it dispels the spectre of reggae completely for me. The other songs aren't even haunted by it.

Payola\$ are hard to categorize. Or, to put it another way, they're easy to categorize in several different ways. Both their attitude and their style are sort of halfway between the Alarm and Oingo Boingo, or between Translator and the Psychedelic Furs, but those are both wide stretches to interpolate into. There are fast, bouncy party songs with slightly sad twists, like "Romance" and "Some Old Song". There are loud, brash rock songs like "Youth" and "Rockers". There are slow, smooth ballads, like "Hastings Street" and "Pennies Into Gold", which I find particularly effective, as Hyde has some of Bragg's knack for real-life lyrics, and for letting the rough edges in his voice give a slow song character without ruining it.

All together, the Payola\$ display that fresh, hard-to-pigeonhole *new* energy that seemed self-explanatory at the beginning of New Wave, and that seems almost unfathomable now that the establishment has got the situation under control and sliced it up into neat sub-genres. The task of explaining them is made even harder by the fact that I got their first two albums back when my collection was so small that bothering to look for patterns in it would have been an exercise in statistical futility. The Payola\$ just seem like *music* to me. There's something to be said for naïveté, not that I'd want to go back. Just remember, I remind both of us, the point of grouping things in this book is to enrich the listening experience by connecting artists to musical contexts, not to limit it with labels.

### *Hammer on a Drum, 1983 LP*

Payola\$ third album has the song that originally drew me to them, the intensely bitter child-abuse tale "Where Is This Love". Insistent sixteenth-note closed hi-hats run through the entire song, with acoustic guitar and quiet keyboards on the first half, electric guitar and louder synths on the second half. Hyde's voice slams from whisper to yell, covering the highs of the child's life and the focal low point, "He's home again, he's drunk again, / A fist falls down / Like a hammer on a drum". It's a moving song, but I loved it initially just because it sounded *so* cool. The rhythmic tension between the fast, clicking hi-hats and the slower guitar parts really drives the song, and the transition from acoustic to electric is riveting.

The other song here that became a firm part of my life was "Christmas Is Coming". Christmas, in my parents' house, was something of a musical gantlet to be run. Mom and Melissa really got into "Christmas music", a fabrication that to this day I regard as mostly oxymoronic. Around Halloween, it seemed, out came the stack of Christmas records, topped by Johnny Mathis and getting worse as you burrowed. The worst involved Snoopy in some way, combining Christmas themes, "funny", and corny musical dramatics, all of my least favorite characteristics in music. And if I complained, they would innocently suggest that I put on some Christmas music of my own selection instead.

By the end of high school I had a few scattered songs that involved Christmas in some tangential way, and these were treasured ardently, since they gave me something to play around Christmas time after all. The Pretenders "2000 Miles" was one, and "Christmas Is Coming" is another. Both of them later took on additional significance when my senior year of high school ended up being occupied with a long distance romance, the object of which was coming back to Dallas from boarding school (Andover, about 2000 miles away) for a blissful *two weeks* at Christmas time. The lines "Christmas is coming. / It's been a long year. / I wish you were here" really *spoke* to me, in the way that only melodramatic 17-year-old boys *can* be spoken to. I sang them to myself, badly. I sent Hilary the lyrics. I played the record a lot. My life wasn't especially unhappy at the time, all things considered, but "Go home to my records, / I play them too loud" is a timeless sentiment, don't you think?

The rest of the record, perhaps by contrast, doesn't seem quite as raw and fresh as *No Stranger to Danger*. "I'll Find Another", "Wild West", "Never Said I Love You" and "People Who Have Great Lives" all seem a bit strident to me. "I Am a City", and the slow "No Prisoners" and "Hungry" help redeem it, though.

### ***Here's the World for Ya*, 1985 LP (Paul Hyde and Payola\$)**

Payola\$ begin fragmenting with the next album. This one is credited to "Paul Hyde and Payola\$", which is baffling to me. Hyde and Bob Rock co-wrote essentially everything here, just as they did on the *other* albums. A new bass player is aboard, but the other albums had a revolving cast at that spot, so why they felt it necessary to change names, I don't know. Perhaps the joke of "Payola\$" was wearing out. Perhaps the fact that this album doesn't *sound* much like the others was why.

Whatever the reason, the record is marvelous. The band is beginning to move toward the musical mainstream, but they sound terrific doing it. I would be remiss if I didn't warn you that Bryan Adams helped write a song here, and several sound like he *could* have had a hand, but provided you don't automatically tune out slick, commercial pop-rock, this is a charming album of it.

Hyde's voice, in maturing, has smoothed out, and even gotten a little soulful. The Paul Hyde of 1982 would probably have been a little dismayed by the shiny horn stabs that slither jazzily through "It Won't Be You", or the warm "ahhhhhh" backing vocals of "Cruel-Hearted Lovers", but three years older he fields it all with equanimity. "Little Boys" is the most like the older material, giving Hyde some near-spoken parts, which the older songs were full of, but even *it* revs up to synth-bass-buoyed top-40 gloss by time the chorus arrives.

Of course, there are usually tradeoffs to anything, and in this case Hyde has bought the band's commercial sheen by selling off the part of his brain that he used to write lyrics with. The texts here, like "Rhythm Slaves" ("I move for the groove, and I take it all inside"), "You're the Only Love" ("Won't be home today, / I'll be seeing you tomorrow, / But I just had to say / That I've got no more time for sorrow"), and "It Won't Be You" ("Should have married into money but I took a / Little honey who had absolutely none") are not exactly up to "Where Is This Love"'s standard. But lyrics aren't what you listen to this sort of music for.

### ***Between a Rock and a Hyde Place*, 1987 CD**

In lieu of reissuing Payola\$ back catalog on CD after their dissolution, A&M put this compilation out in Canada, from whence HMV kindly imported it for my benefit (and theirs).

The best part of the collection is that it includes two tracks ("China Boys" and "In a Place Like This") from Payola\$ *first* album, which I've never even seen, and the b-side of the "Eyes of a Stranger" single ("Soldier"). I don't know how representative these three songs *really*

are, but they sound rawer, noisier, more punk than *No Stranger to Danger*, so I'm guessing they're pretty accurate. "Soldier" never made it onto an album until this one, so devoted but not-quite-complete fans may have a reason beyond converting to digital to get this compilation.

The selections from the other three Payola\$ albums (Paul Hyde and Payola\$ counts for this purpose, but Rock and Hyde doesn't, since they switched labels for *Under the Volcano*) aren't very clever, though. *No Stranger to Danger* is represented by the first two songs, "Romance" and "Eyes of a Stranger". These aren't bad at all, but I would never have done a Payola\$ best-of without "Pennies Into Gold".

*Hammer on a Drum* gets three songs, the first two and the one with a guest vocalist, "I'll Find Another", "Where Is This Love" and "Never Said I Love You". "Where Is This Love" is an easy inclusion in my opinion, but I would have put "Christmas Is Coming" and "I Am a City" on in place of the other two.

With the typical "newer is better, right" ignorance that usually signifies collections assembled by record label executives (the brief, cloying liner notes are another clue to this), *Here's the World For Ya* gets four tracks here: "Stuck In the Rain", "You're the Only Love", "It Must Be Love" and "Here's the World". I might have picked a slightly different selection, but the real thoughtlessness implicit in the balance of tracks is giving the last album such relative prominence, since its style is so out of step with the band's early material, and *not even remarking on this irony*. The liner notes detail the awards the band won for "Eyes of a Stranger", and that's about it. They call "Soldier" a "classic single" even though the track credits right on the opposite side of the booklet point out that it was a b-side. It's a hard task to compile a best-of for a band that covered so much stylistic ground, from the acerbic rage of "In a Place Like This" to the laminated dance-pop of "It Must Be Love", but to do it without even trying to confront the range and say a few intelligible words on the subject is just pathetic. It would have been worse, I suppose, if they'd mixed up the chronological order of the tracks, but that would have required some actual creative energy, which this compilation clearly benefited from none of.

Still, it is digital...

## **Rock and Hyde**

### ***Under the Volcano*, 1987 LP**

Another name change later, the same cast who made *Here's the World For Ya* return on a different label

for an abortive new life as Rock and Hyde. The key word for the new duo/band's one album is "produced". Bruce Fairbain helped Bob and Paul out, but to me this album connects more logically to Bob Rock's subsequent production work with Metallica and others than to the Payola\$ records. Huge, crashing drums, steely synthesizers, thick multi-tracked guitars, a perfect amount of reverb, just enough bass, some tasteful sampling, and enough hooks to clean out a trout farm, this album has every detail that sheer attention to detail and studio money can provide.

The surprising thing, though, is that Rock and Hyde manage to carry off the polish with such easy grace that it doesn't strike me as *overproduced* at all. This album is actually *more* restrained in some ways than *Here's the World For Ya*. The fact that it has so little musically to do with the first three Payola\$ records should make it less painful for old Payola\$ fans to listen to, since they won't hear ghosts of what *could* have been. But by the same token, it isn't any more likely to appeal to Payola\$ fans than anyone else. Phil Collins and Patty Smyth are closer points of musical comparison.

The even more surprising detail is how much I like this album. I loved the early Payola\$ stuff, and I hate Phil Collins, but there's something about this album that has me skipping merrily around the room, typing a word or two on each circuit. The studio gloss gleams brightly, for sure, but it doesn't seem cynical or calculating on Bob and Paul's parts, it just seems like they're trying to make the best album they can. It's a daring gamble, selling out for *artistic* reasons, but I buy into it. Maybe the Canadian air is the secret...

## Rockhead

### *Rockhead*, 1992 CD

After taking a few years off to establish himself as a bona fide production genius, Bob Rock returns to his own music with a band that finally takes *full* advantage of his fortuitous surname. If *Under the Volcano* was polished and mainstream without being overproduced or clichéd, this one throws all restraint out the nearest exit and swallows every cliché in rock whole. The guitars are *huge*, Chris Taylor's drumming brutal, Jamey Kosh's bass subterranean, Steven Jack's throaty singing drenched in rock drama. Keyboardist John Webster even tries to toss in some old-style honky-tonk piano, but it gets almost completely drowned out by the comically inflated guitar roar. If you yearn for the days (perhaps mythical) when rock music could unself-consciously embrace all the clichés that *made* it rock, and

produce an irony-free exuberance glorious enough to shake the gods' ambrosia goblets off the arms of their marble thrones, then *Rockhead* is a second-coming in miniature. The lyrics are basically crap, and in this context "innovation" means "during clapping", but *damn* it sounds great.

There is *some* variety here. There has to be, in order to cover all the important rock clichés. "Chelsea Rose" has the obligatory London references. "Death Do Us Part" is the indispensable acoustic ballad with soaring vocal harmonies. "Warchild" is the Zeppelin-esque epic that starts slow and builds into a roar. "Sleepwalk" has the turbo-Doppler reverse-reverb vocal processing. "Hell's Back Door" has both the required lyrical references to "Hell" and "Back Door". "Hard Rain" is the de rigueur mid-tempo song with the trace of blues. "Angelfire" has the vital acoustic slide-guitar and mitigating heavenly allusions. "Webhead" is the brief, primarily-organ keyboard instrumental. "Baby Wild" is the slow-dance love song with balls. "House of Cards" is the song co-written by somebody more famous than this band (in this case, Jon Bon Jovi and Richie Sambora of Bon Jovi). The liner has the mandatory mixture of live photos and carefully posed portraits emphasizing the band members' long, flowing hair.

I love it.

## Zerra One

### *The Banner of Love*, 1983 12"

Zerra One's "The Banner of Love" is another song that falls into the category of "I Melt with You" near-soundalikes. "Oh how I run to you" is the chorus of their version. I'd rank it after "China" and "Love is the Law", but it's still nice.

### *The Domino Effect*, 1986 LP

I'd figured Zerra One for a one-song band in the most literal sense, so when I ran across this album years later in a used-promo bin, I forked over my dollar to find out how they'd turned out. They actually turned out kind of interestingly. Producer Barry Blue cranks up the drums and guitars on this album's opener, and great backing vocals from Suzanne Rattigan and others give the rather ordinary singer Paul Bell a striking backdrop to sing in front of.

If the band had had the sense to keep every song at the intensity level of the driving opening track, "Rescue Me", this could have been a very impressive album. They don't, though, and most of the rest of this is a turgid attempt at Simple Minds-like slow dramatic



overkill. “Forever and Ever” and “Cry for You” pick up the pace, but to nowhere near “Rescue Me”’s manic level. I guess, like the apparent vitality of decapitated chickens, this album *doesn’t* prove that Zerra One wasn’t a one-song band. It does change my mind about *which* song it was, though, and that’s something.

## The Church

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### *The Church, 1982 LP*

I didn’t turn out to be a Church fan, but when I heard my first Church song, “Unguarded Moment”, I didn’t know that’s how it would turn out. “Unguarded Moment” is a brilliant song on the level of “I Got You” and “I Melt With You”, simple and catchy in a way that the band’s later, murkier work would never seem to me. This was either the first or the third New Wave record I ever bought (I remember buying Thomas Dolby’s *The Golden Age of Wireless* and Berlin’s *Pleasure Victim* together, but can’t recall whether this one came just before those, or just after).

## The Chills

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### *Submarine Bells, 1990 CD*

While I’m on the subject of bands from New Zealand or Australia who I like only one song by... In this case, I bought a Chills CD not knowing at all what they sounded like, but having read enough critical raves about them that I figured I *ought* to know. They album doesn’t *bother* me, but it and I definitely don’t connect, and I would have lumped the Chills in with the Go-Betweens, out of this book, if it weren’t for the slow, graceful title track, which surges with synthetic strings and bells like a modern arrangement of a half-remembered nursery rhyme. I left the Chills and the Church in, then, so that fans of either band can see the one point where I connect with each, and perhaps calibrate tastes accordingly in some useful way.

## The Expression

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### *The Expression, 1984 LP*

A band I like better, just to show you that I’m not *constitutionally unable* to appreciate Australian pop bands, is The Expression. I seem to be the only person in the Northern Hemisphere who has heard of them,

and if they ever released any other records I don’t know about them. The promotional copy I bought used for \$2.98 is the only one I ever saw, and though I must have heard “Present Communication” on the radio at least once, it vanished quickly and never reappeared.

The songs on this album come from 1982-1984, and for the most part they exhibit the giddy fascination with synthesizers that endears the period to me. A few songs, like “Keep Appointments”, come out sounding a little too mechanical, but for the most part, as on “Present Communication”, “With Closed Eyes” and “Nothing Changes”, the band uses their toys well to propel catchy, melodic songs that benefit from synthesizers without relying on them.

## A Flock of Seagulls

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### *The Story of a Young Heart, 1984 LP*

We now enter the armpit of New Wave. Yes, it’s true, I have an album by A Flock of Seagulls. Having admitted to ABBA elsewhere, though, I can’t see how this will harm my credibility any further. I bought it because I liked the chorus of “The More You Live, The More You Love”. And I still like it. The rest of the record (including the rest of that song, sadly) is just as awful as you remember them being.

## Minor Detail

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### *Minor Detail, 1983 LP*

It sounds absurd now, but there was a time when bands actually *tried* to be like A Flock of Seagulls. Minor Detail is a pair of Irish brothers named John and Willie Hughes, who, with some assistance, turn out another footnote-caliber album with one stand-out track, “Canvas of Life”, which sounds like the Chipmunks doing Icehouse (but catchily!). The rest of the album does nothing for me, and I’ve never heard anything more about the band, so perhaps nobody else was that impressed, either.

## Level 42

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### *Staring at the Sun, 1988 LP*

Level 42 has a long, distinguished career in the real world, but in my book they are reduced to my idea of what A Flock of Seagulls or Split Enz might have

sounded like if they spent more time practicing, and less time doing their hair. The first song from this album, "Heaven in My Hands", is brilliant, combining stabbing brass, leader Mark King's hyperactive bass playing and well-realized group vocals. The rest of it has a dry, white sort of funk twinge that I can't seem to get into, though I know people with otherwise laudable musical tastes who adore the band. Another expensive single.

## Nik Kershaw

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### *The Riddle, 1984 LP*

Mark King actually shows up to play bass on one song on this album, so I guess it's appropriate that Kershaw reminds me of Level 42. I don't care for this album much more than *Staring at the Sun*. Its great song, "Wouldn't It Be Good", was covered on the *Pretty in Pink* soundtrack, and I imagined that the original would be better, but I don't find that I actually prefer it. Other than that, the best thing about this album is that it features two guys named Wix and Pundit Dinesh. At its worst, on the embarrassing "Save the Whale", it sinks to near execrable.

## A Drop in the Gray

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### *Certain Sculptures, 1985 LP*

A Drop in the Gray's twist on the usual synth-band routine is that their bass player also sometimes plays cello. I purchased this album knowing nothing at all about it, on the strength of that fact, and because I thought both the band's name and the album title were really cool. Given the chancy nature of such purchases, this one turned out to be a rather pleasant surprise. The band's style falls somewhere between a slower Zerra I and a lush Dream Academy. Singer and songwriter Dan Phillips's voice has a interesting always-struggling-to-avoid-going-flat personality that has shades of Gene Loves Jezebel and the Armoury Show in it. He would benefit, perhaps, from a barbiturate or two, or a lot less coffee, but this is a bearable trait.

The band is capable, but unremarkable. There's straightforward reverb-dulled drumming, an overabundance of keyboards (provided by various guests, who largely eclipse the band as musical contributors), and some fiery, in an ordinary sort of way, guitar. For the slower moments, one of the keyboard players rolls in a piano. The album is

pleasant enough, but I can't say I'm surprised that the band vanished quickly, and apparently without a trace.

## Thinkman

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### *The Formula, 1986 LP*

Rupert Hine is a prolific producer, and he's in this band. What he does here, other than produce, I honestly don't know, as the credits decline to assign any specific responsibilities to the four members. The album, which *is* quite well produced, is *mostly* a particularly low-energy white synth-funk melange that I'm not particularly fond of. Three of the eight songs here, though, are clear exceptions to this overall judgment.

"Best Adventures", "The Legend" and "The Challenge" are three variations on one great song. The verses are slow-to-mid-tempo, combining half-swallowed singing with hyperactive bass, rumbling drums and meandering synths. The choruses kick in with a vengeance, the whole band going crazy in careful sync. Lithe synth-brass stabs whirl through the sound, the singer raises his voice a bit, and backing vocalists start some sort of musical argument behind him. The lyrics have that sort of Nordic battle-imagery cast, but that's better than you usually get from dance music.

And that's definitely what this is: dance music. It's not for pogoing, slamming, calisthenics, waltzing, square dance or any of those dumb dances that everybody is supposed to do in sync, nor for over-amped blacklit in-vogue dance clubs, it's for that happy, free-form energy-release that, back when I was in college and a bunch of people would pack a hapless party host's common room and work up a delirious sweat with no particular regard for what anybody else might think of us, was what *dancing* meant to me. After college, everybody's too self-conscious to dance right. I miss it. I think I'll play these three songs again.

## The Thompson Twins

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### *Here's To Future Days, 1985 CD*

Another band with distinctive hair, the Thompson Twins fit right in as a gimmicky New Wave eyesore. Although I admire Alannah Currie's fusillade of chimes, I was never a big Twins fan. I'd been trying to remember who did the song "Lay Your Hands on Me" for quite a while, though, and after ruling out Peter

Gabriel (same title, but not the song I meant) and the Graces ("Lay Down Your Arms", which sounds closer than its title reads) I finally figured out it was them, and so I bought this album to get it.

Now, I have it. It's a great song, dramatic and pathos-laden, with great orchestral swells and impassioned shrieking by all concerned. The rest of the album conforms to my previous impression of the band. The cover of the Beatles' "Revolution" is especially unfortunate, challenged only by the painful mock-Asianisms of "Tokyo". They get a point for calling a song "You Killed the Clown", but lose a thousand points for making it a sad song.

## Human League

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### *Greatest Hits*, 1988 CD

Having bought records by A Flock of Seagulls and the Thompson Twins, I only had to stoop a little deeper into the muck to nab a copy of the Human League's best-of. I wanted those corny Human League songs I so abhorred the first time around, and here they are: "Mirror Man" (not the same as the Talk Talk song, but in a similar spirit), "(Keep Feeling) Fascination" (in my opinion their best) and "Don't You Want Me" (New Wave's answer to "Paradise by the Dashboard Lights"). I fully expected to find the rest of the album extremely tedious, and I do, though the stilted "Open Your Heart" is kind of cool. This is one for the archives.

## Talk Talk

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### *The Party's Over*, 1982 CD

Talk Talk, a band that over the course of its career goes through one of the most amazing transitions I'm aware of, begins life as a mellow synth-pop band a bit like the Human League with most of the quirks and corniness removed. Lee Harris's drumming is mostly either programmed or synth-drums. Paul Webb's bass and Simon Brenner's keyboards provide all the music, over which singer Mark Hollis' frail, unsteady voice flutters like an exhausted migrating bird kept aloft by the breeze more than its own strength. The whole album has a muted quality to it that at the time I marked up to inexperience, either theirs or the producer's. By the time *It's My Life* came out, *The Party's Over* already sounded dated to me, a murky, mechanical album that, though it had its moments, was mostly uninteresting except as a comparison, for historical purposes, to the band's second record.

I've come to believe, though, as the years since then have rolled by, that in fact this album is brilliant, both as an embodiment of an aesthetic that has, for the time being, been lost to rock music, and also has a work that stands on its own, timeless. Where many other bands have used bigger sounds to make bigger-sounding records, Talk Talk has the rare courage to keep their scope small. Rather than evoke vast alien plains, crystalline mountains or other futuristic dreamscapes, Talk Talk's music is claustrophobic, gray walls and dim, energy-efficient fluorescent lights. The world they seem to inhabit is that of 1984, without the politics, *Brave New World* without the clones, or where the upper-middle class would live outside of *Blade Runner's* LA. The incredibly heartening message beneath *The Party's Over's* deadened veneer, though, is that the music itself is wonderful, that the apparent bleaknesses of these dystopian futures are basically illusory, and that life, with all its ups and downs, and *music*, with all its dynamics and intensities, are in no way precluded by even the most constrictive-seeming environments.

This is, to be sure, a subtle point. Talk Talk is, though, a subtle *band*. If you can avoid thinking of this album in the context of its contemporaries and immediate successors, and appreciate it on its own, as being the way it is *deliberately*, then perhaps with some work you can come to find it, as I do, mesmerizing, and for lack of a better word, magical. Put together with the band's other albums, it becomes even more impressive, part of a breathtaking progression from the artificial to the natural, from close-walled dystopia to terraformed ecological Eden. I won't pretend that understanding this won't require some effort on your part, but it's pleasant work, and the rewards are enormous.

### *It's My Life*, 1984 CD

The walls of Talk Talk's world turn translucent on the band's second album. Producer Tim Friese-Greene is the most important arrival, a presence that is part of the band's sound from here on. Keyboardist Simon Brenner is gone, replaced in that role by Tim and Ian Curnow. The rest of the expanding cast include guitarist Robbie McIntosh, pianist Phil Ramocon, percussionist Morris Pert and trumpeter Henry Lowther.

The album this group of people assembles is one of the greatest ever recorded, and I feel no reservations at all about making that claim. Claim to confuse Talk Talk with Duran Duran if you wish, but this album is *beautiful*, not exactly in the smooth, perfect-sunset new-age fashion of, say, Enya, nor in the sad, intensely personal way of Tori Amos or Mark Eitzel's *American*

Music Club, but in a captivating and surprisingly *human* manner somewhere between those three.

Mark Hollis' voice is a wonder, leaning back into an expansive crooning howl at times, and then suddenly leaping forward into an almost subvocal whisper that nearly isn't there. He carries everything from the slow, elegiac crawl of "Renée" to the charged chorus explosions of "It's My Life" and "Call in the Night Boy" with equal facility. The band, in a drastic departure from the first album's carefully constrained instrumental and emotional palette, makes an intricately detailed music that sparkles with unanticipated colors and the occasional perfectly placed silence, structural developments for which I can think of no clear antecedents. This album doesn't *sound* like the work of nine different musicians, it sounds like something that emerged, whole, out of the mind of some ancient muse heretofore thought to exist only in myth, the band's involvement consisting merely of translating direct muse-thoughts into something that 1984 technology could commit to tape. *That*, of course, is a non-trivial task, and they did a *very* good job.

The album opens with "Dum Dum Girl", and a sketchy groove made up of a few low piano notes, a repeating flute couplet and a quiet, ticking drum-machine. Other instruments join in for the verse, and by the time the chorus arrives the drums are crashing, keyboards are screaming, trumpets and acoustic guitar are working their way into the mixture, and the bass is carrying the whole ensemble along a twisty figure that responds to the piano line that began the song. Then it drops back to just the piano, and the cycle begins again. What the song is *about*, I couldn't begin to guess, and that goes for just about everything Talk Talk did, but it doesn't matter.

"Such a Shame" settles into the middle of the range of energies that "Dum Dum Girls" covered. Recognizing this as territory worth an extended stay, "Such a Shame" spends a while there. Towards the end things get very quiet again, and the last minute or so are a fadeout in which a nearly inaudible piano plays quietly while the drums and another piano repeat a three-note pattern at increasingly separated intervals. "Renée" takes over at this slow pace and eases through the album's longest, slowest song, a track that goes from surging synthetic strings to soft, dueling bass-lines accompanied by church bells and some of the sparest drum-machine programming I've ever heard. Lowther's ghostly trumpet is used to especially good effect through this haunting song.

The mood changes back abruptly, as "It's My Life" itself begins. Driven by a quick, dance-worthy drum track and McIntosh's rhythmic acoustic guitar, this song was a big hit, and if you haven't heard it in a while, or didn't pay too close attention when you did, you might

remember it as agreeable, if lightweight, vintage early-Eighties synth-pop. This isn't an insane impression, any more than someone hastening through the Louvre might remember Monet as some big snapshots of churches taken through a fogged-up car window. Close investigation of either reveals a textural richness that leads me to the controversial claim that Talk Talk, in fact, made *better* albums than Monet.

"Tomorrow Started" slows down a little again, between the moods of "Such a Shame" and "Renée". Lee Harris' distinctive rhythm-programming relies heavily on closed hi-hat sounds and little clicking noises (which have no obvious acoustic ancestor) for the bulk of the ongoing beat, and uses the more-solid drum sounds much more sparingly, keeping the song moving but staying out of the way of the resonating guitar (I *think* it's a guitar) and Paul Webb's fretless bass.

On "The Last Time", next, Harris and Webb step back and let Robbie and the keyboard players into the spotlight for a song. The quick acoustic-guitar chord-triplets and the high "chuff" synth-effect establish a framework for the long, melodic keyboard lines and Hollis' flanking vocals to weave their own design into. "Call in the Night Boy" speeds up even further, with a frenetic chorus, howling guitar and a breathtaking piano solo from Ramocon. For the album's shortest song, with perhaps its most straightforward and unchanging drum pattern, this is packed with stunning detail work.

Things virtually *have* to slow down again after "Call in the Night Boy", and they do. "Does Caroline Know" joins the distinguished rank of songs about people named "Caroline" ("Pretty in Pink" is the other leading alumnus). "It's You" makes a perfectly satisfactory end-piece for the record. It returns to the general feel of "It's My Life", and so ends the album on an up note. It also reminds me a bit of "Hate", from *The Party's Over*, and this reference makes for some useful continuity between the two records.

The two albums sound, to be sure, incredibly dissimilar on the surface, *It's My Life's* instrumental panorama a qualitatively different experience than *The Party's Over's* damped synthesizers. Hollis's singing and Lee Harris' drums, on the other hand, leave no doubt that the same people are behind both records. Rather than trying to hear one in the other, though, these two albums are more interesting if you simply *stipulate* that the same band made them, and then explore what that implies. Forget what order they were made in, even, and muse on why a band who *could* do one of the albums, *did* also do the other. You will be tested on this.

### *The Colour of Spring*, 1986 CD

This album didn't make a bit of sense to me until much later. It seemed limp, repetitive, and lacking in all the great things that had made Talk Talk one of my favorite New Wave bands. In fact, this is correct, it is lacking most of those things. There are almost no synthesizers on this album, and the moods range from extremely slow and quiet, to mid-tempo and quiet. Talk Talk seemed to be recreating *It's My Life* as if they'd suffered a serious head injury and had forgotten about it entirely, only the second time through nothing worked out quite right like it had the first time, and we end up with an album that seemed to me to be going nowhere. I bought it, but I rarely listened to it.

Then, two years later, *Spirit of Eden* came out, blew me away, and things started making sense. I would claim, and you can take this the way you take all the other things I claim in this book, that it is impossible to understand *The Colour of Spring* properly on its own, that you must place it in context between *It's My Life* and *Spirit of Eden*, or you are wasting your time. Because you see, this album is a rewrite of *It's My Life*. Instead of re-treading their own steps under the guise of moving forward, however, what Talk Talk is doing is rewriting their own past in order to move *sideways*. The path from *The Party's Over* to *It's My Life* doesn't lead where they wanted to go, so they backed up and headed off again in a slightly different direction. If you aren't paying close attention to direction, though, (and it's hard to until you see where they end up) this album can easily seem like *all* it's doing is covering old ground.

The cast continues to change. Hollis, Harris and Friese-Greene remain the core of Talk Talk. Paul Webb plays on four songs, and sings backup on another. McIntosh plays guitar on three and dobro on two more. Morris Pert plays on a few. Tim handles the pianos, and there aren't any trumpets. Nine other musicians, a choir, and some assorted school children help out as well, but this album never sounds large despite the number of people involved. The playing is better than ever, but if you don't listen carefully it's easy for "Happiness is Easy", "Life's What You Make It" and "Living in Another World" to merge in your mind, with "I Don't Believe in You" and "Give It Up" close by, and if you didn't really grasp *It's My Life* in detail, either, you may well mistake several of these songs for those.

Under scrutiny, though, the albums are clearly distinct. Organs (some by Steve Winwood, of all people), sax, lots of acoustic percussion, real drums and much more prominence to acoustic guitars give this album an organic character that is almost as far removed from *It's My Life* as that was from the first

album. In preparation for the next album, this one is much quieter, produced much more drily. "Chameleon Day", which Hollis and Friese-Greene perform with just piano and variophon (eh?), is intriguing but anomalous in this context, but as foreshadowing of the next album it is completely unmysterious.

Skip this one, then, on your first pass. But do come back for it after you understand the start and endpoints of the journey it undertakes.

### *Spirit of Eden*, 1988 CD

I already said that *It's My Life* was one of the greatest albums ever recorded. *Spirit of Eden* is better. It is quite possible that this is the most original and challenging piece of work in all of the rock era. You're bound to think I'm crazy for saying this, but, frankly, everybody who cares about music has *something* that impressed them the most, and if I'm going to have the ego to write a whole book about my impressions, I might as well make a big deal of the one that impressed *me* the most, and this is it.

In fact, the first time I mapped out this book, *Eden*, the last chapter, was named after and centered around this album, a chapter of music whose appeal seemed to me the most reliant on subtlety, just as Mega Therion began the book with the least subtlety. It was too hard, though, explaining why all the bands in that chapter (Talk Talk, American Music Club, the Blue Nile, the Comsat Angels, and a few others) weren't in the other chapters where they really seemed to belong, and I anticipated spending most of the chapter apologizing for all the albums like *It's My Life* that were made by *bands* that belonged in *Eden* in my mind, but weren't *albums* that belonged there. Besides, there were fifteen chapters at that point, and that just seemed like too many. At some point about six months into the project, I instituted a chapter-pogrom that, when the corpses were counted, left me with a ten-chapter book called *From Mega Therion to Delirium*. Several of the old chapters had been dispersed into other better-justified ones, and the chapter that had been *Eden* was one of these. The book went on this way for a while, until I finally admitted to myself that it really was *From Mega Therion to Eden* in my mind, not *to Delirium*. Fortunately, *Marillion's Holidays in Eden* gave me an excuse to rename *Delirium* to *Eden*, restoring my original title without undoing the chapter-reorganization. This is almost certainly more than you ever wanted to know about the process of creating this book.

*Spirit of Eden* doesn't look like it's going to be that different from any other Talk Talk record. James Marsh's cover illustration is in keeping with his covers for the first three albums, and while six songs is fewer

than you might expect, and their titles are shorter than many prior ones, this isn't enough to more than just arouse suspicions that this album is something different. The cast list fuels those suspicions, though, as it lists 15 players and a choir, not even including Friese-Greene, who here only (sic) produces and co-writes. Besides Hollis, Harris and Webb, who provide the core of the music, there is percussion, dobro, 12-string guitar (McIntosh), harmonica, Mexican bass, double bass, trumpet (Lowther), violin (Nigel Kennedy), shozygs (no idea), bassoon, oboe, clarinet and cor anglais (no idea either). And there are almost never more than two of these people playing at once.

The one word for this album, though it is sure to be misunderstood, is *quiet*. If a quieter record than *Spirit of Eden* has ever been made, I don't know about it. Talk Talk was already a band of details, but this is an album on which silence itself reaches out of the spaces between noises and takes on palpable shape. You hear Hollis' breathing, you hear his hands coming off the guitar strings, you hear the walls still leaking echoes long after the instruments have been taken away. Resonance is the processing of choice, and Mark's guitar sounds like a wild, half-mythical animal's world-rousing howl of pain, a sound that appears to come from *within* me, rather than from the speakers at all. Songs wax and wane, almost entirely without conventional structure, almost musical stream-of-consciousness, yet if so, from a mind able to grasp orders on a larger scale than most mortals. I experience this album as a single work, a single composition, but each of the six nominal songs reprises the whole in its own way.

And yes, there are amazing, cathartically *loud* moments in this quietness, too. "Desire", in particular, explodes in a cacophonous frenzy at points, only to be silenced as suddenly as the tumult began, leaving you dazed, gasping, gulping for air, initially finding nothing until, just before panic's vise-like grip closes completely, you hear the nearly inaudible piano, falling like scattered drops of water into a sun-bleached patch of desert sand, granting you continued life with a blur of mixed metaphors. These outbursts only make the meticulous surroundings even more breathtaking.

If this is really the spirit of Eden, then Eden is a far more complex and satisfying place than Christian mythology would have it. Where traditional views of Eden paint it as simple and animalistic, Talk Talk's Eden is a higher plane than ours, a level of reality where music is freed from all its earthly associations and allowed to exist in and of and for *itself*. You can't *do* anything to this music. You can't dance to it, it's no good for fucking, it won't directly cheer or calm you. You must pay attention to it or it becomes not background *music* but simply *background*. You must

either allow yourself to be absorbed into it completely, or you must turn it off. You must let it remove you wholly from the world, or you won't be able to *hear* it at all. You must drift. You must *believe*, at a lower, more fundamental level than music has ever hit you before, that there is more to the universe than *this*, whatever "this" is. I am an atheist, and this album brings me close to the point where I am convinced I am having a religious experience. I think, sometimes, I exist halfway into madness while I listen to it, and when it ends I am more than a little surprised to find myself back in this little room, surrounded by bins of records, shelves of CDs, assorted music gear, this computer, wooden dinosaur models, broken lamps, Georgia's iron, a Boston Globe clipping of a story about repairing and refinishing a table from the Lampoon, a drawing of myself giving Georgia flowers, the poster from Big Country's "Heart of the World" 12", a Lotus Magellan clock, \$56 in nickels and dimes that I should take to the bank one of these days. For a time, though the world moves on, my traction is slow in returning, and for just a moment I am outside our reality, in the 3.2th dimension, hopelessly lost and utterly enthralled.

If I get one person, who wouldn't otherwise, to hear and understand *Spirit of Eden*, this book will have been thousands of hours well spent.

And if you had any doubts at all that I write these things while *listening* to them, this entry should have banished them. From outside, I'm sure it sounds inane.

Oh, world, to have the courage to be as magically inane more often.

### *History Revisited (The Remixes), 1991 CD*

Talk Talk, I read somewhere, went to court to try to prevent EMI from releasing this remix album. Pure ghoulish fascination drove me to buy it. I *knew* it would be horrible, *knew* that remix producers would turn everything into dub dance tracks, wreaking the same sort of artistic desecration that the second "Pretty in Pink" was, that DNA's version of "Tom's Diner" was. The worst possible artistic crime, I think at these times, is trying to make a work of art into something it was meant to stand *against*, and that's what the bulk of these remixes do. They turn some of the world's most unique music into gutless, repetitive mush. The fact that this collection features two versions of "Living in Another World" and two of "Life's What You Make It" is only symptomatic of how bare it is of understanding. EMI should be firebombed for releasing it.

### *Laughing Stock, 1991 CD*

After *Spirit of Eden* forever altered music for me, there was virtually no way that *Laughing Stock* could be anything but a follow up, anything but a continuation,

recapitulation or, perhaps, a rejection of *Spirit of Eden's* themes. In fact, its cover sets the stage carefully. Where *Spirit of Eden's* cover is a tree in an ocean filled with penguins and shells, *Laughing Stock's* is a similar tree on land, filled with birds. There are six songs here, too. There are *more* players (eighteen), but they play fewer instruments (seven violas, two cellos, two acoustic basses). All differences are minor; having created a wholly new kind of music with *Spirit of Eden*, Talk Talk are content for the time to simply make another album of it. Given how much I like *Spirit of Eden*, and the fact that nobody *else* is doing this, their decision is 100% fine by me. Keep making 'em. This one was #5 on my 1991 top-ten list.

## Adam Ant

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### *Antics in the Forbidden Zone, 1990 CD*

Adam Ant was another particularly easy target for the anti-New Wave backlash, with his sub-Bowie vocal mannerisms, white-strip-across-the-face makeup, outlandish videos, and fundamentally silly music. At the time I hated him, but in retrospect a few of his songs became imbued with a sort of nostalgia, and so when this all-you-need-and-more compilation turned up on sale a year or two ago, I succumbed. Filling the CD to capacity with 21 tracks from six Ant albums, this collection covers all the songs I remembered, positively or negatively.

Of the first nine tracks on this album, from *Dirk Wears White Sox* and *Kings of the Wild Frontier*, only the percussive "Antmusic" and the meditative "Killer in the Home" fall on the good side of bearable. Things pick up quickly after that for me: the mock-medieval "Stand and Deliver", "Prince Charming"'s slow-motion flamenco, the jaunty brass of "Desperate But Not Serious", the marching-band drums of "Goody Two Shoes", the saucy "Strip", the ABC-like "Puss and Boots" and the preposterous space-rap "Apollo 9" are the things I wanted this disc for, and I enjoy them all. Of the other five tracks from the later four albums, the only two I really don't care for are the embarrassing "Ant Rap" and the overproduced "Vive Le Rock". "Strip" is perhaps Adam's finest moment, a delightfully playful song with intelligently silly lyrics, percolating drums, horns and Adam's appealing warble. It's too bad that this collection stresses the first two albums so heavily, but there's more than enough good stuff here to justify a recommendation. You have to listen with a certain sense of humor about the proceedings, but if you can manage it you may find, as I do, that Adam Ant is actually a pretty underrated performer.

## Wall of Voodoo

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### *Wall of Voodoo, 1980 EP*

Few bands could compete with Adam Ant for silliness, but Stan Ridgway's Wall of Voodoo was one. With Stan's voice issuing from a tiny corner of his mouth, the rest of the band follows gamely along, trying to play their instruments as if the *instruments* had mouths out of the side of which their sound could be made to come. This debut EP's saving grace is the amusingly warped rendition of Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire", but the other tracks are just electronic noodling to me. Actually, "Ring of Fire" is just electronic noodling, too, but the fact that it is ostensibly a cover of a real song makes it entertaining.

## Stan Ridgway

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### *Partyball, 1991 CD*

Stan doesn't get any less deranged on his own. This album mixes random bits of noise with actual pop songs, but even the latter get delivered with Ridgway's carnival-barker style, which renders otherwise delightfully normal tunes like "I Wanna Be a Boss" cheap and unpleasant. There's something inescapably tacky about Ridgway, and listening to him always makes me think "I shouldn't play this much, because it would probably really annoy some people", followed by "In fact, I'm not sure one of those people isn't me."

## Peter Godwin

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### *Correspondence, 1983 LP*

Peter Godwin did "Images of Heaven", a New Wave synth-pop tune of the very best sort. I've never been able to find a copy. At some point I bought this album instead, just because I actually found it. Hold out for the real thing. There are a couple of slightly catchy songs here ("Baby's in the Mountains", "Over Twenty-One"), but "Images of Heaven" is worlds better than anything here. I'm hoping that the recent spate of Eighties compilation albums will continue just long enough to get it on one, but that hasn't happened yet, and Godwin himself seems to have disappeared completely. Every once in a while, though, I'll hear "Images of Heaven" on the radio; just often enough to keep me fruitlessly searching for a copy.

## Gino Vannelli

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### *Black Cars, 1985 7"*

While we're on the subject of isolated great songs from the first half of the Eighties, here's another dance-tape staple. Killer whip-crack synth-drum sounds. Dumb lyrics. Crap, but great sounding.

## The Vapors

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### *Turning Japanese, 1980 7"*

And here's another one. One of the greatest ever pop songs about masturbation, which is actually saying something.

## Vigil

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### *Vigil, 1987 LP*

Putting "Turning Japanese" on a dance tape in college always made me want to include Vigil's "Celiba Sea" as well, a temptation I usually yielded to. The song is a long string of sexual puns like "we don't let coitus interrupt us any more", "the celiba sea shore starts to look good" and "I'm swimming for the celiba coast and you know I'm not doing the breast stroke". It's not that exciting a *song*, but having a song about celibacy playing at a drunken dance party was such a priceless irony that I really didn't care.

The rest of the record isn't a complete throwaway either. Vigil really make a dark, strident sort of cross between Bauhaus, Gene Loves Jezebel and Shriekback. "I Love You Equinox" has some good squalling guitars, and "White Magic Spell" could have been a New Wave standard if it had come out five years earlier, and Vigil had been from England instead of Baltimore. Vocalist Jo Connor is a little squeaky for my tastes at moments, but this is still not a bad record at all.

## The Tubes

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### *The Best of the Tubes, 1981-1987, 1991 CD*

The Tubes and the Vapors are even more inextricably linked in my mind than "Turning Japanese" and "Celiba Sea". The Tubes' moment of glory was "She's a Beauty", for which I bought this

suspicious-looking "Special Markets" best-of. The Tubes actually had a couple of supplemental moments: "Talk to Ya Later" is included here, "White Punks on Dope" is not. Eight other songs *are* included. They are awful. It's hard to tell how representative these ten are of the Tubes career (the title claims this collection covers 1981-1987, but I note that the copyright dates are only 1981, 1982 and 1983), but I think now that I have "She's a Beauty", I'll stick.

## The Knack

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### *Get the Knack, 1979 CD*

There is a litany of largely irrefutable criticisms that can be fired at the Knack without needing to aim particularly carefully. Yes, this record looks like a shameless Beatles rip-off. Yes, the level of evident sensitive maturity displayed in the lyrics of these songs is, basically, zilch. Yes, the band wears skinny black ties tucked into the platens of their shirts. Yes, "My Sharona" has every hallmark of a one-hit wonder's one-hit. Yes, "Good Girls Don't" does too.

Ah, but there's the first easily overlooked twitch of evasive action. One fluke could be tossed aside contemptuously; these days *anybody* can luck out and have one hit. The fact that the Knack manage two is a vexing anomaly. But, after all, two is only one more than one, so we could write them both off to chance with, if not a clear conscience, at least a lightly fogged one.

If you want to hold to that position, though, *don't* listen to this whole album. Whatever you do, don't let anybody play you "Let Me Out", "Your Number or Your Name", "Oh Tara" or "Heartbeat". Or "Siamese Twins" or "Lucinda". Because, if you do, you'll discover the horrible truth that this album, for all its calculatedness, actually achieves everything it pretends to. Not only does it *look* like some savvy Hollywood marketing hacks' idea of a delightful, barbed neo-Beatles early-New-Wave power-pop masterpiece, it actually *is* a delightful, barbed neo-Beatles early-New-Wave power-pop masterpiece. The band is tight, the songs irresistible, the production (by Mike Chapman) uncluttered. The lyrics are gleefully adolescent, with "Good Girls Don't" being up with "Turning Japanese", J. Geils' "Centerfold" and Aerosmith's "Walk this Way" as a paradigmatic anthem of frustrated teenage sex-drive given vent in song. The sound rakes together everything charming from the Beatles, the Kinks, the Byrds and anybody else whose records were lying around handy, and then tosses in most of what *would* be



appealing about the Plimsouls, Bram Tchaikovsky and the Romantics.

Although I imagine some managed it, it seems incredible that anybody could listen to this album and not just give in to its charms. Lots of very smart people have worked very hard to make this album exactly what the American pop fan, circa 1979 at least, wanted from life, and many years later it still sounds to me like they did a truly great job.

### *...But the Little Girls Understand, 1980 CD*

Then, the Knack did it again. They made *another* record like the first one. Just like the first one. Just *exactly* like the first one, except, well, haven't we heard this before? If you had trouble relaxing and enjoying *Get the Knack*, you'll never get the hang of this one. Not only is there nothing here that could pass remotely for "progress", but it is clear listening to the Knack that they are walking in their own tracks *intentionally*, that they are shuffling hooks and chords and words around just enough to call this a new album, that they could do all sorts of things differently if they wanted to, but they *don't* want to.

Why, then, should you buy this one, too? No reason I can think of, save perhaps curiosity, which was my motive. If you want to hear the first album twice, put it on twice. Nobody's stopping you, it's plenty good enough to hold up under back-to-back playings, and frankly, I suspect most people's short-term aural imaging is not detailed enough to even *tell* the difference between the two albums, much less care.

On the other hand, why *shouldn't* you buy this one? All the things that made the first one great make this one great, too. You don't hear people comparing Van Goghs, going "Well, this is just another of Van Gogh's carefully-realized genre-defining impressionist masterpieces, using paint and light and texture in, really, the same awe-inspiring way as all his other peerless paintings. Look, it's even of a cathedral. In fact, you can't fool me, this is the *same* cathedral as that other one!" Do you? Okay, maybe you do, but don't you deride them for it? Don't you pummel them with your tour-pamphlets, inflicting hundreds of tiny papercuts until they finally give up and return to Texas?

And if Van Goghs cost \$2.99 in the cutout bin, wouldn't you buy at least two?

### *Serious Fun, 1991 CD*

Didn't you think the Knack died about the time you had to get new checks that didn't say "197\_" on them anymore? I certainly did, but it turns out not to be entirely the case. They put out a third album, called *Round Trip*, in 1981, which I've never actually seen,

and then quietly folded for a while. Around 1986 they reformed, a few years later they traded in old drummer Bruce Gary for a newer model (Billy Ward), and in 1991 they bowed to some hallucinated demand and recorded a *fourth* album, *Serious Fun*.

Upon hearing this news, you sit blankly, not reacting at all. After some violent prodding, you are roused to say "Oh. Uh, well, how is it." Despite the fact that you ask with so little enthusiasm that the question doesn't even come out sounding interrogatory, I tell you. It rocks! It *really* rocks! I mean, man, it *really*, uh, rocks!

Lest you mistake me, I am *not* being sarcastic. In the ten years since their last album, the Knack appear to have made a Faustian pact with the usual figure one makes Faustian pacts with. In lieu of their souls (who'd want the souls of the Knack?), they traded in every bit of lyrical cleverness they once had (which was a lot—their old lyrics were *inspired* in their immaturity), and rather than getting immortality in return, they opted for a boatload of immaculate arena-pop hooks. Thanks to this bargain, *Serious Fun* is simultaneously one of the most lyrically inane and musically elevating albums I've ever heard. It successfully combines musical elements of *Get the Knack* and *Boston*, which were already two of the greatest albums of a certain type of music, and the combination is at least as good as either, if not better. Producer Don Was gives the record a sparkling Nineties pop clarity that even Tom Scholz would envy, and the band weaves melodies and harmonies into a blend that bypasses my ears and goes straight for the muscles on the side of the face that pull the corners of my mouth up.

The lyrics, of course, are execrable. Every chorus is about on the level of "I'm a dog for your love. / I'm a dog for your love, baby yeah yeah. / I'm a dog for your love, I'm a dog for your love, baby. / Yeah, yeah." ("Doin' the Dog") It's a rare phrase here that isn't either a cliché or the repetition of an *earlier* cliché. The low point is perhaps "Serious Fun" itself, where they make a feeble attempt at sophistication via name-dropping, only to forget the "z" in Nietzsche.

But as much as I value good lyric-writing, I'm quite willing to make the occasional exception for music this great. There practically isn't a *moment* on this album that doesn't sport a hook like the ones that Reo Speedwagon, Loverboy and Survivor only *dreamed* of. If you hate overproduced LA indoor-arena AOR rock music, this album may cause you to need medical attention. If you have the same soft spot in your skull for it that I do, however, *Serious Fun* may be one of the best things you've heard in *years*.

### *Retrospective*, 1992 CD

Most bands sound *better* on their “best-of” collections than they do on individual albums. That, I guess, is why “best-of” collection often feature the words “best” and “of” on the cover somewhere. *Retrospective* has ‘em, too, but while they might be technically accurate on a song-by-song basis, this album is definitely *not* the Knack’s best.

It *sounds* like a good idea. This compilation features “My Sharona”, “You Number or Your Name”, “Good Girls Don’t” and “(She’s So) Selfish” from *Get the Knack*; “The Hard Way”, “Baby Talks Dirty” and “Can’t Put a Price on Love” from *But the Little Girls Understand*; “Just Wait and See”, “We Are Waiting”, “Africa”, “Another Lousy Day in Paradise”, “Sweet Dreams” and “Pay the Devil” from *Round Trip*; “One Day at a Time” and “I Want Love” from *Serious Fun*; as well as a cover of Bruce Springsteen’s “Don’t Look Back” and the original demo version of *Serious Fun*’s “Rocket O’ Love”. The relative over-representation of *Round Trip* looks a little mystifying, but there are several songs from each album, which seems like a reasonable approach.

It turns out to be disastrous for two reasons. First, if the sample of *Round Trip* included here is any indication, and with six songs it pretty much *has* to be, that album was *awful*. The Knack venture into a jungle of soul grooves and psychedelia, and they do not emerge intact. You won’t mistake “Africa” for that abominable Toto song about blessing the rains there, but I can’t say I *prefer* it much, either. “Pay the Devil (Ooo, Baby, Ooo)” sounds like one of the songs on those TV Seventies love song collections whose title scrolls by in white because they *aren’t* going to play you a sample. The depressing influence of *Round Trip* here is exaggerated even further by the fact that there are so many tracks from it, and by the way they are scattered throughout the album, so that after the first five songs you never get more than two straight good ones again.

Second, even if the *Round Trip* stuff wasn’t here, the other three Knack albums just don’t lend themselves to excerpting that well. The great thing about *Get the Knack* was what a tightly assembled unit it was, and the same is basically true of *But the Little Girls Understand* and *Serious Fun*. Chopped apart here, they lose some crucial focus, and the things that make *Get the Knack* and *Serious Fun* both amazing on their own war with each other here, and drag each other down.

The one redeeming feature of this compilation is the “Rocket O’ Love” demo, which answers any question you might still have *after* hearing *Serious Fun* about how anybody would have had the confidence to let the band make it. If the album version wasn’t so great itself, *maybe* that would be a reason to recommend

this album at least to *fanatic* Knack devotees, if such people exist, but as it is, even they need not bother with *Retrospective*. If you can only get one *Knack* album, take the first or the last. You’re better off *not hearing* the other than having both ruined this way.

## Shoes

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If you can’t quite stomach the Knack, though, there’s still hope for you. Shoes provide an aesthetically-correct, cult-credible, unpremeditated substitute that contains the same USRDA of ingenuous American power-pop.

I, honestly, had never consciously even heard of Shoes until 1993. When I go and look them up in everybody else’s music guide, there they are, garnering adulatory praise in a startling rare display of critical unanimity, but I’d missed them completely until, in discussion on CompuServe’s RockNet about Mitch Easter, talk swinging to other pop and power-pop masters, several people said things to the effect of “Of course, *Shoes* are the greatest” (except this was CompuServe, so they actually said “*\*Shoes\** are the greatest”, ‘cause there aren’t any italics), to which I could only respond “Uh, is ‘Shoes’ a band, or is there a footwear connection here that I’m overlooking?” They took pity on my ignorance and, assessing my other likes, informed me that if I didn’t like Shoes, too, they would consume theirs, and various other items of apparel, in a virtual garment banquet. This had the ring of a win-win proposition for me, so I went out and bought a Shoes CD. I came home and listened to it. Then, I went out and bought all the others. They were right. Thanks, guys. You can put the soy sauce away.

### *Black Vinyl Shoes*, 1977 CD

Shoes are four guys from Zion, Illinois. Two of them play guitars, one plays bass, one plays drums. All the ones who play stringed instruments also sing and write songs. Two of them are brothers, but it doesn’t make much difference which. This album, which isn’t technically their first but is as close as you and I will ever come, was recorded on a four-track, and they claim one of the six microphones they used actually came from Radio Shack.

There is a certain low-fi charm to *Black Vinyl Shoes*, but that’s Shoes’ style, not any constraint on the studio equipment, the limitations of which seem to make no difference to the band at all. The guitars are warm and fuzzy (and I do mean *fuzz*, not distortion in the usual heavy-metal sense), the bass sturdy, the drums snappy, if thin, and the three singers blend together in one plain but likable voice that recalls Big Star and the

early dB's. The songs are short and fat-free (15 of them in 40 minutes), and though they ache to be played loud, they seem to sound quiet and humble no matter how high I crank them. Cross the Knack with the Ramones and you have a decent idea of what this album sounds like. (Mind you, they were already recording it in 1976, when the first Ramones album came out, and the Knack wouldn't show up for a few more years.) Their lyrics come out of this strange union neither sexist nor lobotomized; they write about girls, mostly, but with the wide-eyed innocent enthusiasm that you would *like* to remember yourself as having, rather than the pimply, leering vulgarity you and I and every other awkward heterosexual American male-ling *really* displayed, and some of you probably still do.

This isn't where I'd recommend that you start with Shoes. For all that it clearly overcomes the technical limitations of its creation, this album is still on the limp and stiff side (both, at once, I say), compared to their later ones. The singing gets better, the dynamic range increases, the instrumentation gets more interesting, all later on. On the other hand, once one of the later albums gets you hooked, don't hesitate to fill out your collection. The difference between this and the others is a matter of degree, not kind, and the band has nicely arranged for it to be reissued on CD, sparing you the dry, chapped hands that would result from the long weekend afternoons in poorly heated used-LP stores that will result from taking my advice on certain other bands whose output has been left behind in analog. (As if you would.)

### ***Present Tense*, 1979**

*This*, on the other hand, is a fine place to start. *Present Tense* and *Tongue Twister* came out on Elektra originally, but after the majors gave them up, Shoes reclaimed their rights, and reissued them on *one* CD. They make an excellent pair, and the CD gives you 24 tracks for 75 minutes, which is certainly enough to decide whether you like the band or not. There is a best-of CD that you *could*, I suppose, begin with, which contains tracks from all the other albums through *Silhouette* (and even one preview track from *Stolen Wishes*, which came after it), but it doesn't contain anything that *isn't* on the individual CDs, so I don't recommend it on the grounds that, of course, you'll end up wanting them all, making it superfluous.

*Present Tense* is wonderful. The band puts their four-track in mothballs and flies to England to record this one in a real studio with a major-label budget. There was a danger, I guess, that this technical freedom would overwhelm them, and damp their naïve energy, but since I came to all these albums at once, after the fact, the suspense was ruined for me: it didn't. They

throw in a keyboard or two, and some acoustic guitars, and they *sound* much better than on *Black Vinyl Shoes*, but their approach is basically unchanged. The songs are consistently longer than those on the first album, where a "3" was a rare occurrence in the minute column of the track lengths, but the 2:44 to 4:10 range is hardly expansive.

As Shoes grow more confident and smoother, and get out of their living room, the Big Star and early-dB's comparisons become quickly less-apt. At a few moments here they remind me of Guadalcanal Diary's more-serious moments, and when I asked Georgia who they reminded *her* of, she said "Beatles" without a pause, but I think I hear the Knack and Cheap Trick in here, as well. This album has an awesome, rumbling bass sound, and the guitars here really are *distorted*, not just fuzzed. All three singers sound better than before, and together they produce some nice harmonies. The humility of *Black Vinyl Shoes* is not gone—it's part of Shoes' demeanor—but the quietness of the first album is. If you turn this one up, it sounds *loud*. And great.

### ***Tongue Twister*, 1981**

You won't have to pay too close attention as the CD goes from track 12 to 13 to recognize the point where *Tongue Twister* takes over. The drums and voices suddenly jump forward, the guitars twist through another reverb on the way to the speaker (closer to fuzz again, the bass even more so), and the songs, incredibly, get even better. The lyrics, while you weren't watching, have grown up a little, and here are balanced between slightly more adult versions of girls-from-a-distance, like "She Satisfies", and actual relationship stories like the terrific "The Things You Do", as well as a few old-style paeans like "Girls of Today". The songs have shrunk down to their original length, as none of these dozen pass the 3:10 mark, but since you'd hardly notice that they were longer on *Present Tense*, that's not that notable.

*Tongue Twister* was recorded in Hollywood and mixed in LA, and the two journeys that it and *Present Tense* represent, east to England and west to California, are matched by the different approaches of the two albums. *Present Tense*, I think, is the bigger change from *Black Vinyl Shoes*, with *Tongue Twister* being more different from *Present Tense* than from *Black Vinyl Shoes*. Still, LA is a good distance from Zion, IL, and *Tongue Twister* has a polished softness in parts (especially "Karen") that is quite different from the muted quietness of the first record. And where the first half of this CD sounds loud played loud, this half actually seems to sound better-balanced at all volumes.

Together, *Present Tense* and *Tongue Twister* are even more impressive than they are apart. Putting

Shoes in these two somewhat different settings just highlights their essential charm that much more clearly, the differing productions allowing you to factor production out entirely, and get a long, satisfying drink at Shoes apparently inexhaustible font of pop confections (though the idea of drinking confections in turn highlights my unfortunate tendency to mulch metaphors together with the kind of culinary thoughtlessness that once prompted my mother to combine spinach and pineapple, which I don't advise).

### *Boomerang / Shoes on Ice, 1982 CD*

*Boomerang* finds Shoes back nearer home physically, in Chicago. It would have given my chronicle a nice symmetry if this physical return was also a stylistic return, somehow, to the band's early days, but this doesn't work out. For one, they never got that far away from the way they sounded on *Black Vinyl Shoes*. For another, this album is, if anything, a little farther from it.

The credits to *Boomerang* list a variety of guitar synthesizers, "processed guitar", E-bow, "gizmotron" and a Casio VL-1, and although you may not find yourself easily isolating any of those elements, the album does feel like the band has been listening to Devo records, and liking them. The fuzz and distortion are here joined by buzzes, beeps and eeeeeeoowhaaahhh flanged flybys. This results in *Boomerang* sounding more dated to me than any of the other Shoes albums. The last track, "Tested Charms", is perhaps the most severe case of this, as for most of its length it uses nothing but a mechanical cymbal track and an array of Joy-Division-like synthesizer whines. Also, if it weren't the title, I'd have no idea what the chorus of this song was saying. It sounds like "She's losing her 'tastic arms".

On one hand, all this gives this album a sonic variety that the first three don't really have, and that's a good thing. If it hadn't, it would be unsatisfying for not having made any progress. On the other hand, Shoes' unassuming tunesmanship gets buried a little, as well. It's an unavoidable tradeoff: you can't simultaneously criticize and praise them for changing. My opinion as to the balance they've struck here is somewhat ambivalent. *Boomerang* isn't my favorite Shoes album.

This CD, though, has the six songs of *Shoes on Ice* to recommend it, as well, and that makes a considerable difference. *Shoes on Ice* was a live EP originally given out free with copies of *Boomerang*, recorded at the Zion Ice Arena (!) in 1981. It contains live versions of four songs from *Present Tense* ("Too Late", "Hangin' Around with You", "Cruel You" and "In My Arms Again") and two from *Tongue Twister* ("She Satisfies" and "Hate to

Run"). Perhaps the contrast with the rest of the album leads me to exaggerate my reaction, but these live run-throughs sound *fabulous* to me. The rawness that the live recording ensures gives the songs a vitality that even their energetic originals didn't have, and hearing people *cheering* Shoes is particularly cool for me, as it makes Shoes' existence a little more tangible. It isn't just a couple people on CompuServe who like Shoes, they had a whole crowd (or at least enough people to carry an Ice Arena)! Zion just *sounds* like a made up name.

And so, even though I have mixed feelings about the CD as a whole, I'd have to say that it isn't a bad place to get introduced to Shoes, either. The live tracks fill in some history, and the *Boomerang* stuff shows a range that, though it isn't the same exact sound as the first three albums, strikes a happy median between those and the two still to come. If you find only one, and its this, I say forge ahead.

### *Silhouette, 1984 CD*

Major label patience finally ran out after *Boomerang*, and the band went back home to make *Silhouette*. Drummer Skip Meyer also bowed out of the group proper (or was pushed; I don't pretend to know anything real about the change), though he plays on most of the album.

The Devo resemblance gets even stronger on this record. "Will You Spin for Me?", with its keyboard riff and whipcrack sheet-metal crashes, is the most notable in this regard, but synthesizers are plentiful throughout, and there is a stiffness to Shoes' playing that Devo shared, though Devo made a *big* deal of it, and Shoes mostly fit it into their stride. At the same time, I think the songwriting here is a return to simpler, tighter, earlier form. The musical variety on *Boomerang* seemed a trifle scattered, but here the band is focused again, and feels more assured. They are no longer *experimenting* with other sounds, they are just using them, and this album thus *doesn't* feel dated to me at all.

You can tell, listening, that this album is back to a smaller production. The sound is murkier, lower-fi than the three Elektra albums. This works out absolutely fine, though. The wider instrumentation and more-mature songwriting are more than equal to the scaled-down production, and this record sprays out of the speakers with a dense, noisy life that studio vagaries can neither subdue nor simulate. It is as if the band realized that sonic perfection is beyond their budget this time around, and so decided to not let it even worry them. These are, as a result, some of the most invigorating Shoes songs, especially the galloping "I Wanna Give It to You", and the overall mood is

much more upbeat than on *Boomerang*, which tended slightly to sadder or, more precisely, more-melancholic, songs.

And, this too is an eminently acceptable place for you to introduce yourself to Shoes. It isn't strictly representative of the style of the previous records, but it has every bit the same *spirit*. And there's not a bad song to be found.

### *Stolen Wishes*, 1989 CD

A five-year delay would seem long enough to convince just about everybody that Shoes was dead and long gone by 1989, but since they record and release their records themselves, Shoes don't really have to care what anybody thinks has become of them, and *Stolen Wishes* gives not the faintest sign that the gap between albums had any sinister import. Indeed, the only real sign of behind-the-scenes change is that Ric Menck replaces Skip Meyer as session drummer.

Otherwise, *Stolen Wishes* is a sparkling successor to *Silhouette*. Keyboards are even more prominent here, and used with more imagination, and the band has never sounded better, major-label productions included. Perhaps the years between records were spent puttering around Short Order Records, cleaning tape heads and tweaking reverbs and laying better cable and such things, or perhaps Shoes just *set out* to make this record cleaner-sounding. Whatever the reason, it really sounds wonderful. The added keyboards assume a lot of the space-filling role that the guitars' buzz did formerly, and this allows the band to clean up the guitars quite a bit, without compromising the basic surge. Menck's drumming sounds bigger and limberer than Meyers', though it's not clear whether technique or production is responsible for this. The group's singing voices have grown stronger with the passage of years, too, and where at the outset their earnestness was their greatest strength, by *Stolen Wishes* they don't really need any qualifying.

I tend, I admit, to have a prejudice for the new over the old in these matters, but I think this is my favorite Shoes album. The differences between it and *Silhouette* are incremental, much like the changes from any of their albums to the next have seemed, but maybe because of the delay, this time I'm more conscious of the accumulated development between *Black Vinyl Shoes* and this, and it's really quite impressive how far they've come without any major direction changes. A decade and a half, or so, complete with a brush with success and the usual disappointment afterwards, apparently hasn't made them cynical at all. They aren't, we can safely assume, nearly as young as they were at the outset, and without seeming mired in their youth, they've retained that component of it that

makes innocent wide-eyed pop possible. They are an American treasure with the rare but admirable generosity to keep *themselves* in print. For this they deserve all the encouragement we can provide. Please hurry to the record store and do your share.

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## various

### *Yuletunes*, 1990 CD

Shoes aficionados should be aware that there's one more delightful Shoes song lurking on this bizarre Black Vinyl "Alternative Pop Christmas Song" compilation. It's called "This Christmas", and it adds festive holiday synth-bells to the band's usual giddy arrangement.

The even better news is that Shoes' song isn't the *only* reason to track down *Yuletunes*. The other songs I like are the Cavedogs' demented "Three Wise Men and a Baby (Xmas Song)", Bill Lloyd's Big-Star-like "Underneath the Christmas Tree", Kelley Ryan's sad, chirpy "It's Not Christmas", Big People's thin, jerky "Piece for Christmas", the Critics' rocking "She Feels Like Christmas Day", and the silly final track "The Christmas List", by "The Puddles", who appear to be a Jeff Murphy pseudonym. There are also songs by the Idea, Material Issue, Leroy, Matthew Sweet, Spooner, the Spongetones, 92 Degrees, Marti Jones and Don Dixon (who do Booker T.'s "Every Day Will Be Like a Holiday") and Herb Eimerman, in case you prefer any of those artists to the ones I liked here.

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## Bram Tchaikovsky

### *Strange Man, Changed Man*, 1979 LP

"A Million Miles Away" reminds me of an earlier, similar classic, Bram Tchaikovsky's "Girl of My Dreams". Bram Tchaikovsky are, for the most part, a trio, though Mike Oldfield, of all people, shows up to play tubular bells (what else) on "Girl of My Dreams". The other highlight of this album is a strained, clanging rendition of "I'm a Believer". Other than these two songs, though, the album is pretty bland. Or, more accurately, these songs all sound essentially the same, even the good ones, except that most are missing the spark that animates "Girl of My Dreams". The drumming is workmanlike but uninteresting, the bass solid but unremarkable, and Bram's guitar-sound gets on my nerves after about four songs.

On the other hand, Bram predates by a ways some of the bands I'm comparing them to here, and so to an

extent the relative flaws here can be explained as ways in which they *influenced* later bands. On that note, "Sarah Smiles" reminds me of Winter Hours' "Wait 'til the Morning". Then again, "Turn on the Light" reminds me of Steve Miller. Sometimes "before your time" means "you should have practiced more first". In the end I think the best thing to do with this disk is treat it as a big, slow single for "Girl of My Dreams". It's the first song on side two.

### *Pressure*, 1980 LP

Why did I buy another Bram Tchaikovsky album? I honestly can't remember. With no standout track to ennoble it, this album washes over me in a tepid wave of sincere but unaffecting guitar pop-rock. Perhaps the most remarkable thing is that the album contains songs called "Let's Dance", "Heartache", "Pressure" and "Jeux Sans Frontieres", *none* of which are covers, nor are the more well-known songs with those titles covers of these. Or perhaps the remarkable thing is how much the guy on the left in the back-cover photo looks like a young John Lithgow.

No, I take it back. The remarkable thing is that I have two of these albums, and even looking at them I often can't tell them apart.

## The Plimsouls

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### *The Plimsouls... Plus*, 1992 CD

The Plimsouls, Peter Case's pre-solo-career home, are another twangy American power-pop band who remind me of the dB's, even though they show neither the Big Star-like song-deconstruction of the early dB's albums, nor as much of the later dB's country influences. Instead, they occupy a stylistic niche in between the two that the dB's themselves never actually passed through.

The Plimsouls first album was not particularly successful, commercially, but that didn't stop Rhino Records, the masters of rescue-from-obscurity reissuing, from assembling this expanded version for CD. Besides the 11 songs from the original 1981 album *The Plimsouls*, this re-release contains the five tracks from the 1980 *Zero Hour* EP, three single b-sides, and a fan-club-only studio outtake, as well as a good history by *Billboard's* Chris Morris. (It's CDs like this that make one wish that Rhino were in charge of the back catalog of *every* under-recognized pop act.)

Listening to this album, it is amazing to realize that it didn't make the Plimsouls enormous stars. The Romantics and the Knack, in particular, rode this same basic music to all sorts of fame, however fleeting.

Where those two bands often sounded like gimmicks, though, or cynical Beatles rip-offs, the Plimsouls are genuine and original. Their musical lineage from the Beatles, the Byrds and other original guitar-pop bands is clear, but they sound like they have arrived at this sound naturally, by their own devices, rather than trying to reverse engineer it for its own sake.

"Zero Hour", their first single, is the standout track here, and it's great to hear it both in its original and the re-recorded album version. On the whole, I'm more impressed with the *Zero Hour* EP tracks, which have a feel closer to the Jam, due mostly to sparser production (and an Otis Redding cover), than I am with the album tracks, but several of the latter are excellent: I particularly like the bouncy "Now", the stomping drums of "Hush, Hush" and the rumbling bass of "Everyday Things". The charged live version of "Hush, Hush" is also killer.

### *Everywhere At Once*, 1983 LP

The second Plimsouls album (there were only two) has their masterpiece, and their closest brush with success, the Byrds-esque single "A Million Miles Away", with its chiming guitars, sturdy drums and rousing chorus.

Otherwise, I find this album a large dud. The production is just awful; I hate to think how many cardboard boxes they must have gone through in making the record sound this muffled. (Or maybe my turntable needs a new stylus.) Nowhere is this more evident than on the remake of *Zero Hour's* "How Long Will It Take?", which pales as if bleached next to the shoe-string-budget original.

The songwriting here isn't near as good either, or at least I don't like these songs as much. Songs like "Shaky City" and "My Life Ain't Easy" veer too much in the rockabilly/soul direction for my taste, and only "A Million Miles Away" and "Everywhere at Once" capture the fresh, melodic appeal of the first album. A big disappointment, as has Peter Case's solo career been for me. Ah well, put the first one on again.

## The Cavedogs

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### *Joyrides for Shut-Ins*, 1990 CD

The Plimsouls also lead me to Boston favorites the Cavedogs. Picked up by Enigma after a full career of radio tapes, the Cavedogs got the traditional Boston band's shot at stardom: one under-promoted album that captures a whole era in Boston rock but fails to make anybody big piles of money.

Like the Bags' *Rock Starve*, this album owes its startling solidity to the fact that the material here comes from various tapes and studio sessions spanning a considerable period of time, and on every one of which the band is trying their absolute hardest to make every moment count. (Where *Rock Starve* was new recordings of a proven set of songs, *Joyrides* actually uses most of the original versions.) There isn't a second of filler on the whole album, not a single song that doesn't sound like it should have been a huge hit. In fact, when I finally bought this album on the strength of "Tayter Country", I discovered that it was a veritable compendium of songs I'd half-heard and liked over the preceding few years in Boston, but not known whose they were.

The Cavedogs were (for they are no more) a classic trio. Todd Spahr played guitar, Mark Rivers drummed and Brian Stevens played bass, and all three sang. They sound something like the Who playing while the Byrds sing. The Who resemblance is especially strong due to their instrumental make-up, as well as the fact that their song "Baba Ganooj", better known as "I Want What You've Got" or "A Name", appears to have nothing to do with its title, which I have to think is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the Who's "Baba O'Reilly", better known as "Teenage Wasteland".

Occasional in-jokes aside, the record is remarkably sincere, and it delivers pretty much what the auspicious title promises: tuneful, uplifting, sturdily rocking pop songs free enough of top-40 rock-star baggage to satisfy the most discerning stay-at-home pop cynic. Spahr churns along on tastefully-distorted guitar, making up the bulk of the music without resorting to flashy solos, power-trio power-chords or other musical histrionics. The rhythm section is flexible, fast and muscular, without succumbing to punk abandon or heavy metal bombast. Vocal harmonies are well-used, but they too contribute to the overall feel of songs, rather than distracting your attention.

Another way of expressing the *solidity* of this album, admittedly, is to observe that most of these songs sound a lot like each other. "Bed of Nails" and "Taking Up Space" are darker than usual, "Proud Land" folkier, "Calm Him Down" prettier, and the acoustic "Right on the Nail" cleaner, but the other six songs are definitely cut from the same fast-pop mold. The mold is good enough, though, that I suspect you won't mind. For Boston rock fans this is a seminal and essential album, and guitar-pop fans with no inherent interest in Boston would also be hard-pressed to do better.

### *Six Tender Moments*, 1991 CD5

When Enigma went bust, Capitol rescued the Cavedogs, saving them from the ultra-traditional Boston band's return-to-obscurity-after-one-album. To tie fans over between albums, the Cavedogs released this six-song single for "Tayter Country". A cross between a novelty and an extension of *Joyrides for Shut-Ins*, this disc provides the abbreviated single edit of "Tayter Country", two unreleased studio tracks ("Cherokee Fight Song" and "Heartland Jingo Polka", neither of which is as strange as the titles might lead you to expect), covers of "What's New Pussycat?" and Ray Davies' "I Need You", and a folk-bluesy near-acoustic original called "Glass Eye", from a radio appearance. The covers are terrific and "Glass Eye" is as good as anything on *Joyrides*. I'm not as overwhelmed by the two studio tracks, but this single is definitely worth searching for if you're a fan, and provides a pretty good cheap introduction to the band for the rest of you, should you run across it.

### *Soul Martini*, 1992 CD

Since *Joyrides* was mostly a compilation of radio tapes, *Soul Martini* marks the first time the Cavedogs had the luxury of making an *album*. Recruiting producer Michael Beinhorn for the project (who was known to me for producing the Parachute Club's *At the Feet of the Moon*), they proceeded to make a much louder, darker, harder record than their previous releases, but one that I don't find nearly as successful.

I should be clear: at their best, the songs on this album are every bit as good as on the first one. "Love Grenade", "Sorrow (Boots of Pain)", "As You Were", "Murder" and "Tarzan and His Arrowheads" are essentially timeless pop gems. The problems, however, are twofold. First, *every* song on *Joyrides* was a timeless pop gem, while this one has seven that sound either like the band is taking advantage of the newfound space to experiment, or like they couldn't quite manage twelve songs up to their old standard in only two years, depending on what kind of mood you're in.

Second, even the good songs are battered and strained under the weight of this record's cacophonous sound. Apparently the band was partially dissatisfied with *Joyrides* because it was too sweet and cheerful, and they thought of themselves as a basically loud and abrasive band, but this is simply an excellent example of a band not recognizing its own strengths. Stasium's lighter touch on *Joyrides* suited the Cavedogs much better than the harsh overdriven sonic glare of *Soul Martini*.

Whether Capitol agreed with this diagnosis or had some other reason, the Cavedogs were dropped shortly after the album came out, and broke up soon thereafter,

in the wave of Boston music-scene casualties that also claimed the Bags and the Neighborhoods.

## The Clocks

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### *Clocks*, 1982 LP

Few songs lodge in my mind as being connected to a specific moment when I first heard them, but “She Looks a Lot Like You”, the first song on this record, will forever take me back to a summer day in 1984, driving my parents’ 1970 mucus-green Toyota station wagon out to some high school in North Dallas to visit my junior physics teacher Dr. Roe at the summer science “camp” that he was running. I was turning the corner to the front of the school, driving down the access road by the long fence around the soccer field, towards the entrance, when this song came on the radio, and I pulled in, parked and sat in the car listening to the rest of it. The DJ came on and explained that the song was by the Clocks, and I made a mental note to put the album on my want list.

I never heard the song again. I looked for the album, and didn’t find it. The tune, however, would *not* leave my mind. The words, too, were lodged there. For years I carried around this mangled version of the narrative in my mind: “I saw her picture on the cover, / Somebody’s photogenic lover. / But when I looked into her eyes / I was taken by surprise. / I thought I recognized her. / They tell me looks can be deceiving. / I had a hard time disbelieving. / She looked a lot like you.” When I remembered I’d check the Misc C section for “Clocks”, but after several years of finding nothing I gave up and took the entry off my list.

Then, one day shortly after I’d graduated from college, I found it. In fact, not only did I find it, but I found it for \$.99. It is at moments like that one that I give the world a quizzical glance and wonder whether the solipsists I invented might be right after all, and all this is simply a complicated illusion designed to make me more amusing to watch, like giving a cat a ball of yarn. After considering this possibility for a few thoughtbeats I usually shrug and resolve that even if that is what’s going on, the least I can do is oblige and be overjoyed.

The song, now that I can listen to it any time I want to, has lost none of its appeal and none of its association. It’s well worth all the time I spent seeking it, and I think of Dr. Roe every time I play it, which, given the lyrics, is a trifle bizarre, but so be it. The rest of the album, provided you don’t mind utterly schlocky over-produced vintage-1982 ex-cover-band-striking-out-on-their-own hormone-pop, is about as good as they

come. Fans of *Flesh for Lulu* or *Honeymoon Suite* (up next) definitely might like this, too, but you’ll probably never find a copy (or at least, if you *do* find one easily, I don’t want to know about it). Clocks are from Wichita, Kansas, so perhaps there are whole warehouses full of this album there, like all those strange figures or whatever they were in *Dhalgren*.

By far the most unnerving thing about this album, though, is that below the credits, on the liner, there is a picture of a man named Vern Sumner, to whom this album is dedicated without further explanation. And, damn it, he looks like Dr. Roe.

## Wonderboy

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### *Wonderboy*, 1992 CD

Just to make me feel better for not having known about Shoes, here’s a band that I’d wager *you* haven’t heard of, and another one I found out about through CompuServe. Wonderboy’s label, Racer Records, began as a tiny mail-order operation headquartered in San Francisco (I’ve just recently seen their releases show up in Tower records, so they must be expanding from just mail-order), but they also were the first record label with an organized presence on CompuServe, a section of their very own in RockNet. To announce their arrival they offered a free CD sampler of their six bands, and my desire to help out a new label meshed nicely with my willingness to receive free CDs in the mail, so I ordered one. Four of the bands didn’t do much for me, but Wonderboy and Dennis Phelps sounded nice-enough, so I got their albums.

Wonderboy’s is power pop of an amiable sort, with big happy guitars, comically oversized hooks, and a chirpy but likable singer. The lyrics have lots of amusingly naïve turns, like “Now You’ve Proven Me Right About Girls” and “The F Word”. The band plays very well. The liner design sucks, but that’s about the only detail that betrays this album’s small-time origins.

Having said those nice things, though, I have to admit two reservations. First, Georgia’s reaction to Wonderboy was “Ugh, this is horrible. You like *this* but you don’t like Journey?” I do, and don’t, but I wasn’t aghast at the comparison. Second, as pleasant as this album is, I wouldn’t contend for a moment that it is *significant* by any definition of the word. Listening to it is an enjoyable way to kill some time, but unless you have a *lot* more spare time than I do (which you probably do unless you’re writing one of these books too), life is too short to waste on this.



## Flesh for Lulu

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### *Long Live the New Flesh, 1987 LP*

As violently as I hated John Hughes' film version of *Pretty in Pink*, I adored his next take on the same basic storyline, *Some Kind of Wonderful*. Everything I thought *Pretty in Pink* got wrong, *Some Kind of Wonderful* got right. I've watched it at least six times, and I consider it and *About Last Night* two of the most underrated movies made since I started using the word "underrated" in earnest.

Flesh for Lulu's song "I Go Crazy" was in the movie, and got played on the radio a lot, and I came to like it enough to get the album. The second song, "Postcards from Paradise", is okay, too. The rest are a tedious mixture of the Church and some other band with more faux-metal guitars. Skip the album and rent the movie.

## Honeymoon Suite

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### *Honeymoon Suite, 1984 LP*

Take Loverboy and turn the guitars and drums up a bit and you'd get something that both looks and sounds like this band. The dead giveaway, before you even get the thing unwrapped, is the classic cover photo, featuring a short-skirted maid adjusting the sheets on an enormous heart-shaped bed perforated with dozens of protruding nine-inch nails. In fact, if this cover makes you neither laugh nor smile, you aren't going to like the music, either, so forget it.

*Honeymoon Suite's* fifteen minutes, cruelly cut short at 3:37, is the minor hit "New Girl Now", which I have a strong abiding fondness for. The rest of the album is eminently forgettable, and veers much more deeply into New Wave than the hit's light metal edge. Never mind the release date, this song has 1982 written all over it. That is a very nostalgic year for *me*, but if it doesn't inherently recommend this to you, then you will most likely gain nothing more from listening to this album than a clear understanding of why they didn't make any of the other songs the single.

## Martin Briley

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### *One Night with a Stranger, 1983 LP*

We now move into more promising one-song territory. I don't know a damn thing about Martin

Briley, except these facts: he had a hit with a song called "The Salt in My Tears", and his song "Just a Mile Away From Here" suddenly leaped into my head unbidden a few months ago, and it took me weeks to track the song down and realize that, in fact, it was on a record I had.

The cover of this album is cool. Most of it is a pretty ordinary scene of a woman, in lingerie and heels, sitting on a half-unmade bed smoking, the TV going in the background. It's hard to tell if this is the aftermath of a prostitution-law violation, or the lead-in to it, but it's one or the other. Above the flying man in the background, though, the ceiling turns into water, and he is trying desperately to keep his head poking through it, out of the picture. The reverse side is the corresponding shot from above the surface of the water, Briley looking very damp and unhappy to be drowning in a suit.

The music inside is surprisingly good. I fully expected this to be like the many albums that ended up in this chapter with little good to say about them besides the name of their one great song, but in fact this is a pretty solid album. "The Salt in My Tears" is my favorite track, but it isn't alone in my affections. "Put Your Hands on the Screen" is a Peter Gabriel-sounding story of TV evangelism. "She's So Flexible" has a nice circus-organ bop, and the dumb/funny line "She can be hard as steel / But she can soothe like lanolin". "A Rainy Day in New York City" has a sort-of Randy Newman groove to it. I have a feeling there are a number of artists Briley would like to be, and echoes of these longings permeate this record, but if he doesn't cover completely original territory, he at least covers it competently.

## Jon Astley

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### *Everyone Loves the Pilot, 1987 CD*

Jon Astley, too, could have been a one-moment artist. Where Martin Briley surprised me by making a decent record, Jon Astley surprised me even more by making a *fantastic* one! His hit, "Jane's Getting Serious", due mostly to a preponderance of silly-sounding synth noises, had a novelty that doesn't make for much serious critical attention, and evidently didn't make for instant fans, either, as whenever I ask people whether they remember Astley, then say either "No", or "Uh, yeah but...". And to be fair, I didn't fall in love with this album immediately, either. The song itself had a resonance due to the coincidence of my becoming good friends with a woman named Jane right when this and Icicle Works' "Understanding Jane"

came into being, but I liked it mostly for amusement value, as neither song particularly applied to the situation.

"Better Never Than Late", though, a marvelous piece of fear-of-flying paranoia, caught my attention *musically*, and that kept the album in at least *some* rotation in my life. A few years later, as I began replacing vinyl with CDs, this record suddenly jumped to mind, and I picked up copies of it and Jon's second, and this time, paying closer attention, I was much more impressed.

For one thing, Astley himself produced most of the sounds on the album, via Fairlight, and yet he makes it sound like there's a tight, nicely restrained, philosophically-in-sync band behind him. Some guitars (including Eric Clapton somewhere in here), a sax, harmonica and a cadre of backing vocalists help fill out the songs, but the core of the music is the core of its appeal. Astley's virtual rhythm section is methodical and spotless, but never feels like a machine, and his synth-bass work is of album-making quality all by itself. Keyboards are used liberally, but the emphasis on bell/marimba-type sounds in the upper registers make these arrangements much more reminiscent of Thomas Dolby than, say, Howard Jones. Astley understands exactly which elements are necessary to the songs, and that's the only sort you'll hear here.

And the things that hold it all together and turn it toward a purpose are Astley's voice and lyrics. His singing voice is like a warmer, deeper Bowie, or a serious Stan Ridgway, or a sarcastic non-NY Lou Reed, replacing Bowie's theatricality and Reed's deadpan dolor with a sardonic chuckle, but not allowing irony to twist his voice into a different shape, as Ridgway does. Or maybe Robert Palmer minus Robert Plant, with just a hint of Devo thrown in. Astley seldom really cuts loose singing, and probably couldn't really even if he wanted to, but his low half-talking style complements the strong, precise music and higher-range backing singers very well.

His style also fits well with his lyrics, which are clever without making that big a deal out of it. They don't aspire to ruminative brilliance, but they do sound like the words of a very intelligent singer who isn't *trying* to overwhelm anybody ("sense" is effortlessly rhymed with "recompense", and it doesn't seem at all unusual in context). Besides the airplane-disaster narrative of "Better Never Than Late", most of these songs revolve around central turns of phrase that act more as the focus of extended puns and wordplay fugues than as subjects, per se. Like a good gimmickless stand-up comic, Astley's subjects are everyday observations that bite precisely because they are so familiar.

Lastly, this record is just amazingly fresh and uncluttered by the conventional trappings that plague most attempts to make good synth-pop. The songs don't sound like they are trying to be hits, trying to be dance songs, trying to be epic or vicious or, even in the case of "Jane's Getting Serious", obtrusively novel. They are merely what they need to be. Understated, underrated, undated, and I won't trade it.

### *The Compleat Angler*, 1988 CD

What few reviews there were of *Everyone Loves the Pilot (Except the Crew)* must all have began "Well, I guess I'm in the crew", and Astley must have read every bad word, because his second album reads like a vitriolic rebuttal to his critics, in the thin guise of self-deprecation. The title itself, casting Astley as the ultimate conniver, plays directly off the liner quotation "As no man is born an artist, / so no man is born an Angler".

It starts with the opening track, "But Is It Commercial?", a bald recitation of the faults he was presumably accused of. He denies wanting to be Bowie or Byrne, echoes the perception "If you ain't got a hook then you ain't got a hope" (note the relationship between "hook" and angling, and the fact that the back cover features a fishhook), and then insists on doing things his way anyway ("I'll hang myself, just give me the rope"). The next song, "Put This Love to the Test", can be taken as a clever relationship song, one partner's exasperated attempt to stop playing coy games. It can also be taken, with not too painful a stretch of the imagination, as a very literal "Fuck you" to Astley's critics. The third song, "I'll Show You Bastards", is even less oblique. "I'll show you bastards with reason and rhyme", he says.

The anti-critic tirade takes a short break for "I Dream About You (But I Cannot Sleep)", a biting song with the great line "Your perfume lingers on but then, you had a lot to conceal". Criticism seems to have doing nothing but hone Astley's creative edge, though I'm guessing that wasn't the critics' intent. The next song, "The Menu", is a rare original about infidelity, *its* great line being "I like to read the menu / But you know I always eat at home". Lest the critics think Astley has forgotten about them, though, he tosses in a Bowie quote ("I'm putting out fire with gasoline!"), just as he promised he would in "But Is It Commercial?".

He goes back on the offensive with "Been There, Done That", which begins "I stand accused, a social climber, / But the truth is I'm not social at all. / I'm staying put at the top of the ladder; / I'll tread on your hands and make you fall." When he later adds "I am my biggest fan", affirming his own confidence in what he's doing, I believe and share the sentiment. The next

two, “Welcome to the Circus” and “Fire the Editor”, reach beyond the critics to the whole entertainment-industry machine, following up on the line of disillusionment he began in “The Emperor” on the first album. And then, rather than end on a self-referential note, he goes out not on a triumphant kiss-off, but merely on another trademark warped-relationship story.

Musically, this album is every bit as good as the first one, so there is no tradeoff. The only thing that can come close to souring such an unqualified pleasure for me is the fact that, so far, Astley hasn’t done another, and this could be taken unkindly as an indication that his critics won, even if listening to the album it is patently obvious that they lost.

## Thomas Dolby

Dolby and Jon Astley are of a pair to me, in several ways. Most obviously, both are talented producers, studio wizards and multi-instrumentalists whose own music seems to me to have been badly underrated. Secondly, they both achieved initial notoriety through a novelty-hit, and while neither is essentially a novelty-song writer, both have strangely warped songwriting senses. Dolby’s career is more varied and ambitious, and this produces both stunning successes and annoying failures.

### *Urges/Leipzig, 1981 7”*

Thomas Dolby’s first single, which this is, comes a while before his eventual album debut, and sounds it. Both these songs are interesting, but underdeveloped. “Urges” is faster, a prototype of his dancier later songs, while “Leipzig” is a slow, quieter song. Dolby’s direct, engaging voice is a clear presence on both songs, and there are also definite signs of his knack for building rhythms without all the conventional hi-hat/kick/snare hardware (a muted electronic thud and some hand-claps here suffice), but this is still essentially a collector’s item more than it is *musically* of note.

### *The Golden Age of Wireless (spring issue), 1983 CD*

There are at least four variants of this basic album. The first vinyl version of it (without the “spring issue” caveat) actually contains “Leipzig” and “Urges”, and does *not* contain “She Blinded Me with Science” or “One of Our Submarines”. An EP followed this in the US, with “Science” and “Submarines” and some others. The “spring issue” LP eventually swapped the early single tracks for the two new ones, and this became the standard version. This CD, just to keep the listener off-guard, *appears* to reproduce the “spring issue” exactly,

but actually substitutes a radically remixed version of “Radio Silence” for the original (or what, to *me* was “the original”).

In whatever form you can locate it, this is an extremely worthwhile album. “She Blinded Me with Science” is a peerless early-Eighties moment, the first song I ever had successfully drummed into my head by MTV, not the radio, and the first New Wave record I ever bought. It is also the least-typical track on an otherwise much less-silly record. The rest of these songs replace “Science”’s jokey audio-play with a striking melodic flair and a sense of atmosphere that counterbalances the heavily synthetic percussion and instrumentation. If you remember either “One of Our Submarines” or “Europa and the Pirate Twins”, both of these are more representative of the album as a whole.

It does *begin* with “She Blinded Me with Science”, perhaps to get this song out of the way. “Radio Silence”, in its original form, made a sharper break into the rest of the record. The remix here, with its relative abundance of beeping, chirping background noises and duet vocal from Akiko Yono, makes the transition from “Science” to the rest more gradual. I guess, then, it works better this way, and I can’t deny that the song is more *interesting*, but there was a quiet drama to the original that seemed more in keeping with the spirit of the lyrics to me, and I miss it. Another piece of vinyl I can’t get rid of, after all...

“Airwaves” relaxes all the way, though. Mark Heyward-Chaplin’s fretless-sounding bass and Dolby’s piano playing help give this song a swaying grace that combines a sense of technological nostalgia and some strange exhausted sadness (“I itch all over, / Let me sleep”). With this as setup, “Flying North” is able to speed the drum machines up again, toss in guitars and piano hooks and arpeggiated computers and a raft of other kinetic accouterments, making a fast, driving song that, nonetheless, has almost none of the capacity to annoy that “Science” did. Dolby’s vocals and nicely-restrained synthetic strings are legato and calm, playing confidently against the persistent furious pace of the rest of the music. This is one of those rare songs that you could take the rhythm stuff off of and make it a haunting ballad, or take the haunting things off and make a killer dance track, but which is much much better simply left the way it is.

“Weightless” forms a bracket at the other end of “Flying North”. Like “Airwaves”, it is more often quiet and soft than not, but where “Airwaves” soars, “Weightless” drifts closer to earth. I realize that the titles and metaphors don’t add up. Sorry.

“Europa and the Pirate Twins” is clearly my favorite song here, and one I’d nominate for the pop hall of fame without the slightest hesitation. The frenetic instrumentation is brilliantly scattered, jumping

from guitar-solo to robotic hand-clap riffs to slithering synth-strings and wailing harmonica (by XTC's Andy Partridge, who is also credited with "Stick" on "Leipzig", whatever that means). The story, the narrator remembering a childhood friend who is now famous and inaccessible, is perhaps not Nobel Laureate material, but I find it genuinely touching as a wistful contemplation of how youth's dreams never turn out. Reality is sometimes better than the unselfconsciously romantic plans children make, and it is sometimes worse, but it is always *different*.

"Windpower" completes the trilogy of spacer songs that "Airwaves" and "Weightless" began. On anybody else's album these could all be first-singles, but here they feel to me much more like casing around "Flying North" and "Europa". This impression is furthered by the next song, "Commercial Breakup", which strikes me as easily the album's weakest track, and the only one that I regard as possibly out of place (as opposed to merely non-typical). For this one, Dolby steps out of his auteurial cocoon and plays it straight, allowing Kevin Armstrong, Mark Heynard-Chaplin and Justin Hildreth's guitar, bass and drums to dominate the arrangement. He tosses in a warped synthetic take on bar-piano boogie himself, and his singing seems to have a forced grittiness that bothers me just enough to notice.

The interlude of conventionality is short-lived, and the last two tracks round out in the album in a more appropriate fashion. "One of Our Submarines" is a lot like a combination of "Europa and the Pirate Twins" and "Radio Silence", somewhere between the two in both overt energy level and underlying melancholy. "Cloudburst at Shingle Street", a track I always seem to forget about, only to be pleasantly reminded of as the album fails to end after song nine, is a grown-up cousin of "Leipzig", translating the earlier song's deliberate smallness and pulsing rhythm into a less-claustrophobic production. Where "Leipzig" would have faded away, though, "Cloudburst at Shingle Streets" bursts into a rumbling clash of drums and comically overwrought backing vocals (from Dolby's old patroness, Lene Lovich, among others) that, in turn, fades out itself, leaving Dolby alone, musing "And now there's only you", which echoes and then fades, leaving behind quite a nice record, really.

### *The Flat Earth*, 1984 CD

As charming as *The Golden Age of Wireless* was, though, *The Flat Earth* is Dolby's surprise masterpiece. On the surface it doesn't *appear* to be anything very epic. Its seven songs clock in at well under forty minutes, and the single, "Hyperactive!", has enough "She Blinded Me with Science" similarities to expect the

whole record to be very much in keeping with the first one.

It isn't. Where Dolby's first album showed that he had a good command of pop songwriting, as well as a comprehensive mastery of studio technology, *The Flat Earth* finds his true gift: he is the rock world's second-greatest master of creating atmosphere through incidental noises (after Talk Talk; interesting that Tim Friese-Greene produced "She Blinded Me with Science" and "One of Our Submarines"). The music on this album wriggles with life like a jungle, creaking, chirping, whirring, breathing, stretching, ringing, clicking and knocking. Where Talk Talk turned these sounds of life into the music's *focus*, excising everything *else* in order to flip background and foreground, Dolby is content to leave them in place, in the background, letting them enrich his songs without taking them over. I expect to find cicadas listed on the credits, exotic tropical snakes and birds whose mating calls these noises must be, but there are just people there.

The first three songs, which comprised the first side on vinyl, are a remarkable set. "Dissidents", a fascinatingly paranoid fantasy about writers mysteriously abducted by the government, is powered by a stiff, halting bass pattern and a lockstep drum line. Typewriter noises and snatches of foreign dialog run through the song, as do clipped guitar chords, insidious mosquito-like keyboards and radio-opera backing vocals by Adele Bertei. The senses of feverish activity and sinister Big-Brother interference are powerful, and although the song is paced about right to be a dance track, I find it both too engaging and too disquieting to serve in that capacity very well.

"The Flat Earth", itself, is perhaps the best evocation of Dolby's ongoing strange fascination with the relationship between technology, science and anachronism. Although he *uses* the best devices that technology can offer, Dolby seems to take a rather less pragmatic view of *science*, regarding it as an academic pursuit more akin to philosophy, and thus one about which emotional reactions are entirely proper. There are elements of this in "She Blinded Me with Science", but it is clearest in "The Flat Earth", where he simply asserts that "the Earth can be any shape you want it". The use of this as the album's title, along with the cryptic geometrical figure on the back of the jacket, harken back to science in the days before it became a side-project of engineering, back to when it was done with minds, togas, and lines drawn in the sand with a stick, not particle accelerators and centrifuges and STM needles. It isn't that Dolby doesn't believe that today's hard science isn't worthwhile, only that he is reminding us that it is not the *whole* of science.

"Screen Kiss" combines the first two songs, using the romance and deliberate disbelief (or mis-belief) of

"The Flat Earth" (as well as mentioning "the discovery of Radium") and the media-fascination of "Dissidents" (two "Vaseline" mentions in three songs, not that Vaseline is a medium, *per se*) for a very ambiguous song that either despairs that people attempt to escape their lives in movies, or else claims that our ability to make movies actually *does* compensate for reality, or perhaps says something else entirely.

The second side is a little less impressive to me, as the various influences at work seem to settle out a bit, leaving each song less-rich than the first three. "Hyperactive!" and "White City" isolate the manic dance-energies, and while I think this makes them Dolby's *best* dance songs, they unbalance the album and make it harder to appreciate the two in between. "Mulu the Rain Forest" (along with "The Flat Earth") is the song here richest in amazing incidental noises, but away from the pop conventions that "Hyperactive!" and "White City" are *overburdened* with, the noises aren't as striking a component, and don't impress me nearly as much. Plus, this song is *about* a rain forest, and so you *expect* to hear insects and such. "I Scare Myself" is the one song here that strikes me as, more or less, a dud. I don't care for the flamenco guitar or the spastic horns, and the presence of "voodoo" in a song is never a trait in its favor in my book. The piano seems to wander at random, and after all the innovative percussion work elsewhere on Thomas' albums, the jazz-touch ride-cymbal patter in this song just depresses me.

This album shows up frequently on my DID lists, but only when I haven't heard it for a while. In my mind, the first three songs expand to swallow the rest, and the whole album takes on only their character, and I think it is virtually peerless. When I listen to it again, I realize that the rest of the songs mar its perfection for me, and it drops out of my *highest* esteem for a while. But I forget again, and it makes its way back, like those dogs in that book. I feed it some scraps, and keep trying to explain to my CD player what "side one" means.

### ***Astronauts and Heretics*, 1992 CD**

An extended period of distraction ensued for Thomas Dolby after *The Flat Earth*. He did some soundtracks, a lot of production, and put out an album called *Illegal Aliens Reach Ealing In A Buick*, or something like that, whose singles disgusted me so thoroughly that I didn't even *consider* buying it. Around 1990 or so I began reading sporadic press allusions to *Astronauts and Heretics*, his epic comeback album, years in the making, which he was having trouble finding a label for. A few times it seemed like it was going to come out, but it never did. Finally, in

1992 Georgia and I went to England on vacation, and the first advance single from the album was just coming out. When I got back, more singles came. Eventually, the album *did* appear, but by the time I got it I had the three singles below already, and between them I'd already heard *six* of the album's nine songs.

It's a pleasant album, but a terrible disappointment. Compared to his first two, this record is hopelessly mild, inoffensive to a fault. The three songs that were wholly new to me, "Cruel", "I Live in a Suitcase" and "That's Why People Fall in Love", weren't nearly enough to make me feel like I was actually hearing an *album*, not just a compilation of all the scattered tracks I'd already heard, none of which were all that impressive to begin with. Perhaps if I had had no build up, no singles, no expectations, and just discovered one day that Thomas Dolby had a new album, I would have liked it a lot more, but coming on it this way I can't manage a single strong feeling. There's nothing *wrong* with it, really, it just isn't *much*.

### ***Close But No Cigar* (1 of 2), 1992 CD5**

This single, a UK "Part 1 of 2", has two versions of "Close but No Cigar", a piano/vocal version of "Beauty of a Dream", and "Neon Sisters". "Close but No Cigar" is a nice song, making good use of Eddie Van Halen's guest guitar part. The "Version" version just sounds like it's missing some parts. "Beauty of a Dream" is nice enough, too, but not that different in feel from the album's fuller arrangement. "Neon Sisters" is Dolby's after-the-fact farewell to a friend dead of AIDS (one assumes). It seems sincere, but hearing Thomas sing "you went and stuck a dirty needle in your vein" brings up images in my mind of a phonograph needle, and a desperate music addict (or blocked musician, perhaps) trying to transfer music either directly to or from his very lifeblood. This is much more in keeping with Dolby's previous lyrical fascinations. I also have developed a strong suspicion of anybody who tries to avoid homosexuality while "confronting" AIDS, as too often the implied sentiment seems to be "It's so sad; he wasn't even *gay*.", which is horrible. I have no particular reason to read malice into Dolby's song, but it fits the pattern.

### ***I Love You Goodbye* (1 of 2), 1992 CD5**

Even more redundantly, *this* single features two versions each of "I Love You Good-bye" and "Eastern Bloc", both of which are *Astronauts and Heretics* album tracks. It's not enough that "Eastern Bloc" is already an explicit sequel to "Europa and the Pirate Twins". Real sequels are pretty rare in rock music, and "Europa" was one of my favorite songs, so this sounded like a good idea, but I can't say that this installment adds much to

the original for me. Tying Europa in to the collapse of the Iron Curtain feels strained to me, like Dolby is trying too hard to show he's paying attention to the world (and also reminds me how long these songs were in progress, which makes me all the more disappointed that they aren't better).

The alternate versions are nothing to covet. The second half of this single, which I didn't get, replaces the extra versions with "Windpower" and "Europa and the Pirate Twins". This shows a real knack for pointlessly flogging the same material in many guises, and I have to wonder whether Dolby or Virgin were responsible. Either should have had better sense.

### *Silk Pyjamas (1 of 2), 1992 CD5*

The Part 1 single for "Silk Pyjamas" actually does something *useful*, for a change, as it includes Dolby's collaboration with Ryuichi Sakamoto, "Field Work", a song called "Puppet Theatre" whose origin I know nothing of, and "Get Out of My Mix", an old mega-remix 12" epic that I remember seeing back around the time of *The Golden Age of Wireless* and thinking, even then, that Dolby had an unfortunate tendency to sell the same stuff too many different ways.

"Field Work" (here in the "Long London" mix) is definitely worth having, and I've more than once considered getting the Sakamoto album it appears on, just for it. "Puppet Theatre" is an eerie dance song that was worth unearthing, if not *earthshaking*. "Get Out of My Mix" is worth having as a perfect example of the pointlessly chaotic collages that, for a time, *defined* the "remix". Not that they've gotten all *that* much better as a rule since, but this is definitely the low point, and thus historically significant, if unlistenable.

## David Bowie

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### *Time Will Crawl, 1987 7"*

Bowie, Costello, John, Joel, whatever. I don't like Bowie's voice, either, and I have hated just about every phase of his career (which is pretty remarkable considering how much his style has varied over the years), but there are lots of great Bowie *covers* in this book. "Time Will Crawl" is the only Bowie song that I've liked a lot in Bowie's own version. It has a steady groove, and sticks to it doggedly, minimizing the amount of Bowie's personality that leaks through. Real Bowie fans probably don't like this much.

Actually, I just asked Georgia, who is a Bowie fan of sorts, whether she liked the song or not. "It sounded like Bowie", was her first reaction. Her thumbnail analysis of the situation is that there are early-Bowie

fans, mid-Bowie fans (*Scary Monsters* being her example of "mid-Bowie"), and late-Bowie fans, and that this is late Bowie and she's a mid-Bowie fan, so she's more tolerant of late-Bowie than early-Bowie-fans. This all sounds pretty reasonable, so I include it for reference, and also because I like mentioning Georgia.

## Devo

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### *New Traditionalists, 1981 LP*

In terms of pure techno-nerd silliness, nobody has *anything* on Devo. Devo took all the worst things about New Wave and turned them all into virtues by deliberately overplaying them. Not only were their flower-pot hats, plastic hairpieces and identical ridiculous costumes vicious caricatures of an aesthetic that many New Wave bands aspired to with no sense of humor about it at all, but their music was even more absurd than their outfits. You could *try* to sound more stiffly mechanical than Devo, more like robots programmed with a brain full of rock clichés but absolutely no sense of rhythm, but surely there's some *other* way you can think of to completely waste your time.

As with the Ramones, you should really have some Devo, whether you particularly like it or not, just because there are situations in life when Devo is precisely what is called for. The good news is that Devo can actually play *much* better than the Ramones, and their songs don't all sound nearly as identical as the Ramones' tend to, so you might even find yourself liking them.

The best-of compilations are definitely the place to start, but I happen to have this album as well. The standout tracks on *New Traditionalists* are all on *Greatest Hits* ("Through Being Cool", "Jerkin' Back 'n' Forth" and "Beautiful World"), but "Love Without Anger" is also excellent.

### *Greatest Hits, 1990 CD*

In compressed peak form like they are here, Devo are a *very* impressive band. These sixteen tracks come from *Shout* ("Here to Go"), *New Traditionalists* ("Through Being Cool", "Jerkin' Back 'n' Forth", "Beautiful World"), *Oh No! It's Devo* ("Big Mess", "Peek-a-boo"), *Q: Are We Not Men? A: We Are Devo!* ("(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction", "Gut Feeling" and "Jocko Homo"), *Freedom of Choice* ("Whip It", "Girl U Want", "Freedom of Choice" and "Gates of Steel") and *Duty Now for the Future* ("Smart Patrol/Mr. DNA"), as well as the single "Working in the Coal Mine".

Not only do these show Devo at its satirical peak (“Through Being Cool” and “Satisfaction” especially), but several of these songs are actually delightful in their own right, notably “Big Mess”, which is the killer pop song Wall of Voodoo never made, and “Beautiful World”, which you could easily accuse A Flock of Seagulls of having spent their entire career trying to emulate. There are enough big hits here to justify buying the album solely on the grounds of Eighties nostalgia, but the less-well-known tracks are every bit as good, and where many of my early-Eighties nostalgia purchases get listened to once or twice and then filed under “Well, I *have* that”, this one I keep pulling out and putting on, and I like it more every time. Devo are utterly original and a distinctly *American* phenomenon to me, and deserve real respect along with the requisite howls of derisive laughter.

### ***Greatest Misses, 1990 CD***

The companion volume to *Greatest Hits* is even stranger, and even more unexpectedly wonderful. Pulling heavily from *Duty Now for the Future* (seven songs), *Q: Are We Not Men? A: We Are Devo!* (four songs) and four “Booji Boy” versions of other songs (“Be Stiff”, “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction”, “Mechanical Man” and “Jocko Homo”), this set emphasizes the band’s early (*Q* and *Duty* were their first two albums), much-less-accessible, often-brilliant opacity. These are definitely not the band’s big hits, so normal nostalgia isn’t as much of a reason to buy this one as *Greatest Hits*, but if you get through the hits and find yourself wishing you knew more Devo, this is an excellent next step, the material varying from aggravating (“Mechanical Man”) to crazily invigorating (“Speed Racer”) to unabashedly melodic (“Space Junk”), with a much more clearly defined punk edge than the band’s later material.

Few bands both promise something unusual and deliver it; Devo claims to be “suburban robots here to entertain corporate life forms”, and they live up to that claim. That sounds depressing, but Devo’s genius is that they make you believe that their de-evolved world might not be such a bad place, they make you convinced that the real world actually *isn’t* the suburban hell they envision (or else all music would sound like this), and then they make you wonder whether, in fact, the world might actually be *cooler* Devo’s way, after all.

## **Gary Numan**

Gary Numan is Devo taken seriously. This might sound like a bad idea, but in my opinion it proves

inspired. Where Devo’s is a cartoon future, a Saturday morning matte-animation version of *Brave New World*, Gary Numan’s aesthetic is more like *Blade Runner*. Both Devo and Numan are attempting to subvert the impersonal future by assuming its outward guise and then humanizing it from within, but Devo’s approach is so obviously satiric that what could have been a serious artistic point gets largely lost. Numan has the courage to take himself seriously, and though this doesn’t deflect shallow criticism as well as flower-pot hats, I think it produces some of the most enduring and unnerving music of the synthesizer’s early years, music that, probably, neither can nor will be made again for a long long time, if ever. Ironic as this seems, Numan’s is a vision of the future locked in the past. Not only will the future never *be* that way, but I’m not sure we’ll ever *imagine* the future that way again. Future nostalgia. How strange.

Perhaps the strangest thing about Gary Numan, to me, is how little *direct* influence he has had on music since. I consider him one of the most original artists to emerge from the dissolution of punk, but nobody ever seems to cover his songs, cite him as a hero, mention him on DID lists, or grant him any of those accolades usually collected by stylistic pioneers. Instead, he gets panned as “dated”. I don’t get it. *Lots* of records sound like they are from the time they’re from. How is that bad? Do critics find him threatening? Hard to see why they would. He’s clearly talented, and at least in the US he wasn’t nearly popular enough to earn much reactionary enmity. It’s mysterious. I guess I’ll have to start the critical revival of early Gary Numan myself, here.

There are, as I write, three ways to approach collecting Gary Numan’s significant early catalog on CD. The first approach I took, which was the cheaper of two at the time, was Beggars Banquet’s four two-on-one reissues, combined with their two CD compilation, *Exhibition*. This set gives you *almost* all the songs from the original eight albums it represents, plus a handful of bonuses. The second way involves the Japanese series *Asylum* 1-3. The first two of these are four CD sets, each CD of which reproduces an original album plus several additional tracks. The third reissues *Living Ornaments* 79/80, which I’ll get to. The first two *Asylum* sets ran well over half again as expensive as the Beggars Banquet set when I was buying them, and since I was already buying 105 Gary Numan songs *this* way, the additional b-sides and remixes the *other* way didn’t seem like a particularly essential investment. Not too long after I’d committed myself to that approach, Beggars Banquet recanted it and created a third, and even better alternative, by reissuing the eight albums as four *double-CD* packages, reproducing the bonus-song additions from the *Asylum* set almost

exactly, but bundling the albums in the same pairs as the two-on-ones.

Feelings of version-inferiority overcame me (and listening to the two-on-ones had increased my desire to hear the bonus tracks), and I bought the four double-CDs as well. There are bound to be several simpler ways to arrange Numan's entry, but for the fun of reproducing my experience of these things most closely, I'm going to go through both sets, in catalog-number order. For your reference, the release order of these eight was: *Tubeway Army*, *Replicas*, *The Pleasure Principle*, *Telekon*, *Dance*, *I, Assassin*, *Warriors*, *The Plan*, although the material on *The Plan* is circa *Tubeway Army*.

#### *Tubeway Army / Dance*, 1978/1981 CD

This one is by far the oddest combination. If you know Gary Numan only from "Cars", then *Tubeway Army* will be quite a surprise, in that it is awkward, mechanistic guitar-driven robot-punk. Jess Lidyard provides drumming that you can really describe no other way than *strained*. Paul Gardiner's bass is a little more fluid, but not much. Gary provides the remainder of the instrumentation, and of course his ghoulish voice to hold the mixture together. If Gary's voice gets on your nerves (and sounding like a bad mechanical David Bowie simulation is the sort of thing that could, I admit), then you will hate everything he does, instantly. If you don't mind it, there's hope. If it absolutely fascinates you like it does me, then there are several intense years of musical history to relive. *Tubeway Army* is a punk album that goes in a completely different direction from the rest of punk music. Where the Sex Pistols and their heirs charged into music with little more than energy and attitude, Numan's cold precision ends up being just as shocking. From the rapid-fire vocals of "Friends" to the insidious pulsing guitar of "Something's in the House", this album makes Magazine look *funky*. Synthesizers are effects here, not the central instruments, but the feeling of sterilized austerity that typifies Numan's mental world comes through clearly even so. The startling thing about *Tubeway Army* is how much it *rocks*. You do have to be able to get into the band's metallic, completely swingless rhythm, but if you can, then some of these songs (like "Steel and You", which I'm listening to right now) hammer out an amazing catharsis through sheer persistence.

The selection here covers nine of the twelve songs originally on *Tubeway Army*. The other three, "My Shadow in Vain", "My Love is a Liquid" and "Jo the Waiter", are all on *Exhibition*. The nine from *Dance* omit "Moral", which is on *Exhibition*, and the long track "Cry, the Clock Said", which is not.

*Dance* is a very different record. Gary's fifth (coming only three years after the first!), it finds him enlisting a horde of players to make a slick album that is cold even by Gary's standards, and which would only serve as dance music in something like *Last Year at Marienbad*. Technically, it's remarkable, and Mick Karn's fretless bass playing is intense, but the songs are all incredibly static and soulless. Gary's singing seems to be lost inside the music on these songs, swallowed up under computers and synthesizers, unable to find a melody of its own, and unable to break through the mix for any other reason, either. The drum machines sound painfully thin, the keyboards listless, and the other instruments don't acquit themselves much better. Things only pick up for a moment on "You Are, You Are", which manages a shaky proto-Berlin-like drive. I can't find much to like on this half of the CD, and the juxtaposition of this material with the vital, edgy *Tubeway Army* songs doesn't help at all.

#### *Replicas / The Plan*, 1978/1979/1984/1985/1987 CD

The second CD in the series is definitely the best-matched. Both *Replicas*, Numan's second album, and *The Plan*, a collection of unreleased recordings from 1978, feature the original *Tubeway Army* cast and energy.

*Replicas* is included here in its entirety. With the exception of "Cars", which came later, most of the songs that leap to my mind when I think of Gary Numan come from here, with "Me! I Disconnect from You", "Are 'Friends' Electric?", "Down in the Park" and "You Are in My Vision" being among the best. Synthesizers are *much* more central here than guitars, though, and the guitars that do appear are often heavily processed. The bracing punk energy of *Tubeway Army* is channeled this time into slower, more deliberate, but no-less-anxious songs that positively buzz with analog synth. Notes slide around, siren-like, modulate crazily, veer and dive and drone with enthralling abandon. This is an album to make you suddenly realize that in the years since 1979, the synthesizer has mostly died as an instrument in its own right, and has come to be used almost exclusively as a cheap method for mass-producing conventional instrument sounds. Numan, perhaps better than anybody, plays his synthesizers like the whole machine is a musical instrument. Knobs are meant to be turned, sliders to be slid. Plenty of people have wrung fascinating music out of synthesizers, both in this chapter and elsewhere, but very few others have taken advantage of the synthesizer's ability to not only *produce* sounds, but modify them on the fly. "Programming" a synthesizer and "playing" it don't *have* to be separate actions, but for most of the world they have been. First you



program the sounds you want, then you play a plastic piano that makes those sounds. Synthesizer design both reflects and enforces this attitude, and as I write it is nearly impossible to find an electronic keyboard that in performance gives you anything more than a couple of data-wheels beyond the standard white-and-black keys. There are tons of buttons, but they are tiny and fragile, absolutely unsuited for any sort of performance use. Ensoniq and Roland and Yamaha will charge you many times what a couple hundred bucks will buy you in department-store Casios, but the instruments they produce are not different from the novelty-organs in type. They are plastic pianos, all. Now, you can make a lot of very good music with plastic pianos (or real pianos, for that matter), but the fact is that for the time being, at least, the *musical* revolution that the early synthesizers promised has completely failed to materialize. Hearing it so auspiciously try to get underway on *Replicas* makes this feel like a very significant loss to me. Perhaps when I finish this book I'll work on some new instrument designs...

Retreating to Numan's guitar days for *The Plan*, we get ten more blistering punk songs. If anything, these rough demos are even *better* than the songs that made it onto *Tubeway Army*. The original album had, as best I can tell, thirteen songs. These ten leave out six of those ("Bombers" shows up on *Exhibition*; "My Shadow in Vain", "The Machine (Steel and You)", "Something's in the House", "The Life Machine" and "Friends" all appeared on *Tubeway Army* in one form or another) and add three (two from an early single, and "Out of Sight"). Any subset of these songs would, I expect, serve just as well, as their appeal is a joyful untutored punk raggedness that nonetheless shows embryonic stages of Numan's later mature synth style. You could claim plausibly that Numan turned *into* an out-of-touch New-Wave relic stuck in an unrewarding stylistic rut, but this album is ironclad evidence that he didn't begin that way.

### ***The Pleasure Principle / Warriors, 1979/1983 CD***

*The Pleasure Principle* is the one with "Cars" on it, and that was the first I and most of the rest of the US ever heard of Gary Numan (and in most people's cases, the last, too). In fact, I liked "Cars" so much at the age of twelve, when it came out, that I waived my usual rule for album purchases that I had to have heard and liked at least three songs before buying, and bought it having heard nothing but "Cars".

I hated it. "Cars" was great, but there wasn't a *single* other song on the album I liked at all. One record was a sizable investment for me at that age, and I was absolutely *crushed*. I remember going down to the living room and, crying, telling my mother that the

album was awful. She, perhaps having lulled herself into thinking that I was too old for such pathetic childishness, had no sympathy at all. The store I got it at didn't take non-defective returns, so I was stuck with it. It got sold at a garage sale soon thereafter, and whoever bought it probably suffered a near-fatal karma blow by taking an artifact as loaded with psychic resentment as my copy of *The Pleasure Principle*. Years later, of course, as with everything I have ever gotten rid of, it sometimes seems, I wanted it back. As you'll see, I've ended up buying it on CD *twice*, just to compensate.

I have come, obviously, to like it a lot, but I have no trouble seeing why I hated it at first. It is *very* stark. It isn't listless like I find *Dance* to be, but it is very cold. The blank, glowing pyramid on the cover and the one-word song titles are both very representative of the mood of the album. Numan has stripped his style down considerably from *Replicas*, and here dry drums and a few buzzing synth lines suffice to construct the latticework over which he hangs abstractly alienated vocal semi-narratives. Christopher Payne's viola adds an interesting touch, but this is not an album that emphasizes its musical diversity. Numan sets out to pursue a style, to follow through on the synthetic potential of *Replicas*, and he sticks to this plan. "Cars" is, I think, still the most successful track here, but several others, like "Observer" and "M.E.", are close behind. The one track omitted from this CD, "Engineers", is on *Exhibition*.

*Warriors*, on the other hand, has no such minimal aspirations. Guitars, keyboards, saxophones, backing vocalists, tons of percussion and another great fretless bassist (Joe Hubbard) get together here to make an album that is a considerable improvement on *Dance*, but more or less the same *sort* of record. This one *is* danceable (especially the epic "Sister Surprise"), and has a few notable musical moments (parts of "The Tick Tock Man", and the ominous "Love is Like Clock Law"), but it still pales against Numan's earlier work. This is a good album, but *The Pleasure Principle* was a *unique* album, and I'll take unique over merely "good" any day.

The two omitted *Warriors* tracks, "The Iceman Comes" and "My Centurion", are both on *Exhibition*.

### ***Telekon / I, Assassin, 1980/1982 CD***

If I had to ditch one of the album-pair CDs, this is definitely the one I'd get rid of. These two albums surround *Dance*, chronologically, and suffer, in my opinion, from the proximity. Stylistically I'd place them both between *Dance* and *Warriors*, firmly on the downhill slope of Numan's career, albeit before the plunge into the abyss that comes after *Warriors*. Both

records find Numan doggedly intent on making dance music. He does this with some facility, I'll grant him, but it is neither his own forte (that is, it isn't the aspect of his style that I like best), nor are some of the unavoidable facets of his music (namely, his voice) all that well suited to the form. On the other hand, *I, Assassin* does feature Pino Palladino, my very favorite session bassist. In fact, Numan's use of fretless bass is one of the coolest things about his later music, and one of the few distinctive traits that don't come from *him* as a *player*. On the whole, though, neither of these albums have the spark or stark coherence of the three pre-1980 albums. Of course, just saying that points out what an amazing musical evolution Numan went through in incredibly short order. From *Tubeway Army* to *Warriors*, he put out eight studio albums in only six years. Listening to them all together like this, they don't sound at all like they span only six years. He could easily have spaced them out every two years and still impressed me with the degree of musical development they exhibit. Plus, if he'd done that he wouldn't have made all the duds from the last decade at all, which would also have been just as well.

Although I don't see much need to fret over a track more or less from either of these albums, *Telekon* is missing "Remind Me to Smile", "We Are Glass" and "I Dream of Wires", and *I, Assassin* is missing "White Boys and Heroes", all of which are on *Exhibition*.

### ***Exhibition*, 1987 2CD**

Two packed 18-track discs, this collection is an impressive tour through the 1978-1983 Gary Numan corpus. The liner notes are obsequious in the extreme, and reading them through the plastic before buying this, I several times decided against it. Eventually, though, I decided that I shouldn't hold Francis Drake's inane commentary against Gary. You should do the same. This really *is* an awesome compilation.

*Tubeway Army* contributes "My Love is Liquid", "Jo the Waiter", "Everyday I Die" (a live version), and "My Shadow in Vain". *Replicas* is represented by "Me! I Disconnect from You" (live), "Are 'Friends' Electric?", "You Are in My Vision" and "Down in the Park". From *The Pleasure Principle* there are "Complex", a remix of "Cars", "Metal" and "Engineers"; from *Telekon*, "We Are Glass", "I Dream of Wires", "Remind Me to Smile", "I'm an Agent", "This Wreckage", "I Die: You Die" and a live version of "Remember I Was Vapour"; from *Dance*, "Moral" and "She's Got Claws"; from *I, Assassin*, "Music for Chameleons", "We Take Mystery to Bed" and "White Boys and Heroes"; from *Warriors*, "Warriors", "My Centurion", "Sister Surprise" and "The Iceman Comes"; and from *The Plan*, "Bombers". The other seven are the 1978 single "That's

Too Bad", the 1981 singles "Love Needs No Disguise" (with Dramatis) and "Stormtrooper in Drag", and the b-sides "We Are So Fragile" (from the back of "Are 'Friends' Electric?", 1979), "Do You Need the Service?" (from "Down in the Park", 1979), "On Broadway" (from "Remember I Was Vapour", 1980) and "Noise Noise" (from "Music for Chameleons", 1982).

As a representative selection, this is pretty decent. I wouldn't have included quite as many from *Telekon*, especially at the expense of *The Plan*, but the inclusion of the wonderful "That's Too Bad" makes up for a lot. Also, although *Telekon* isn't my favorite Gary Numan album, it's probably the best midpoint in the career span this collection represents, and it thus makes sense that it is well-represented here. As much as I like *The Plan*, it is something of a footnote to the regular chronology. The seven non-album tracks are only a small fraction of the many extras on the *Asylum* sets, but they're a nice touch, and help balance the twelve tracks that are repeated here from the two-on-ones.

At any rate, as an introduction to Gary Numan this would serve admirably. It spans a sizable career, and should provide a thorough enough grounding to determine whether you want to pursue the other albums further, and/or which ones. Newcomers might balk, I suppose, at shelling out for a two-CD, two-hour-plus collection by an artist they don't know that well. If that describes you, perhaps you should *start* with one of the pairings, like *Replicas* / *The Plan*. There have been some single-disc abridgments of *Exhibitions*, but the range of the material is such that reducing it that much further does nobody any particular service, in my opinion.

### ***Living Ornaments 79/80 (Asylum 3)*, 1981 CD**

The third *Asylum* set is a single CD that combines the two live LPs *Living Ornaments 1979* and *Living Ornaments 1980*. Actually, it leaves out two tracks for space reasons, shunting them to *Asylum 1/2* (they are "Something's in the House" and "Conversation"). The seventeen that remain come mostly from *The Pleasure Principle* ("Airlane", "Cars", "Films", "Metal", "M.E.", "Tracks") and *Telekon* ("This Wreckage", "I Die: You Die", "Remind Me to Smile", "The Joy Circuit" and "We Are Glass"), with a few scattered favorites from *Tubeway Army* ("My Shadow in Vain", "The Dream Police" and "Everyday I Die") and *Replicas* ("Down in the Park", "Are 'Friends' Electric?"), and the b-side "We Are So Fragile". The performances are very much of the *Pleasure Principle*/*Telekon* era, even the older songs.

I can't honestly say that live albums strike me as Gary's best medium. The careful album arrangements don't seem to hold up nearly as well in a live setting,

and Gary's voice in particular seems poorly suited to concert-arena tension. I'm prepared to believe that these shows were visually arresting, and a fascinating experience, but captured on album this set of music just seems like another, less-well-produced run-through of the same old material. It definitely doesn't help that most of these songs are also on *Exhibition*. Unless you are a very serious Numan fan, this disc is strictly optional, and not all that highly recommended even at that. Of course, you do get the lyrics in Japanese, which is worth *something*...

### ***New Anger, 1989 CD***

Then, Gary Numan loses his touch. Some artists gradually fade, but Gary completely self-destructs, and though the chronology continues without letup after *Warriors*, the newer material is, in what seems to be almost everybody's opinion, basically crap. There are *Berserker* (1984), *White Noise* (live, 1985), *The Fury* (1985), *Strange Charm* (1986), *Ghost* (yet another live album, 1988), *New Anger*, *Outland* (1991) and a raft of singles, quasi-bootleg live records, collections, collaborations and miscellany. From what I've heard of them, they all suck, and all in the same basic way. They are bland, jerky dance music with wailing female backing vocals that make Gary's own voice sound even more out of place than it usually does. At their best, songs like these *are* danceable, but there is really no sign of Numan's original flair or unique aesthetic. *Anybody* could have made these, and probably nobody should have. The occasional song stands out a little (here, "New Anger" and "Child with the Ghost"), but nothing here challenges his earlier work. Presumably *somebody* likes this stuff, but it isn't any Gary Numan fan I've met. One bewildered fan summarized the situation neatly: "Nobody is buying Gary's new stuff except his dwindling core of old fans, and none of *them* like it. We're all just holding on hoping that one day he decides to make more good albums like the old ones."

Depressing.

### ***The Other Side Of, 1992 CD***

One post-*Warriors* album is *more* than enough. Why I bought another is beyond me. This compilation spans, I think, several of the ugly albums, and does little to redeem them. In the brief liner notes Gary claims it is "a small but well chosen collection of my songs". All I can say is that if this is "well chosen", a *poorly* chosen set would be *really* disheartening. Even the cover photographs are awful. "Contains 4 Bonus Tracks", trumpets a sticker on the front cover. No, really, you *shouldn't* have.

## **The Blue Nile**

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### ***A Walk Across the Rooftops, 1983 CD***

If Gary Numan is Devo taken seriously, the Blue Nile is Gary Numan taken even more seriously. A Scottish trio whose individual roles are left shrouded in mystery, the Blue Nile go one step beyond Gary and *stipulate* the cold base aesthetic of synthesizers and drum machines. Rather than attempting to subvert it, though, they simply act as if there's nothing at all unusual about it, and go about the task of making unbelievably crisp and sophisticated pop whose gauzy atmospheres are constructed with mosaics of bell- and mallet-like keyboard lines, effortless drum-machine patterns and Paul Buchanan's smooth, ethereal voice. This is one of the sweetest, most chillily beautiful synthesizer albums you'll find.

The "hit", the one song you might have heard, is "Stay", a New Wave-y confection with a burbling bass line, steady clicking rhythm track and pizzicato square-wave arpeggios. The other six songs are variously less adherent to pop structure, with "Tinseltown in the Rain" being the closest to "Stay" in pop accessibility, and the stark piano and voice duet "Easter Parade" being farthest from it. At moments this album approaches the silky moods of *Everything But the Girl*, but the painstaking arrangements and Buchanan's affecting voice rescue it from background-ambiance oblivion, and every song on this album glitters like a million-faceted jewel in the glare of an Arctic noon. Musical Mondrian. I can't tell you whether you'll like it or not, but I can say with complete confidence that it's a enviable achievement.

### ***Hats, 1989 CD***

Blue Nile records evidently take a long time to make, as the second one doesn't appear until six years after the first. For results like these, though, I'm willing to be *very* patient. *Hats* is everything *A Walk Across the Rooftops* was, only more so. Slower, more introspective, more beautiful, drifting along like fog past a lighthouse, *these* seven songs not only parallel the first seven almost exactly, but they seem to follow from them as if the six year gap was merely an intermission. Where the first album started with a journey over the rooftops to look at the city in the rain, then a return home to watch the parade, ride out the heatwave and listen to the sounds of the cars outside, this record starts with a similar journey ("Over the Hillside"), to view another city ("The Downtown Lights"), but then changes course with "Let's Go Out Tonight", and so instead of staying at home listening to

cars, *Hats* finds us out *watching* the cars ("Headlights on Parade"), and riding a late night train home in the morning, where we muse over the night just passed ("Saturday Night").

I can't promise that the lyrics of these songs actually support this narrative as well as the *titles* do, as they aren't included with the discs, and listening to these albums somehow never puts me in the mood for painstaking transcription. The *moods* are right, though. These are albums of wonder, elegance, drama, simplicity, grace, calm, control and latticework grandeur. *Hats* is, if anything, even better than the first one, but in my perfect world they'd simply package these two together. They compliment each other sublimely, and putting them together eradicates the single flaw that either has, and that they both share, which is that they aren't nearly long enough.

## Think Tree

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### *Eight/Thirteen*, 1990 CD

We now veer wildly from the Blue Nile to Boston band *Think Tree*, who are only similar to the extent that they do use synthesizers in unique ways, and do make *very* distinctive music, theirs with heavy use of samplers, vocoders, electronic percussion, bizarre voices and general eeriness. There are certain shadowy similarities to co-Bostonites Tribe, but *Think Tree* at their friendliest are like Tribe at their most jarringly conceptual.

This is their first full album, compiling seven songs recorded between 1987 and 1989. It doesn't really hang together very well, in my opinion, but several songs are interesting on their own. "Hire a Bird" is possibly the most striking. A huge buzzing bass synth, acoustic guitar, noise-drums, at least four distinctly different and unearthly voices, and lots of phaser-on-stun sound-effects twine around some surprisingly literary, almost mythical, lyrics. "And so you hire a bird to sing your song, / And you buy her a tree to start things off, / And you wire the words through lines of leaves, / And you hope that she shows when comes the sun. / She may never sing, / She may never show, / But you don't know."

"The Lovers" and "Memory Protect" are the most accessible, both containing a clear rhythm, a good deal of repetition for you to eventually get used to, and more than a little flavor of Love and Rockets as played by Nine-Inch Nails (Trent gets a thank you on *Like the Idea*). "The Moon" sounds like somebody took a chainsaw to a standard industrial dance song, carving it into something jagged, dangerous and tortured, with little

moments of XTC embedded in the most surprising crevices. The satirical vocal diatribe in the middle, a patronizing invitation to an American Indian to join suburban society, gives the song a violent twist, and turns the repeated line "Everyone Will Learn to Like the Moon" into something monumentally sinister. "Prison Dwellers" and "Iguanodon", on the other hand, just seem noisy to me, and never really go anywhere.

The last song is easily the strangest, a fourteen-minute live epic called "The Word", much of which is a TV evangelist's recounting of his son's college-bred doubt of the Lord's power, and the harnessing of divine might that smites the sinner back into the fold. The intensity level in this song is breathtaking, and the idea that the band had the gall to perform it live in a Boston club where the mere presence of synthesizers on stage is usually enough to turn an audience surly, really impresses me. You can *hear* the tension in the air in the audience, as slashing synthesizers rip through the crowd, chattering political sound-bites bounce back and forth, and the simmering bass and steady drum-pulse hum along underneath the preacher's lecture. From the anecdote of the preacher's son, he careens crazily into a demented paranoid raving that people are going to soon claim that Christ didn't die on the cross, that he and his followers settled in France and have continued the Christian line, and that these are the words of Satan, meant to keep the audience from taking their rightful place in the 144,000 chosen to ascend into the eternal kingdom of heaven. Historical and theological controversies fly out of this hysterical tirade like grenade fragments. The song finally grinds to a halt, but the level of concentrated mania it manifests on the way is virtually unprecedented in rock music. *Think Tree* is a band with subversive intellectual agendas to spare, and this makes listening to them incredibly unsettling in the best possible way.

What the title means I don't know, but I did pick up what seems like an oblique numerological reference to it. In "Memory Protect", when they *sing* "on top stood a man / three-fifths its size", the printed lyrics substitute "five-eighths". The next logical step in this progression is eight-thirteenths. Doesn't help me explain it, but it's interesting anyway. Isn't it?

### *Like the Idea*, 1992 CD

The second *Think Tree* album, and what turned out to be their last, was #9 on my 1992 top-ten list, and in terms of musical innovation it makes the rest of the year's music look decidedly routine and tame. I'm not sure I heard *any* other albums in 1992 that pushed the boundaries of music like this one does. *Think Tree* are *possessed*. If you've started thinking that nobody is doing anything truly adventurous with music these

days, this is an album to track down *quickly*. Your faith *will* be restored. You may also go completely crazy, but what's life without a little risk, eh?

"Monday A.M. First Thing", the hyperactive opening track, is one of the densest mashes of blazingly clever lyrical word-play that I can think of. If you can imagine that the Boomtown Rats' "I Don't Like Mondays" is like Eeyore, then "Monday A.M. First Thing" is like Tigger with Tourette's Syndrome. Some songs rock, roll or rattle you, but this one feels like a massage chair on overdrive, or like you're being machine-gunned with bean-bags. By the time the outraged screams of God himself have merged with the singer's alarm clock, this song has sweated the better part of a pound and a quarter out of me.

"Everything is Equal", by comparison, is almost a straight gospel blues jam, Hammond organ and backing chorus vocals riding out a song that, though edgy, is blissfully smooth and relaxing after "Monday A.M. First Thing". The first of several random sub-one-minute noise breaks follows (they come between almost every two songs), and then the band breaks into "Break That Mirror", a harrowing tale that begins "He stands holding one smoking gun / That just shot the apple of his eye, / Who now lies at his feet / Looking somewhat like himself." Except for the cello, sax and melodica it sounds quite a bit like "Hire a Bird", except more unbalanced.

"Rattlesnake", next, is like a country-western folk tale performed by Andrew Eldritch and David Byrne. It's angular and twisted, but it also proves that Think Tree can write a half-decent groove when they want to. They don't *often* want to, though, and "All We Like Sheep" sounds like a cross between Gardening by Moonlight and a really nasty traffic jam. The song has about as many lyrics as a normal rock song (which is quite a lot *less* than Think Tree songs usually have), but rather than spread them around in the usual way, Think Tree ignores everything except the ghostly "mind is yellow" through most of the song, and then right near the end suddenly whip through the verses at the fastest possible rate of word-expulsion. What a strange approach. "Eye for Eye" gives you a few minutes to recover, listening to another funky, soulful song along the lines of "Everything is Equal". It's odd that the most-normal songs on this album are the ones credited to the whole band.

"The Living Room" returns to weirdness, very much back in the "Hire a Bird" mold. It's *nothing*, though, compared to "Holy Cow!", a frenetic redneck condemnation of Hinduism, sung in the same blood-curdling tongue-in-cheek drawl as "The Word". Chilling intolerance and hilarious ignorance are seldom combined with as much sardonic panache as this. "Porcupine Coat" is forced to return to the funk for

grounding. The sound snippet that follows it, "Feels like the Clam Blues", is even sillier.

The intensity level then gets cranked back up to maximum and left there for the last three songs. "Doh" is a harrowing (yes, I know that's the second time I've used harrowing in this review) story about, I think, the Vietnam War, which opens with the arresting line "My beaten mother dragged / Into a field of trees", and closes with a frightened Vietnamese voice whining "Some strange woman on my phone... / And I know she's trying to kill me". "Mamther", which is almost completely nonsense, should be a breather, but after "Doh" I find myself reading horrific ulterior motives into the lyrics. They can't really be saying "Beridrome Hershey in a porcelain fac-quest", can they? It *must* be something too ghastly for them to even write out. "A Court Jester Named Sa-Sa" plunges back into the maelstrom one last time, collecting another litany of disturbing images like "parachutes preening themselves for misfortune" and "canker-sore cancers that spill from cathedrals". Then, both mercifully and sadly, *Like the Idea* is over.

This is *not*, in case this hasn't been made clear, an album for the frail, timid or sheltered. The images in the lyrics are often quite vivid, especially the media fueled rape-fantasy in "Eye for Eye", and the closest Think Tree comes to compromising their intensity is in printing the final rhyming phrase of that song's chorus as a truncated "numb with c". Even if the lyrics were in another *language*, though, the *music* is frightening. Ministry and Nine-Inch Nails may be superficially heavier, but for me listening to them is often barely dissimilar from napping through the endless loops of House or the drugged raves of Techno. Think Tree, on the other hand, is actually scary. I wish music scared me this much more often, and the fact that Think Tree manages to be hilarious and terrifying at once is even more remarkable. It doesn't surprise me that Think Tree went nowhere commercially, and folded without much uproar, but *man* I wish they hadn't. Even if Peter did rhyme "varmint" with "garment" twice on one record.

Before they folded, I did get to see them do an *acoustic* in-store performance at HMV in Cambridge. Perhaps after that they simply couldn't think of anything sillier to do.

## They Might Be Giants

### *They Might Be Giants*, 1986 CD

As hard as it is to imagine a band with an even more brilliant and warped sense of the absurd than

Think Tree, there *is* one, and these are them. Where Think Tree dress their genius in the near-industrial, though, They Might Be Giants chooses a more low-budget array of accordion, guitars and a cheap drum machine to make their first album with. This album is an awe-inspiring blend of rock-cliché parody, genuinely inspired pop-song catchiness, country twang and pathos, dadaist sound-bites (but *acoustic* dadaist sound-bites!), surreal wordplay and They Might Be Giants' own antecedentless idea of what makes an interesting song. They share with Devo a fondness for stiff, artificial rhythms, but where Devo tends to stick to two or three different stiff rhythms per song, They Might Be Giants take full advantage of one of the drum machine's most underutilized skills, the ability to switch from one rhythm to another completely unrelated one on demand. A human could play any individual measure of these songs without *much* trouble, but stringing them together would require either a Swiss internal clock or a complete lack of short-term memory. In fact, I saw TMBG live in 1992 and as a special treat they played this whole album through, in order, with a real band. It was wonderful to hear them do "Don't Let's Start" and "Rhythm Section Want Ad", two of my favorite TMBG songs, but the feel of the songs simply wasn't the same, and the irony of seeing a real rhythm section playing "Rhythm Section Want Ad" was almost overwhelming. I'm glad I saw it, but I still class it with the acoustic Think Tree performance as one of the most subtly strange musical translations I've ever witnessed.

*The Might Be Giants* opens with "Everything Right Is Wrong Again", a short song that sounds almost normal. The drum machine behaves itself, big elastic synth-bass boings along the bottom, and some harpsichord-like key-twinklings shine through the accordion. "And now the song is over" they sing, about halfway through. The thin threads of normality unravel quickly. "Put Your Hand Inside the Puppet Head" is jittery and paranoid (in some unspecified way) and at one point stops for the ominous voice-over "Memo to myself: do the dumb things I have to do. Touch the puppet head!". "Number Three" ("There's just two songs in me and this is the third.") is even more fascinating, a perfect sing-along folk-song punctuated by subsonic artificial tuba belches.

The album and the band hit their first peak with "Don't Let's Start", one of the handful of moments in their career where, despite their own resourceful perversity, They Might Be Giants make a flawless pop song. This one careens along barely in control of itself, as if the drum-machine foundation were an enormous rolling beach ball and the Johns are big-shoed clowns running desperately in the other direction on top of the

ball, trying not to fall off, forever on the verge of doing so.

"Don't Let's Start" also pushes on the aspect of They Might Be Giants that at times turns me off to them, and ends up keeping them off my lists of truly favorite bands. Or, more accurately, the *contrast* between it and the subsequent series of songs is what can drive me crazy. You see, as much as "Don't Let's Start" does tone down the conceptual absurdity that TMBG obviously live for, I find it so much more fun to listen to than "Hide Away Folk Family", "32 Footsteps" and "Toddler Hiway" that it ends up ruining those songs for me, and I wish that the band would relax and spend *all* their time writing great pop songs, using their oblique approach to enrich the songs, but not letting their urge to deconstruct the genre get the better of them quite as often.

Things pick up again, however, in relatively short order. "Rabid Child" has some good moments, and the mock-defiant "Nothing's Gonna Change My Clothes" closes out the original first side in excellent style. The roll continues with "(She Was A) Hotel Detective", a hilarious blues-rock parody replete with wailing guitars, harmonica and horns, big macho vocals and silly lyrics about a girl. The record's biggest, dumbest moment, with TMBG's uncanny sense of timing, is followed by a rare moment of genuinely moving emotions. Given how dedicated TMBG are to cleverness, it always comes as a powerful surprise to me to find a real sad-romantic sentiment lurking inside one of their songs. "She's An Angel" creeps up on me with especial stealth, and actually makes me think for a moment that I'm going to cry. I'm sure the element of surprise has a lot to do with it. The passage in this one that gets to me is "Gonna ask for my admission, / Gonna speak to the man in charge. / The secretary says he's on another line, / Can I hold for a long, long time? / I found out she's an angel." The segue-less transition from the band's usual twisted storytelling to the idea that random people you meet are actually angels for some reason grabs some sense of perfection inside my head and gives it an affectionate squeeze. They Might Be Giants' songs are *just* like that: clever, bizarre, hilariously warped situations that sometimes conceal these amazingly lyrical, melodic moments. This song is one of the angels it describes.

After another Dead-Milkmen-esque quasi-punk song, "Youth Culture Killed My Dog", the album goes into another over-weirded slide for a few songs. "Boat of Car", "Absolutely Bill's Mood", "Chess Piece Face" and "I Hope That I Get Old Before I Die" have, I'm sure, many good things you could say about them (for instance, "I Hope That I Get Old Before I Die" is essentially "She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain" with new words), but after "She's An Angel" I'm just

not in the mood. I reconnect in time for the country spoof "Alienation's for the Rich", which opens with the classic verse "I gotta get a job, / Got to get some pay. / My son's gotta go to art school, / He's leaving in three days." Then there's a short ode on the subject of Marvin Gaye's wedding to Phil Ochs. It's over quickly, though, and the album spins into the brilliant closing track, "Rhythm Section Want Ad", a song that deflects almost every possible offhand criticism of the band by simply embracing them. "Laugh hard; it's a long way to the bank", they sing. My stereo works, and I have enough money to buy records; if life doesn't get any better, perhaps this is close enough.

### *Lincoln*, 1988 CD

This album's opening song, "Ana Ng", was #1 on the first top-ten song list I ever did, and it carried *Lincoln* to #1 on the album list as well. It is one of the greatest pop songs ever written, in my opinion, and a perfect song to memorize the lyrics of. Towards that end I will reprint them here:

#### Ana Ng

Make a hole with a gun perpendicular to  
the name of this town in a desk-top  
globe,  
exit wound in a foreign nation showing  
the home of the one this was written  
for.  
My apartment looks upside down from  
there,  
water spirals the wrong way out the sink,  
and her voice is a backwards record.  
It's like a whirlpool, and it never ends.

Ana Ng and I are getting old and we still  
haven't walked in the glow of each  
other's majestic presence.  
Listen Ana, hear my words, they're the  
ones you would think I would say if  
there was a me for you.

All alone at the '64 World's Fair,  
eighty dolls yelling "small girl after all".  
Who was at the Dupont pavilion?  
Why was the bench still warm? Who  
had been there?  
Or the time when the storm tangled up  
the wires to the horn on the pole at  
the bus depot.  
And in back of the edge of hearing,  
these are the words that the voice was  
repeating:

"Ana Ng and I are getting old and we  
still haven't walked in the glow of  
each other's majestic presence.  
Listen Ana, hear my words, they're the  
ones you would think I would say if  
there was a me for you."

When I was driving once I saw this  
painted on a bridge: "I don't want  
the world, I just want your half."

They don't need me here, and I know  
you're there,  
where the world goes by like the humid  
air,  
and it sticks like a broken record—  
everything sticks until it goes away,  
and the truth is, we don't know  
anything.

© 1988, They Might Be Giants

Like "She's an Angel", this one affects me deeply. Pick a random person halfway around the world; how sad it is that the two of you will live out your lives never meeting, when you might be the perfect companions for each other. Generalize this, and realize that you will never meet *most* of the people in the world. Statistically, it seems vanishingly unlikely that the one person most suited for you, and you for them, will be among the small fraction of the available people that you will actually ever meet. Rule out the ones you don't spend enough time with to evaluate accurately, and the likelihood approaches 100% that there are at least hundreds of potential friends and lovers you won't meet who would be better than the ones you do. It's hard to argue that this is anything other than tragic on the grandest scale, and for me this turns "Ana Ng" into a song of overpowering sadness.

On the other hand, this *isn't* a question of pure statistics. On some theoretical level they are right, but in practice environment is a much more important factor in compatibility than genetics. People raised in dissimilar cultures are much less suited to be worldly soulmates. This allows you to rule out most of the world. Next, keep in mind that the people you associate with are not a randomly selected group. By where you live, by the jobs you get, the schools you go to, the music you listen to, you are filtering your companions. Not all the decisions you make will actually filter the people you associate with the *right* way, of course, but many of them will. Then stipulate that only people who live in your area are eligible (this isn't always *necessary*, but it helps a lot). Now you've

reduced the sample pool by an enormous factor, and the people you find (presuming you *do* find some, which is to be hoped) are much more likely to be in the upper percentiles of the potential ones. Lastly, there are very good arguments to be made that compatibility is not a linear scale, but more like a curve that asymptotically approaches “maximum” compatibility, and that it isn’t even the most significant component of success, that most of what really goes into making a relationship work *is*, in fact, *work*. Thus, goes this line of reasoning, the *predisposition* for compatibility is merely an interesting starting point, more a way of eliminating people with *low* potential, finding the ones with whom establishing an initial friendship will be the easiest, than a guarantee or predictor of success.

This debate underlies so much Western culture, yet it is rarely surfaced. For example, is the idealized “girl next door” story one of good fortune (“against all odds, perhaps via divine intervention, the one best suited for me lives right next door”), triumph of will (“thrown together, for absolutely no real reason, we *made* it work”), buoyant optimism (“*any* two people can be blissfully happy”) or depressing apathetic futility (“people will take whatever route requires the least obvious effort, and pursue it out of pure inertia, regardless of how obviously ill-advised it seems”)? “Ana Ng” doesn’t have answers, but at least it raises the question.

The rest of *Lincoln* pales in comparison. When I pick it up and look at the song list, I ache to hear “Ana Ng”, and feel absolutely nothing for any of the others. If I put it on and, for some reason, fail to stop it after the first song, I quickly remember that there are quite a few marvelous songs here, and that the album as a whole is even better than *They Might Be Giants*, and earned the #1 ranking I gave it at the time. The most I find myself able to say about the rest of the album, though, is that it contains a lot of hilarious lyrics: “Chinese people were fighting in the dark. / We tried to help them; no one appreciated that.” (“Purple Toupée”) “Every jumbled pile of person has a thinking part that wonders what the part that isn’t thinking isn’t thinking of.” (“Where Your Eyes Don’t Go”) “People should get beat up for stating their beliefs.” (“Shoehorn with Teeth”) “You made my day, now you have to sleep in it.” (“Stand on Your Own Head”) “If it wasn’t for disappointment I wouldn’t have any appointments.” (“Snowball in Hell”). It seems unfair to let one transcendent song detract from so many songs that are merely excellent. But, for me, that’s what happens.

#### *Flood*, 1990 CD

In fact, not only does “Ana Ng” end up blotting out the rest of *Lincoln* in my mind, it mostly eclipses

everything They Might Be Giants have done since. *Flood* has some decent songs, but it has nothing to compete with “Ana Ng”. The band is maturing, but not in any direction likely to get my attention anew. This isn’t the album of played-straight (or -straighter) pop that they *could* make, and at the same time it lacks the charming amateur naïveté of the first album. It’s more of the sort of things that TMBG *usually* do. If that’s what you want from them, you’ll like this a lot. Me, I feel like I’ve glimpsed something greater, and settling for this stuff hurts too much.

#### *Apollo 18*, 1992 CD

I’ll keep buying their albums, because one day they may click again. They don’t here. In fact, I’m sorry to say that even if I try to forget who did this and listen to it on its own terms, it seems mostly either listless or annoying. Most of the songs make me want to hit Skip, and the ones that don’t, that are at least *listenable*, are barely more than that. “See the Constellation” reminds me of Scruffy the Cat or the Reverbs, and I never thought that They Might Be Giants would seem that undistinguished. The only part of the album I can really get into is “Fingertips”, 22 disembodied choruses that whirl dizzily past. None are long enough to really bother me, and some of them show real potential. Moreover, by stringing them together they create one long piece that flits from mood to mood with astonishing abruptness, which was something they *used* to do *within* songs. I miss it.

Maybe next time.

## Camper van Beethoven

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#### *Telephone Free Landslide Victory*, 1985 LP

Camper van Beethoven is another self-consciously weird band who occasionally deign to produce a great song. On this, their first album, they don’t stoop to greatness very often. In fact, there are exactly two songs here I care for. “Oh No!” has a catchy chorus that reminds me of Jonathan Richman. “Take the Skinheads Bowling” I like all the way through, some bad self-referential lines notwithstanding. It’s a pretty mild song, though, and doesn’t keep the eclectic eccentricity of rest of the record from seeming completely pointless and annoying to me.

#### *Our Beloved Revolutionary Sweetheart*, 1988 CD

Making their major-label debut a few years and albums later, Camper van Beethoven sound much-improved (or tamed in what I consider a useful



direction). I can listen to *most* of the songs here. “Eye of Fatima (Pt. 1)” is nice, “My Path Belated” is like a cross between Dramarama and Game Theory, and several of the others are serviceable, if standard, jangly guitar-rock. There are some extraneous instrumentals, but they aren’t as numerous or disconnected as the ones on *Telephone Free Landslide Victory*. On the other hand, listening to this album again after a few years, Camper van Beethoven sounds pretty *plain* and surprisingly undistinguished to me. I’m sure some of this I’m projecting from having heard and grown to loathe David Lowery’s subsequent band Cracker.

### **Key Lime Pie, 1989 LP**

Camper van Beethoven’s last album finds them on the verge of grinding to a dead halt or finally getting things right, or perhaps both. For two songs in the middle of the first side, it looks like the band might really have something. The dour “When I Win the Lottery” is ugly in a mesmerizing way, a steam-of-consciousness rambling laced with violent anti-war hatred and nicely observed notions of what the bitter undereducated narrator would think to do with “lots” of money. The next song, “(I Was Born in a) Laundromat”, which made #10 on my song top-ten in 1989, is a powerful, driving, punk lower-class anthem, a droning, insistent, simple rock song like every song Social Distortion ever did. The production is very strange, with the vocals buried and the drums dry and hollow, and it sounds perfect to me, garage-band rock and roll at its underachieving best. The Status Quo cover “Pictures of Matchstick Men” is in this same vein, grinding cheap-guitar rock pomp, with a violin to provide the solos.

The rest of the album tends to the dark and moody, the quiet and measured. A couple of the songs work okay for me, like “All Her Favorite Fruit” and “Come On Darkness”, but most of them seem stagnant. The band expired shortly thereafter, and that comes as little of a surprise to me after listening to this album.

## **Pere Ubu**

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### **Cloudland, 1989 CD**

Pere Ubu is another band with sterling cult credentials. I knew the name, but little else about them, until I heard “Waiting for Mary” on the radio one night, driving down into Boston from the north, Georgia dozing off in the passenger seat. It had the sound to me of a timeless classic, a song I should have heard a million times by now, not just once. The litany “What are we doing here?”, the background clamor,

the voice-of-God spoken chorus, the glorious verse hook, it all fits together amazingly well, a joyous collective romp about nothing in particular.

I rushed out to find the album that contained it, which this is. “Waiting for Mary” wasn’t at all what I’d expected Pere Ubu to sound like, and so I was very interested to see how the rest of the album would be. Nothing else strikes me like “Waiting for Mary” did. My overall impression is of the Fine Young Cannibals doing Pixies songs, or Bob Mould covering It’s a Beautiful Day, of possessed weirdness processed through a carefully professional performance, or old-style songwriting played by people who don’t quite understand or approve of it.

Evidently this isn’t a very representative Pere Ubu album, but it sounds to me like a decent New-Waveish pop album that has come apart a little from being trucked across the country in an insufficiently-padded semi. David Thomas’ reedy voice doesn’t quite seem to fit, and Allen Ravenstine’s synthesizer noodlings appear to have been applied as an unrelated afterthought. On many of the songs the drums don’t seem to sync up with the rest of the music, and the backing vocals can’t quite keep pace with the leads. The three songs that were, like “Waiting for Mary”, produced by Steven Hague, are clustered toward the beginning of the album, and this helps create the impression that the album falls seriously to pieces after the halfway mark. I suspect that the second half is more like Pere Ubu’s previous work. You’ll notice that I haven’t bought any more of it.

## **Oingo Boingo**

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### **Good for Your Soul, 1983 LP**

We’re nearing the end of this chapter, which means it’s time to toss in a couple bands that are almost uncategorizable. Oingo Boingo’s hyperactive big-band dance-crazy party music is a little like the Mighty Mighty Bosstones’, but I really couldn’t stomach putting them in an ostensibly punk chapter, so here they are.

There are tons of people in Oingo Boingo, but the brain is definitely singer and songwriter Danny Elfman, whose rise to prominence as a Hollywood soundtrack composer never ceases to amaze me. In Oingo Boingo he surrounds himself with an eight-person band that adds horns to the usual guitar/bass/drums/keyboards mixture. The lyrics vary from mindless (“Sweat”, “Little Guns”, “Cry of the Vatos”) to literary (“(Wake Up) It’s 1984”, “No Spill Blood”) to introspective (“Who Do You Want to Be?”, “Fill the Void”) to suburban insularity (“Nothing Bad

Ever Happens"). The music combines reggae, ska and punk in an infectious, ebullient, incredibly-tight high-energy amalgam that you really can't get elsewhere. There is a sort of comic-book bold-coloredness to it that may not appeal to everybody, and doesn't always appeal to me, either, but it does make Oingo Boingo a unique force to be reckoned with, and an Oingo Boingo album or two a fine thing to have around to stir up a lagging party. There's enough sameness to their material, though, that I'd recommend a compilation rather than any individual album, including this one.

### ***Boingo Alive, 1988 CD***

The compilation I chose, because I'm a sucker for big packages, was this two-CD live-on-a-sound-stage best-of. Drawing from across the previous decade of the band's existence, these 31 tracks are certainly enough Oingo Boingo for any casual fan. The live recordings aren't all *that* live-sounding, but they prove that the band can pull off their intricate ensemble work in real-time, which is an impressive thing to know.

Most of the material is stuff like "Dead Man's Party", "No Spill Blood", "Nothing to Fear (But Fear Itself)" and "Only a Lad", the core of Oingo Boingo's style. The band does take some opportunities to branch out, though. "Stay" and "Cinderella Undercover" are nice, calmer songs closer to early-Eighties power-pop than the band's usual no-referent mania. "Home Again" opens with a terrific sequenced-piano hook (and "Just Another Day" with a similar one on synth-marimba). "My Life" has some Motown sway. "We Close Our Eyes" sounds like serious top-40 schlock. "Mama" is an odd, angular lull. "Goodbye-Goodbye" and "Country Sweat" are the perfect excuses for an evening-ending square dance. The reprises of "Dead Man's Party" that end each CD give the whole thing a nice sense of closure, as well.

If two-plus hours of Oingo Boingo seems like rather a lot to you, I could understand your going for one of the one-CD collections, of which there appear to be several. It all revolves, I guess, on how long you want your party to *last*. You could put the one CD on repeat, but remember that people are going to be paying attention to individual songs both at the very beginning and after any significant pause, so the likelihood that they'll recognize the second pass starting is pretty high, and they may quickly feel self-conscious about repeating themselves. Why take this risk? Spring for this set and enjoy risk-free dancing until everybody gets too tired to continue, which this should be plenty for unless your friends are in much better shape than mine.

## **Burning Sensations**

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### ***Burning Sensations, 1983 EP***

The Burning Sensations are another chaotic party band that uses a lot more instruments than you might expect. On "Belly of the Whale", the song that hooked me into this four-song EP, timbales and sax are the spices that supplement a rumbling rhythm section. Burning Sensations have a more tropical-island feel than Oingo Boingo, but they'd make a plausible opening act. "Belly of the Whale" is the only one of these songs that has much *song* to it, but the other three are all packed with Afro-Caribbean groove. I had a hell of a time finding this EP, but a year or two ago I noticed that it had been reissued on CD5. I can't think *why* that would be, but it might make this easier to find if you're interested.

## **The Bobs**

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### ***The Bobs, 1983 CD***

It's only fitting that I end this chapter of giddy pop music with probably the giddiest band in the world, and certainly the coolest a cappella rock band I know of. Before "a cappella" makes you run and hide, expecting that cloying doo-wop barbershop stuff that it usually signifies (or before you run out and buy Bobs records *hoping* for that), know that for the Bobs, voices are merely the tool they use to make pop music, and don't imply a style any more than drums or guitars or saxophones would. The back-cover credits, which list them as "Gunnar 'Bob' Madsen/Vocals, Janie 'Bob' Scott/Vocals, Richard 'Bob' Greene/Vocals, Matthew 'Bob' Stull/Vocals", are a perfect reflection of the attitude that being a cappella shouldn't be taken as making them fundamentally different than any other band. In fact, the Bobs often use their voices in the same roles that instruments *would* play. This is most obvious on the covers of "Helter Skelter" and "Psycho Killer" here, which sound less like a cappella versions than just like cool rethinkings of the originals.

The Bob's original songs are almost invariably both hilarious and irresistible. Like early They Might Be Giants, they tend towards material that actively undercuts pop/rock stereotypes. "Prisoner of Funk" is a dream of a frustrated singer who gets a job flipping burgers but hears music everywhere, taunting him. "I Hate the Beach Boys" is a cheerful song about hating cheerfulness (and uses two separate vocal lines in an amazing counterpoint). Other songs deal with a cowboy feeling out of place because his mouth is the

wrong shape ("Cowboy Lips"), thin apartment walls ("Through the Wall"), trying to free somebody from a love-cult ("The Deprogrammer"), pathological bad luck ("Eddie the Jinx") and being elected vice-president by surprise ("Democratic Process").

Musically, the four singers switch roles around easily. I don't know which singer is which, but the three men cover low bass, mid-range and high (there are words for those, I know, but I never did learn the difference between tenor and alto), and Janie Scott covers "female". On any given song, any of them may take lead, and some songs even vary the lead within them. The others alternate between providing normal harmony and contributing instrument-like noises. "Art for Art's Sake" is big on vocal percussion, "Be My Yoko" is laced with crazed sound-effects. On "Lazy Susan" the bass and mid-range combine for a changing chord arpeggio, while another voice slides in fake horn stabs. "The Deprogrammer" has a droning vocal synth buzz.

One song here, the early track "Eddie the Jinx", actually does have some instruments on it (keyboards and some drums), but it makes surprisingly little difference. All the Bobs' albums are wonderful. This is one of them.

### *My, I'm Large, 1987 CD*

This is another one. The Bobs emerged more or less fully-formed, and there isn't a lot of progress, *per se*, evident in most of these albums. *My, I'm Large* simply picks up where *The Bobs* left off, and contributes another ten original songs and two covers ("Little Red Riding Hood" and Smokey Robinson's "You Really Got a Hold on Me"). If you don't like the Bobs, or find them merely amusing in a novelty sort of way, then any one of the first three albums will do just fine as an introduction. True Bobs fans will be satisfied with nothing less than all of them.

*My, I'm Large* is the first Bobs album I got, and it took me a while to track the others down (they've since been re-released on Rhino, which should make them much easier to find), so this is the one I've lived with the longest. As a result, the set of songs here seems marginally better to me than the ones on *The Bobs* or *Songs for Tomorrow Morning*. "Helmet", about the sheer joy of wearing a helmet, is positively inspired. "My Husband Was a Weatherman", a hilarious tale of a husband who can predict the future, was the first Bobs song I ever heard, on the *Modern A Cappella* compilation I gave Georgia for Christmas one year. "Valentino's" is a brilliant story of a girl who lives across the street from the elegant restaurant where her boyfriend is a valet. She sits at the window watching the handsome, well-dressed customers arrive in such style, watching her

pathetic boyfriend scurrying meekly to park their cars. She dreams of a Latin lover who will drive her to Valentino's in his Camaro (this says something about her idea of "elegant"), and toss his keys to her boyfriend.

Other subjects this time out: waking up as a giant ("My, I'm Large"), Hurricanes Bob and Charlotte ("Mopping, Mopping, Mopping"), dating an activist ("Please Let Me Be Your Third World Country") and a faithful man betrayed by his promiscuous shoes ("My Shoes"). Perhaps the funniest is "Johnny's Room", a petulant extended complaint by a new boyfriend about how his girlfriend's parents made him sleep with her younger brother when they visited. This last song also has great vocal bass.

### *Songs for Tomorrow Morning, 1988 CD*

The Bobs' third album is more of the same delicious stuff. The one cover this time out is the Beatles' "You Can't Do That". The highlight of the original material is an epic five-song series called "The Laundry Cycle", which moves from the gospel sway of "Pounded on a Rock" to the slow, moving story of a wife who hangs out laundry to signal her lover across the street, whose husband buys her a clothes drier, to the mock-reggae of "Dictator in a Polo Shirt", to the jazzy fragment "Where Does the Wayward Footwear Go", to the stirringly spiritual conclusion "Share a Load". The rest of the album runs through a great money-making idea ("Food to Rent"), one of the only extant lyrical odes to bad nutrition ("Corn Dogs"), a couple sweet love songs ("Boy Around the Corner", "But Then, A Week Ago Last Thursday..."), the modern supermarket's pre-eminent existential decision ("Plastic or Paper"), the self-explanatory ("First I Was a Hippie, then I Was a Stockbroker) Now I Am a Hippie Again", and "Killer Bees", and a heartfelt thanks to Ollie North for bringing a family back together again.

As I said, it's hard to draw much qualitative distinction between the first three Bobs albums, but listening to this one just now I think that perhaps it *does* show a slight maturing of singing style, slightly tighter, smoother harmonies, slightly fuller sound. Or maybe I'm just imagining it. At any rate, this album is, like the others, damn close to flawless.

### *Sing the Songs of..., 1991 CD*

Taking a break from originals for an album, the Bobs then put out an entire record of covers. Besides reprising "You Really Got a Hold On Me", "You Can't Do That", "Helter Skelter" and "Psycho Killer", and the self-cover "Through the Wall", this disc adds versions of Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze", Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire", Tom Waits' "Temptation", Led Zeppelin's

"Whole Lotta Love", the Beatles "Come Together", Peggy Lee's "Fever", the Rascals' "Good Lovin'" and Jimmy Cliff's "Sittin' in Limbo".

On the one hand, I prefer the Bobs' own work to their covers. On the other, this collection is really phenomenal. "Purple Haze" and "Whole Lotta Love", in particular, are a revelation to hear this way, voices taking all the instrumental parts. You find out a lot about a band when they play material they didn't write themselves, and the Bobs here prove themselves incredibly astute musical observers, and some of the best reinterpreters around. For those of you reluctant to buy a Bobs album, but ever so slightly curious, this album is a perfect place to start. It will give you a taste of the Bobs sound (and one song of their very own, to better show their usual *style*), but it doesn't matter as much whether you *like* it or not, because it makes such a perfect party trick that you'll want it simply to amuse and astound your guests (provided, of course, that your guests are musically literate, but then, why would you spend time with anybody who isn't?).

# The Western Skyline

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from the Bruce Hornsby song "On the Western Skyline"

## Soundtrack

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Boston: "More Than a Feeling"  
John Waite: "Missing You"  
Michael Stanley Band: "My Town"  
Heart: "Allies"  
Baby Animals: "Painless"  
Billy Joel: "We Didn't Start the Fire"  
The Call: "I Still Believe (Great Design)"  
Peter Gabriel: "Biko"  
School of Fish: "Three Strange Days"  
Don McLean: "American Pie"

## Introduction

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If you thought the *last* chapter felt like a catch all, this chapter will astound and infuriate you. The Western Skyline has a simple but controversial selection rationale: these are all the artists who I consider fundamentally in the business of making normal, radio-friendly, mainstream American-style modern popular rock music, an enterprise with the primary goal of selling lots and lots of copies and becoming fabulously wealthy and famous. Yes, this chapter is my intrusion into the bland, often-colorless wasteland of run-of-the-mill top-40-aspirant middle-of-the-road basically-okay-to-play-when-your-parents-are-around, generic rock and roll.

Now, this doesn't sound too offensive until you look at who I list here, and fly into a fit of "What?!? *David Bowie* is 'middle of the road'?!? *What road is that?*" So, perhaps I'd better dissemble a little in advance. This is all relative to *me*, not the world at large. To many people, Bowie is *the* definitive rock fringe figure, but to me he's just another guy who was firmly established by the time I became fully conscious of music, and who reliably had several hits per album. In a sense, of course, this is absurd, but it's *my* book, and the only way I can make sense of it is to tell it from *my* perspective. Thus this chapter has a number of figures, like Patti Smith, the Pretenders, Elvis Costello and Adrian Belew, who convention would otherwise place elsewhere in my taxonomy. So be it. The mainstream

really isn't anything to be afraid of, and if you dart in here intending to rescue your persecuted favorites, take a look around them and see what other artists I grafted them to.

Also, this chapter has a number of relatively obscure artists that nobody would hold up as models of top-40 success. Has anybody but me even *heard* of Dennis Phelps? Does anybody else still admit to knowing Billy Thorpe? Perhaps not, but I judge these artists by my perceptions, not their intentions, and certainly not their achievements, so a number of people find their way into this chapter more because I think they *should* have had big hits than because they did, or even, for that matter, because *they* tried to.

Lastly, this chapter features the book's worst examples of tokenism, by far. Musical giants are represented here by one lone single, some of them, or one album from their catalog of dozens. Only a handful of artists get a substantial entry to themselves, and the Call is about the only band with a really sizable career who gets covered in anything near comprehensiveness. The purpose of this chapter, then, is really more to make connections and help you calibrate your tastes and perceptions against mine than it is to lead you to new musical territories. There are some gems nestled in here and there that I'll take particular pleasure in unearthing, but mostly this is the chapter where you breeze along going "Hmpf, I wouldn't even have bought *one* album by *them*" on some, and on others "Man, if this guy reviewed books Shakespeare would be in with *one* entry, and it's be a cartoon. *Troilus and Cressida for Beginners*."

## Boston

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There was a time when Boston was my favorite band in the world, and it wasn't a brief period in my life, either. Even now, Boston remains in my mind the highest achievement of mainstream American rock and roll. If you have a car, some roads, a Boston album, and something to play it on (in the car, I mean), you are ready to experience what it means to be an American. Put on the tape/CD/whatever, roll the windows down, and *drive*. That's America. There are more interesting things to do in the world, but there is nothing more archetypically illustrative of the American aesthetic. All other distinctly American culture is a reaction to this or a failed attempt to equal it.

### *Boston, 1976 CD*

Boston's first album sold about 3 billion copies, and it is vanishingly unlikely that you have attained enough familiarity with music to care about this book

without hearing “More Than a Feeling” about that many times. If you haven’t bought this album *yet*, then I don’t know what I could do about it.

There are two remarkable things which you will discover upon listening to it. The first is that for a record that has been played into the ground for 17 years, it has held up surprisingly well. Band leader Tom Scholz’ prize creation is his guitar sound, and even though thousands of bands have tried to copy it, and Scholz himself has turned to spending his time making sound-processing gear to *help* them copy it, nobody has succeeded. Boston albums feature the smoothest, most deliciously and instantly appealing guitar distortion that ears have ever perceived. It hardly makes sense to *call* it “distortion”, since that sounds like something has been taken away from the instrument’s tone. Rather, Scholz’ guitar sounds like “electric guitar”. That is, where normal guitars use strings, Scholz’ sounds like it uses electricity in the same way, channeling it into chords and notes and such. It’s big, powerful, melodic, kinetic and friendly, all at once.

The other important component of Boston’s sound is lead vocalist Brad Delp. He is the ironic definitive Seventies mainstream rock singer. Why is it that such a relentlessly macho, young-male, fist-in-the-air, leather-wearing, phallic-guitar genre should thrive on voices that sound like they emanate from a fourteen-year-old Italian castrato? I don’t know, but Delp’s is one of the shrillest, most suspect of the lot. As with Rush’s singer, Geddy Lee, it’s quite possible that you’ll instantly despise the band based on the sound of his voice, and there’s no way to *argue* you into liking it. My only theory about it is that voices this high cover a higher frequency-range than guitars, and thus stand out better and better balance the overall sound’s pitch-span.

That wasn’t the second remarkable thing. The second remarkable thing is, upon close investigation, how *thin* this album is. Outside of Delp and Scholz, the rest of the band is merely serviceable. Barry Goudreau, Fran Sheehan and Sib Hashian are historical footnotes. The rhythm section does their job, but strip Scholz and Delp off of this album and you’d be left with something 100% forgettable, barely good enough for local discount-mattress-warehouse radio-commercials. Also, Boston seems to have in them two good songs (like the Housemartins, a fast one and a slow one), two bad ones, and that’s it. They show good enough judgment to use the good ones six times on this album, and the two bad ones only once each (the painfully embarrassing “Smokin’” and the equally execrable “Let Me Take You Home Tonight”), but this is not an album that will stun you with its range. At under 40 minutes, it won’t flatten you with its weight, either. The classic guitar-city-ships-leaving-Earth cover is the most epic thing about it.

But that, too, is characteristically American, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.

### ***Don’t Look Back*, 1978 CD**

The second Boston album jumps forward in the story line to the guitar-city-ship landing on some strange new planet to begin civilization again. Mind you, none of Boston’s records are musically concept albums; the covers tell their own story, independent of the music. “Don’t Look Back” and “The Journey” are the only songs whose titles make them look like they could be related, and they aren’t.

*Don’t Look Back* is, in my opinion, even better than *Boston*. Even so, it is almost without a doubt the most shameless retread of a previous success since the Romans made up new names for all the Greek gods. Not only is this the same *sort* of album as its predecessor, but I can map the songs on it to songs on *Boston* on a one-for-one basis, almost *in order*. “Don’t Look Back” is “More than a Feeling”, “The Journey” is “Foreplay”, “It’s Easy” is “Long Time”, “A Man I’ll Never Be” is “Hitch a Ride”, “Feelin’ Satisfied” is “Long Time”, “Party” is “Smokin’”, “Used to Bad News” is “Something About You” and “Don’t Be Afraid” is “Peace of Mind”. That leaves out only “Let Me Take You Home Tonight”, and sure enough, *Don’t Look Back* is about 4:12 shorter than *Boston*. It only has the same number of tracks on the sleeve because on *Boston* “Foreplay/Long Time” count as one, where on *Don’t Look Back* “The Journey” and “It’s Easy” count as two.

But what’s so bad about redundancy? Another eight of these songs means that you can drive for over an hour without literally repeating anything. And although “More Than a Feeling” still stands, I think, as the band’s finest moment, on the whole I think the set of songs on this album is better than the set on the first one. You can start with *either* album, I’d say, and the risk that, if you like one, you won’t like the other is precisely zilch. Perfect consistency! What more can you ask for in a band.

### ***Third Stage*, 1986 CD**

Boston’s third album was scheduled to come out in 1981, so my parents promised that they’d buy it for me as my present for graduating middle school. It ended up being so late that I was in college when it finally came out. While at the Harvard Lampoon in the summer of 1987, writing our book *Mediagate* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988; ISBN 0-87113-179-X; pay no attention to the hideous front cover), I wrote a story about what happened in the intervening years. There were no other Boston fans on the staff, and everybody said it was too long to even think about publishing. I

include it here because I *said* I'd see it published some day, and I'll be damned if I let this opportunity slip by.

### **Boston, 1978-1986: The Long Silence**

1978 - The long silence begins. Two days after the rock group Boston's second mega-album, *Don't Look Back*, goes platinum, guitarist and songwriter Tom Scholz fires the whole band, including vocalist and lifelong friend Brad Delp. Drummer Sib Hashian points out that Scholz is so inept on guitar that he often uses as many as 50 recording tracks to put down one guitar line, each track containing, at the most, two dozen correctly played notes. Hashian, however, is quick to praise Scholz for the engineering skill this requires. Scholz feels that if he has Cindy around for background handclaps the road show will be fine, but when Cindy dumps him to go live with Peter Frampton, he reluctantly tells Boston's agent to cancel their world tour dates. The agent shrugs. "You guys sucked live anyway."

Scholz goes into the studio to record the next album, which he plans to call *Landing the Guitar Spaceship in Newark*. It will tell the story of the city of Boston, which escaped from an exploding planet on the cover of the first album, discovering an alternate earth and deciding to locate the city in New Jersey this time. Scholz sees the album as a refutation of many of the ideas expressed on the first two albums, which he feels were clichéd and shallow. The first side contains "Basically a Feeling Was All It Was", "Feelin' Mortified", and the long instrumental, "Looked Back/Pillar of Salt". The music is biting, poignant, and exciting, but it basically sounds exactly the same as the first two albums. Scholz is disappointed and goes to England to relax for a while and eat bland food. *Art: cover of single "Looked Back/Pillar of Salt". Photo of huge Morton's salt shaker with Boston guitar flying out away from it like it were a super-nova.*

1979 - In England Scholz discovers punk. He is dubious, but impressed despite himself. In the Sex Pistols' song "No Feelings" he hears echoes of Boston's

"Used to Bad News", and he begins following the band around England. In Birmingham after a show he goes backstage and offers Johnny Rotten Brad Delp's old job as Boston's lead singer. Rotten seems intrigued by the idea, but Malcolm McLaren beats Scholz up and leaves him in an alley. Cindy, who has left Frampton and tracked Scholz to England, decides that getting back together with him would be a dumb idea after all, and leaves with Sex Pistols drummer Paul Cook, who subsequently fades so far into obscurity that Cindy is forced to wear special polarized glasses to see him. At a party for ex-drummers, she meets Pete Best and leaves with him for Japan.

Upset, but not discouraged, Scholz returns to London, where he starts a punk band of his own, called London. The band gets a few gigs on the strengths of Scholz's slightly rewritten versions of old Boston songs, "A Man I'll Never Be, and It's the Government's Fault", and "Let Me Take You Home Tonight and We'll Do Heroin in My Hotel Room", but Scholz's insistence on playing long acoustic-guitar solos on stage angers punk fans, and eventually the band is beaten up and all their equipment is stolen. Scholz tries to persuade the rest of the band to stay with him, pointing out that with his engineering expertise he can construct new instruments and amplifiers using only simple components easily obtainable at any Radio Shack. The band tells him that there are no Radio Shacks in England, and Scholz returns to Massachusetts, despondent but determined. *Art: concert poster for London. Boston guitar with B crudely changed to L, s changed to n, etc., and graffiti scrawled on it, leaning against a trash can in an alley.*

1980 - Scholz, suffering from writer's block, spends some time inventing small devices. He devises a pocket-sized machine designed to evenly coat a pair of hightops with gold glitter. Forced by a lack of commercial backing to try to sell the devices through the mail, he loses a great deal of money on the endeavor. His ads do elicit one

response, however, in the form of a "Dad Brelp" from "Moston, Bassachusetts". Scholz is suspicious, and through some research confirms his suspicion that Dad Brelp is none other than Brad Delp, the only other person in North America who would ever wear something as stupid looking as gold-glitter-painted hightops. Scholz invites Delp to rejoin the band, but Delp counters with an offer to Scholz to come join Delp's basketball team. Scholz accepts.

During opposing team time-outs, Scholz and Delp improvise songs. Delp's high annoying voice reminds Scholz of the better times with Boston, and Scholz's crappy guitar playing reminds Delp of all the *other* things he hated about Scholz, like his crappy piano playing, his crappy organ playing, and most of all his crappy jump shot. After a demoralizing 132-40 loss to Ace Frehley and some of his friends, Scholz quits the team and moves to Georgia.

1981 - On the street in Atlanta, Scholz runs into Peter Frampton. At first he is hostile, but soon the two become friends. Neither knows what has become of Cindy, although Frampton has heard that at Budokan in Japan she met Rick Nielsen, of Cheap Trick. Scholz offers Frampton a job in his band, and Frampton accepts. Together they record several songs for an anti-drug abuse album to be titled, "Don't Cook Crack". The master copy of the first complete side, however, is destroyed one night in a blaze set by Malcolm MacLaren, who is in town looking for Cindy in the hope that her background claps can keep the Sex Pistols awake [sic, Sid was dead by 1981, wasn't he?...] long enough to finish a new album. Scholz and Frampton try to reconstruct the single, "More Than a Needling", but Scholz's perfectionism cannot be satisfied. Frampton, frustrated, leaves the band to go play indoor soccer with Sib Hashian in Wisconsin. *Art: poster for Scholz and Frampton benefit concert for The Anti-Cocaine Task Force. Boston guitar crash-landing, plowing through enormous lines of cocaine.*

At a Cheap Trick concert later in the year, Scholz runs into Brad Delp. Delp tries to conceal the fact that he, too, is

there hoping to see Cindy, but Scholz pries the truth out of him. The two of them, deciding to work together, force their way backstage after the show, but Nielsen tells them that Cindy left him for Canadian folksinger Gordon Lightfoot during a Cheap Trick concert in Toronto. Nielsen offers Scholz and Delp jobs in his band, and they accept. At the next show, however, Nielsen discovers that Scholz cannot play a five-necked guitar, and Delp cannot force his voice low enough to sing "Dream Police", and the two are fired. Saddened, but not shattered, they head for California, where Delp has heard there are good jobs picking oranges.

1982 - In California, Delp and Scholz run into Cindy, who is touring with Kiss, doing background handclaps. They try to convince her to rejoin Boston, but she is in love and will not listen. In a studio in California, Delp and Scholz record a song called "It's Difficult". The song has a catchy tune. Unfortunately, the song "It's Easy," on Boston's second album, has the *same* catchy tune, and industry executives shake their heads. In San Diego the two hear a band called "The Bulletproof Sandwich Ministry". They are terrible, but Delp thinks they are great, and joins the band, renaming it "Orion the Hunter". Scholz returns to Boston to become a Mason.

1983 - In May, Scholz begins writing material for a third Boston album. It is to be entirely played on synthesizer, and will be a radical departure from the Boston style. *Art: cover for "Don't Be Afraid of Synthesizers". Big bowl of recognizable chocolate pudding being dumped on Boston guitar.* Scholz completes the material and records several songs by December, but becomes bogged down over the programming necessary to simulate background handclaps, the last vestige of the Boston sound that he clings to. In the end he gives up, and sets about trying to find a human to do the hand-claps. He eventually locates Peter Frampton, who is in Melbourne playing banjo with a Cajun reggae band. Frampton agrees to return. His plane to Los Angeles, however, is hijacked by Malcolm



MacLaren, who forces the pilot to fly to Canada, where MacLaren tries to bomb the studios in which Gordon Lightfoot is recording his new album, "Perhaps the Edmund Fitzgerald Hit an Iceberg". The raid is unsuccessful, but MacLaren escapes the authorities and returns to England. When Scholz hears of this, he accidentally dumps a big bowl of chocolate pudding on his synthesizer, destroying all his work.

1984 - Delp finishes recording an album with Orion the Hunter, but becomes disillusioned with the band and leaves it to go to the World's Expo in Montreal. There he is surprised to learn that the Expo is not a permanent feature of the city. At the airport as he is preparing to return to Boston, he meets Gordon Lightfoot, who offers him a job in his band. Delp accepts, but when he discovers that Paul Cook and Pete Best are also in the band, he thinks it wisest to quit. Penniless, he is forced to remain in Canada. One day, however, he runs into Cindy in the Montreal Zoo. She has come to the zoo to seek religious salvation. Delp realizes that her sense of direction is terrible and that she has mistaken the zoo for Mecca, which he imagines looks similar. He comforts her and offers her a job in his band and she accepts. Together they record a song called "We're Not Creative", which consists entirely of Delp singing without words and Cindy clapping with one hand. It receives some criticism. Scholz hears it in Boston and offers the two a job in his band. They accept.

Scholz, meanwhile, has been working in the studio with Frampton and Rick Nielsen, who is taking some time off from Cheap Trick. He has several songs and when Delp and Cindy arrive they finish the record. It is very bad, and they are unable to get a record contract. Depressed, but not obliterated, they decide to go on tour. In a gesture of goodwill, they offer Malcolm MacLaren political asylum to come manage the road show and he accepts. Gordon Lightfoot joins them for the northern leg of the tour, and in Detroit they sell out two nights in a drugstore. They play well, but Pete Best and Paul Cook get in a

fight with Ace Frehley, who is in town gaining weight and undergoing tongue surgery to secretly pose as Gene Simmons, who is dead, in the video for the new Kiss song, "Lick It Up". The doctors feel that the surgery is a success, but during the shooting of the video Frehley goes into convulsions and has to be put into cryogenic storage. Kiss threatens to sue Boston unless Best and Cook take over Simmons and Frehley's jobs. Unable to risk an appearance in court because of MacLaren's presence, they accept. Scholz and the band return to Boston.

1985 - Nielsen and Lightfoot leave the band to become musicians, and MacLaren is extradited to England after being arrested one night for attaching leeches to parked cars. Frampton, Delp, Scholz and Cindy begin work on a new Boston album, called *The Third Album*. Penniless, however, they are forced to sell all their fancy recording equipment, constructed by Scholz from cannibalized Blaupunkt car stereos. Scholz has to disconnect the phone mouthpiece to build a makeshift miniature guitar, and living on unpopped popcorn in a bare apartment, they record their songs on Scholz's answering machine, the only other electric device they own. When Frampton accidentally erases the message, destroying their only copy of half an album worth of songs, Scholz fires him from the band. Frampton tries to persuade Delp and Cindy to leave with him, but they are too starved to stand up, so he leaves alone and returns to England.

Delp, Scholz and Cindy record a song called "Amanda", a plea to their landlord Amanda Stormgeld not to throw them out. On New Year's Eve, a private detective hired by MCA records to find Ace Frehley, whose frozen body has mysteriously disappeared, calls Scholz's number by mistake and hears the song. A big Boston fan himself, he realizes that "Amanda" could be an enormous comeback hit. Excited, he rushes to alert MCA headquarters.

1986 - MCA record executives spend New Year's Day just phoning Scholz's number over and over again. The song

is amazing. It is unmistakably Boston genius. Cindy, Delp and Scholz, lying half comatose on the bare cement floor of the apartment, can do nothing but twitch weakly as the phone rings over and over again. Scholz tries to answer the phone with his guitar, but the executives mistake his musical Morse code distress plea as a solo by Peter Frampton, who they are surprised to hear playing with Boston.

Several MCA executives rush to Scholz's apartment to try to steal the answer tape. They are horrified at the scene they find, and Scholz, Delp and Cindy are rushed to the hospital. After a few good meals with chocolate pudding for dessert, however, they regain consciousness. The new president of MCA, Paul Cook, comes to their hospital room himself and tells them that he loves the song and wants them to do a new Boston album. Scholz reveals that for several weeks the three of them have been saving up their energy for nighttimes, when trans-atlantic phone rates are lowest, and they have played several other new songs into Malcolm MacLaren's answering machine in London.

For a moment there is panic at MCA when someone discovers that MacLaren will get out of jail before executives can reach his apartment to capture his message tape, but Scholz, with his engineering ingenuity, instructs an MCA recording technician to impersonate MacLaren electronically, receiving his messages long distance. Just as MCA is finishing the transfer, MacLaren reaches his home and picks up the phone, destroying the lyrics to "The Launch", Delp's searing post-modernist poetic exploration of a number of meaningful worldwide issues. In their haste to release the album before CBS gets wind of it, however, MCA chooses to release the song as an instrumental, rather than wait for Scholz to recover enough strength to recreate the words.

*Art: three covers, labeled across the top as "cover proposals, Third Stage". First is Boston guitar traveling with fleet from Battlestar Galactica. Second is guitar linking with Soyuz. Third is guitar spliced into*

*news photo of Challenger exploding. A week later, in a gala party at Tower Records in Manhattan, Third Stage, Boston's new album, goes on sale. The celebration is phenomenal, and the rejoicing is nationwide. The album shoots to number one its first week, and after eight years, The Long Silence is over.*

"But what", you ask, after flipping past all that, "does the album sound like?" Unfortunately, after eight years of waiting, I am no longer content for this album to recycle the first two. I mean, *Don't Look Back* only took two years, so eight should translate into something thoroughly remarkable.

It doesn't. *Third Stage* is almost impossible to distinguish from the other two albums. The one thing that sets it apart is that Scholz plays everything himself, except some of the drums, and his lack of drumming expertise, in particular, shows. Other than that, this album is the same Boston shtick all over again. Given eight years to subsist on just two albums of this stuff, though, I learned to, and another volume seems totally superfluous. Mom and Dad still owed me a copy, though, so I bought it. But I doubt I've listened to it more than five times, including just now as I wrote this review.

## Billy Thorpe

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### *Children of the Sun...Revisited, 1987 LP*

Growing up, there were four great science-fictional pillars in the rock world. One was the covers of Boston albums, the second was 2112, the third was "Iron Man", and the fourth was Billy Thorpe's "Children of the Sun", a 1979 FM-radio staple with spacey keyboards, grinding guitar and a vague narrative about the arrival of a horde of benevolent aliens. As science-fiction it's pretty lame, but as a song to inspire legions of air-guitarists, it's practically idea.

It also went out of print with the demise of Capricorn Records, long before its natural life was exhausted. So when it was exhumed in 1987 by producer Spencer Proffer's Pasha label, repackaged to pair the original suite, and Thorpe's second hit "East of Eden's Gate", with three new songs, I shelled out \$3.99 for a used promo copy.

The "suite", meaning side one, is just as cornily expansive as I remembered. As science fiction the story is tired, unsophisticated and unappealing. As music the album is overwrought and dated, and the writer of

the notes on the back cover, who calls it “pioneering” and seems to think Thorpe and Arthur C. Clarke about comparable as intellectual futurists, would do well to listen to *2112*, or the “Cygnus X-1”/“Hemispheres” diptych, which came out in 1976, ’77 and ’78, respectively, comfortably before Thorpe’s “advanced visionary work”. Still, it brings back memories. I also really liked “East of Eden’s Gate” at the time it came out (1982), and even now its arpeggiated synthesizers sound terrific.

The three new songs on side two are, and I wish I could think of another way of putting this, awful. I knew halfway through the first one why Thorpe chose to release them this way: on their own he couldn’t give them away. Yeesh! Imagine Phil Collins doing “One Night in Bangkok”, and then imagine it covered by a bunch of studio hacks whose usual occupation is making the jingle soundtracks to those commercials for bubble-gum or cheap makeup that feature bunches of fresh-faced, empty-headed twelve-year-olds bouncing around being peppy, young and clear-skinned. Now imagine a disco version of *that*. You’ve still got something better than “Earth Calling”, “Turn It Into Love” and “Free Enterprise”. Wow. I can’t imagine a worse way to “re-launch” a dormant career than to reissue a popular early work bundled with incontrovertible proof that whatever knack for rock the artist once had left with the children of the sun “on the crystal ships on their celestial flight”, and by now is a long, long, long, long way away. This makes New Coke and the Challenger explosion look like PR masterstrokes.

## Kansas

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### *The Best of Kansas, 1984 CD*

Kansas are another essentially American phenomenon, sort of this continent’s answer to Yes by way of Charlie Daniels. “Dust in the Wind”, “Point of Know Return” and “Carry On Wayward Son” are all rock-radio mainstays from my childhood, and it was hearing “Carry On Wayward Son” again on the car-radio on the way home one night late in 1993 that prompted me to go out and actually buy this best-of. Sure enough, those songs are just as great as I remember them. If 1976-77 wasn’t when *you* began to awaken to the music around you, you may not remember these songs with as much nostalgia as I do, but to me they have come in retrospect to be close to definitive, and have even aged well. The violin doesn’t seem like nearly as much of a novelty for a rock band now as it did then, and the band’s progressive

tendencies fit well with how my tastes have evolved since I first heard them.

The collection as a whole is somewhat scattered, as there are only ten songs here, covering seven albums, from 1975 to 1984. The band’s development from the complex, relatively inaccessible epic “Song for America” (from 1975’s *Song for America*) to the heyday of “The Wall” and “Carry on Wayward Son” (from *Leftoverture*, 1976) and “Point of Know Return” and “Dust in the Wind” (from 1977’s *Point of Know Return*), through the lull of “No One Together” and “Hold On” (from *Audio-Visions*, in 1979), to the production-deadened mainstream arena-rock of “Play the Game Tonight” (from *Vinyl Confessions*, 1982), “Fight Fire with Fire” (from 1983’s *Drastic Measures*) and “Perfect Lover” (new for this 1984 collection) is chronicled pretty well, though, even if you do have to reprogram the disc in the order 5-10-1-2-4-7-8-9-3-6 to get the time order correct. I bought this as one for the archives, but I suspect it will get played more than some.

## Electric Light Orchestra

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### *ELO’s Greatest Hits, 1979 CD*

ELO was one of those bands I remember thinking was really cool at the time. Record purchases back then were so rare for me, though, that I never bought anything unless I’d heard and liked at least three songs on it, and ELO singles were scattered out enough that the only record I got was *Discovery*, which I sold at a garage sale within a year or two. Recently, in a fit of nostalgia, I bought this greatest hits album as compensation for the years of deprivation.

You know, my childhood really wasn’t so bad. If I’d been able to afford all the albums I wanted back then, there’s no telling *how* much cheesy garbage like this I’d have. Despite my fond memories, ELO now seems only a short step above the Bee Gee’s (whose early stuff I’ve thought about buying again...). This CD is worth having, just as a period piece, and I can still groove along to “Can’t Get It Out of My Head”, “Turn to Stone” and “Mr. Blue Sky”, but the rest of it separation has not made me fonder of.

## Night Ranger

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### *Midnight Madness, 1983 LP*

Night Ranger is to 1983 what ELO was to the mid-Seventies. I don’t respect them at all, and I’m somewhat self-conscious about even having one of their

records, but “(You Can Still) Rock in America” is *such* a classic cheese-metal anthem that I knew I’d be sorry years from now if I couldn’t drag it out and listen to it again. Night Ranger attempts to combine Boston and AC/DC, and is at least partially successful. The rest of the record, provided you can stomach cheese-metal, isn’t that bad either. Night Ranger have a nice ear for blending synth arpeggios with metal guitar, which makes both “Rock in America” and “Rumours in the Air” interesting. “Sister Christian” is a solid power-ballad, not nearly as offensive as, say, Journey’s comparable whinings, and “When You Close Your Eyes” is of similar quality.

Still, *Night Ranger!* Jeesh.

## April Wine

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### *The Nature of the Beast*, 1981 LP

April Wine makes a much more credible attempt at merging some metal sensibilities (doesn’t that sound like an oxymoron?) into the hard rock end of the mainstream. “All Over Town” sounds a bit like Thin Lizzy. “Just Between You and Me” is a proto-power ballad, and is much less saccharine than “Sister Christian”; I can listen to it without excuses. “Sign of the Gypsy Queen” is the one that makes this album, a dramatic mystical narrative slightly reminiscent of “(Don’t Fear) The Reaper” and “Godzilla”. I don’t find it as mind-blowing as I once did, and some of the guitar-solo interludes drag on a bit longer than I think was really necessary, but the song is definitely still great. I wonder why nobody has covered it?

After the first four songs, though, this album plummets dizzyingly. The six hackneyed titles “Wanna Rock”, “Future Tense”, “Big City Girls”, “Crash and Burn”, “Bad Boys” and “One More Time” tell the story in stark clarity: disposable lame-ass cliché-ridden jock-rock schlock.

## The Babys

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### *Anthology*, 1981 CD

I remembered the Babys as having two songs, “Midnight Rendezvous” and “Back on My Feet Again”, that were just wonderful. I also liked the John Waite album I have well enough (see below), so around about the same time that I picked up ELO’s greatest hits, I got this CD. On first listen, I was incredibly disappointed. In my mind I’d updated the production about twelve years, and the versions in my head had big Nineties

drums and guitars. The versions on the CD have the sound they actually *had*, which is pretty thin by the standards of today’s mainstream rock.

I gave the collection another chance, though, and listening to it again with the expectation of finding it weak and unexciting, it regains some of its comparative luster. The songs from the band’s first three albums (“If You’ve Got the Time”; “Isn’t It Time” and “Give Me Your Love”; “Head First”, “Money” and “Every Time I Think of You”) don’t appeal to me much, and I don’t remember them either. One of those two things probably produces the other, but I don’t know which way it goes. The four from the Babys’ two 1980 albums (“Midnight Rendezvous” and “Back on My Feet Again” from *Union Jacks*, and “Turn and Walk Away” and “Sweet 17” from *On the Edge*) have much more of the big, slick sound that endeared the band to me back then. I still like Waite’s solo work better, though.

## John Waite

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### *No Brakes*, 1984 LP

You should recognize this album as the one containing Waite’s mammoth hit “Missing You”. I have a mushy spot in my musical taste for that song, but I actually bought this album because I discovered that one of my sister’s and my old Dallas favorites, Gary Myrick (see his entry in *The Suburbs*) plays guitar on this album, and co-wrote several of the songs (not “Missing You”, regrettably).

I’d like to say that Myrick’s presence turns this album from the processed top-40 pop that you’d expect from “Missing You” into something dark, dangerous and vital, something politically and aesthetically correct, something that would *surprise* you. I’d really like to say that. In fact, maybe I will: Myrick’s presence turns this—no, I can’t go through with it. I want it to be true, but it isn’t. He’s a good guitar player, and this album has good guitar on it. He’s a good songwriter, and this album has some good songs on it. He’s a good presence, and this is a good album. But it’s very much the sort of glossy mainstream studio-pop that you’d expect it to be. If you liked the Babys, this is a better version of the same thing. If you didn’t, you probably won’t like this either. I do pull it out and put it on every once in a while, and I’d give it a vote if we had to fill a time capsule of *representative* selections from Eighties musical culture, but there’s no denying that it’s *in genre*.

## Michael Stanley Band

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### *You Can't Fight Fashion*, 1983 LP

I almost named this chapter “My Town”, after the Michael Stanley Band’s one big hit, which leads off side “A” of this album. It wasn’t the right connotation for a chapter title, but I *adore* the song. Big, throbbing bass, steady pounding drums, ringing piano, stirring guitar, working-sods-singing-because-we-love-it harmonies, and more bass. The bass, in case I haven’t stressed it enough, is the best part. It goes “boom wommm, boom wommm” like a combination of a 97-foot piece of sheet metal and a muted tuba. It sounds synthesized, but I imagine it’s probably real. As a promo gimmick they must have pressed up versions of this song in which they shout out different city names between “This town in my town” and “all right!”, because I still yell “Dallas” at the appropriate point in the record, and am disappointed to find myself singing alone. I’ve tried singing “Boston”, or “Cambridge”, since I don’t really care about Dallas at all, but it sounds silly. “Dallas” is the way I heard it, and that’s the way it will stay in my mind.

The rest of the album I have essentially no interest in. It’s competent, but “My Town” was something special, and the rest of this isn’t. I figured I’d think that, but I couldn’t find a single of “My Town” when I wanted one.

## Heart

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### *Passionworks*, 1983 LP

Heart’s career eased from bluesy hard rock in the early days to syrupy arena metal of late. This album finds them somewhere in the middle of this pilgrimage from being a female-fronted Led Zeppelin to being a female-fronted Winger, running across my own taste for a brief moment as something closer to a female-fronted Foreigner, who I once, long ago, liked as well.

In retrospect, *Passionworks* would have been more aptly named *Passionoverworks*, or *Passionwraught*, or something like that. Ann and Nancy Wilson belt out the whole album like third-rate actresses reacting to seeing their babies eaten by giant killer worms. Maybe they were standing too far away from the microphones, and *really*, really upset about it. Whatever the reason, passion and emotion drip out of every song on this album like water dripping out of a Blazer-sized hole in the middle of the Hoover Dam. Big, booming synth-drum rolls lend a subtle, cannon-like emphasis to important cruxes in the music, and

thick waves of guitar and synthesizer head off any danger that you will fall into a crack between two poignant moments anywhere.

With all that, it’s hard to believe that the moment which redeems the album is a song written for the band by Journey (and ex-Babys) keyboard player Jonathan Cain. “Allies” varies the formula just enough, mixing in some piano, and though I suppose in some ways it is even *more* cloying than the rest of the record, to me it attains sublimity. It came around just as I was throwing myself whole-heartedly into my senior year of high school’s long-distance relationship, and the chorus, “Allies, with our backs against the wall, / I will answer when you call / And take on the odds / For what we believe is true”, seemed to me to perfectly summarize what I hoped that Hilary and my relationship could be. I sent her the lyrics, and she kept them by her desk for constant reassurance. Eventually (spring of 1985) I sent her a tape of songs I wanted her to hear, and “Allies” started off both sides, to make sure she’d never have to rewind too far to hear it. No other of my relationships has ever had a theme song, so this one has thus become the single song I feel the most direct *emotional* resonance with. Possibly I could have picked a better song, but it’s way too late for that now.

(The tape’s whole playlist, for posterity. Side 1: “Allies” and “Together Now” by Heart, “The Boys of Summer” by Don Henley, “Madrigal” by Rush, Ultravox’s “Dancing with Tears in My Eyes”, Modern English’s “Hands Across the Sea”, “Flying North” by Thomas Dolby, “Lovers in a Dangerous Time” by Bruce Cockburn, “Never Stop” and “Ocean Rain” by Echo and the Bunnymen, “Sounds of Silence” by Simon and Garfunkel. Side 2: “Allies”, “Wonderland” and “Prairie Rose” by Big Country, REM’s “Camera”, the Europeans’ “Kingdome Come”, Vangelis’ “Alpha”, Jean Michel Jarre’s “Oxygene IV”, and “Rondo’ Veneziano”, “Giochi D’Acqua” and “Columbina” by Rondo’ Veneziano.)

## Pretenders

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### *Pretenders II*, 1981 CD

The Pretenders are one of those incredibly important early-New-Wave bands that I just never really got into. Sure, Chrissie Hynde is an arresting performer, and the band’s raw, punk-edged style has spawned legions of imitators, but for some reason her voice just doesn’t move me. I bought this CD on sale at some point, because it seemed silly that I only had one Pretenders single.

It's a good album. Heck, it's probably a great album. The Pretenders have decayed, in my opinion, since all of them but Chrissie either died or quit (or both), but the first three albums are inarguably modern classics. Individual voices, though, as I've noted before, are very subjective things and Chrissie's always strikes me as Pat Benetar's with something slightly wrong with it.

In the end my fondest memory of the early Pretenders is that when I saw them on this tour (or it might have been the next one), due to their being the headliner when I went to see the Alarm open the show, drummer Martin Chambers had his floor-tom heads rigged with a water-feed so that whenever he hit them he produced an impressively explosive spray. That seemed really cool to me.

### ***2000 Miles, 1983 7"***

*Learning to Crawl* had several songs that I knew I didn't like, so I bought the single of the one I adored. Actually, the single is "Middle of the Road" on one side, "2000 Miles" on the other, so this is more accurately *Middle of the Road*, but I've taken the liberty of mandating an a-side swap. "2000 Miles" is a slow, beautiful ballad, rolling gently on fingerpicked guitar, Chrissie singing about being separated from her then-husband. (Jim Kerr? Ray Davies? I can't keep track; somebody British, anyway.) 2000 miles was just about how far I was from my then-girlfriend Hilary, and she was coming "back at Christmastime", and so the song had a special significance to me.

## **Baby Animals**

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### ***Baby Animals, 1991 CD***

Lead singer Suze DeMarchi, of the Australian band Baby Animals, is one of the many female rock singers whose style owes a debt (incidentally or intentionally) to Chrissie Hynde. She's got short black hair and tomboying appearance, and plays guitar, and these factors doubtlessly combined to make some people simply dismiss the band out of hand. On further reflection, though, it seems rather unfair to black-haired female guitarist/singers worldwide to say that they should either shave their heads or stay out of the business until their hair has grown longer than Chrissie's.

Baby Animals had a small hit with the single "Painless", from this debut album, and I saw it on MTV once. Visually, the band looked like nothing special. DeMarchi looked like Hynde, and the rest of the band were your average long-haired, leather-wearing rock-

stud aspirants. The song had some tiny, but powerful, hooks concealed in it, though, because for the next week I found the chorus running through my head with reckless abandon like my parents used to accuse me of doing upstairs at 8:00 on Sunday mornings.

When exorcism failed to clear the calm lilt of the song out of my mind, I resorted to buying the album. First time through, nothing else seemed to hit me as squarely as "Painless", and I thought I might be on the road to recovery. Later that day, when I caught "Make It End" chasing "Painless" around my mind, I realized that the band had some real potential. A few listens later, the whole thing snapped into place.

"Painless" and "Make It End" are both slow to mid-tempo songs, seemingly innocuous. The band plays with restraint, and DeMarchi's singing is low and gentle. The melodic hooks are deceptively simple, two notes as she sings "pain-less", two and a grace note on "and make it end". They'll either hit you as perfect, or hit you as unremarkable.

The rest of the album, which I only connected with after several listenings, is harder rock. Big guitars, cymbal-heavy drums and deep, gritty bass combine in what initially sounded to me like standard hard/mainstream rock fashion. A little like the Screaming Jets (who get a thanks in the liner notes, by the way), though, Baby Animals have a knack for finessing their songs so that the melodies end up being more important than the style. Voices are a very personal thing, but for me DeMarchi's adds just enough of Fiona's dramatic intensity to Hynde's frank world-wisdom or the Joan Jett/early Pat Benetar school of bad-girl strut. Baby Animals take ordinary ingredients and make something special out of them not by twisting them in unexpected new directions, but just by caring and paying attention to the details. From my initial hohum this album went on to get an Belated Mention in my 1992 year-end review.

## **The Patti Smith Group**

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### ***Because the Night, 1979 7"***

Patti Smith is another significant counter-culture figure whose work I don't, for the most part, care for. I also don't like Bruce Springsteen, so it's pretty strange that I really like this song, which Bruce co-wrote.

## Meat Loaf

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### *Bat Out of Hell, 1977 CD*

Meat Loaf has nothing to do, that I know of, with Patti Smith, but I always associate the two with each other, for some reason. I think I saw him perform on *SNL* or *Fridays* once, and his backing singer looked like her, or like I thought she looked, or something like that. The other thing I remembered about that performance was that there were about a dozen people in the band, and by the end of the song every single one of them was standing at the front of the stage playing guitar, which I thought was great.

Anyway, this album is a bona fide mainstream classic. Meat Loaf, besides having the dumbest name in rock and being about the ugliest man ever to make a living this way, will lead you to realize that rock can get a whole lot more histrionic than you would ever otherwise imagine. Compared to this album, “Bohemian Rhapsody” is “Louie Louie”. There are only seven songs here, but the lyrics seem to go on forever, as does the album. With apologies to Spencer, this album is now almost the definition of epic. The fourteen-minute pairing of “Two Out of Three Ain’t Bad” and “Paradise by the Dashboard Light” is both the seminal poetic rendition of awkward American adolescent back-seat groping, and no doubt often its real-life soundtrack. The band (Todd Rundgren, pianist Roy Bittan, bassist Kasim Sultan, drummer Max Weinberg, keyboard player Roger Powell, saxophonist Edgar Winter and second singer Ellen Foley) back Meat with a schmaltzy accompaniment that does even his voice justice, and Jim Steinman’s endless working-class narratives make Bruce Springsteen look like Robyn Hitchcock.

As with *Boston*, if you don’t have this album, you are missing a period of American music. You may prefer to, of course, but Epic has a predilection for unloading mid-price CDs like this for about \$5.99, and at that price it’s worth getting just so you’ll know what you’re talking about when you say it makes you feel like you just ate 7,000 marshmallows and then a big bowl of rancid chili.

And even if you hate it, it has one of the greatest moments in rock music, when toward the end of “Paradise by the Dashboard Light” Meat Loaf finally breaks down and says he will love her until the end of time and then after a perfectly timed pause slams into “So now I’m praying for the end of time / To hurry up and arrive”. A poignant, bittersweet, disgusting, pathetic and painfully true moment, the likes of which rock rarely produces.

## Eddie Money

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### *Take Me Home Tonight, 1986 7"*

In the Bruce Springsteen/Bryan Adams/Billy Squire/Greg Kihn/Bob Seger/Huey Lewis/Tom Cochrane world of pretentiously-unpretentious ordinary-man rock and roll, I have a small fondness for Eddie Money. Maybe it’s that he’s just a little bit uglier than the others, maybe it’s that he hasn’t been quite as successful, and so hasn’t annoyed me as thoroughly. Whatever the case, I kind of like him. Buy a whole album? Well, that seems excessive, since almost all his songs sound pretty much the same to me. In show of token support I did get this single, which distinguishes itself from all his other songs by the presence of Ronnie Spector’s voice, singing her one line, “Be my little baby”, enough times to give Money’s potato appeal the touch of spice that it needed.

## Little Steven

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### *Voice of America, 1983 LP*

While we’re on the subject of ordinary-man rock, ex-Springsteen compatriot Little Steven (van Zandt) goes miles out of his way to seem like he’s *not* ordinary. The flamboyant clothes, headkerchief, Guernica-rip-off cover, band name “Little Steven and the Disciples of Soul” and his strangled singing style all seem calculated to turn off any Bryan Adams fans who might happen across this album accidentally. The music, though, reflects almost none of these things. I hear no sign of soul at all, for instance, and if you replaced Steven’s voice with Richard Marx’s, I think this would be a politically aware but musically wholly insignificant album.

The two best moments, in fact, inject a healthy dose of LA-issue simulated passion. “Out of the Darkness” and “Los Desaparecidos” both taste strongly of Springsteen’s rough emoting, mixed with a big-budget wailing-guitar-solo and simmering-keyboards production. I think “Los Desaparecidos” is one of the *best* examples of this style, mind you, but despite the Central-American name dropping, it’s still a far cry from the soulful gypsy persona that seems to be Little Steven’s self-image.

## The Brandos

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### *Honor Among Thieves*, 1987 LP

Both mainstream rock's indifference for its subject matter, and its corresponding desperate desire for topics that justify the music's inherent intensity, are evident on "Gettysburg", the first song and only standout track (in my opinion, of course) on the Brando's unremarkable me-too album *Honor Among Thieves*. "Look ma, a song about the Civil War! No way, we're not a CCR cover-band, we're *historically-conscious*! Pay no attention to the J. Fogerty credit on 'Walking on the Water', we're a hard rocking, photogenic young band with a serious lyrical bent. No 'There's a bathroom on the right' for us. Check this lyric out: 'Did you read it in the bible / Did they teach you all that in school'. See how we question authority? Didja notice how we didn't capitalize 'bible'? We pull no punches. Hey, I like the sound of that. 'We pull no punches.' 'The Brandos pull no punches.' Can we get somebody from Rolling Stone to say that so we can print up stickers of it and put them on the albums, down to the right where they won't cover up our faces?"

Yikes. Sorry, a bit of repressed vitriol just leaked out. The Brandos don't really deserve to be singled out for such abuse. So they sound like CCR. Big deal. Lots of people *love* CCR. And you've got to write about *something*, so why not the Civil War? It made for a good song, good enough to sell me a copy of the album, albeit a cutout. You might like it, too.

## Chagall Guevara

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### *Chagall Guevara*, 1991 CD

Ever buy an album just 'cause you liked the band's name? Not even on the basis of the cover, which I've done a few times, but just on the strength of the *name*? Well, I did, once. Walking toward the register in Tower Records, past the "No risk disc" display, the name "Chagall Guevara" caught my attention. The combination of artist and political revolutionary struck me as absolutely brilliant, and "No risk disc" meant that I if I didn't like it I could just bring it back and get something else. I grabbed it.

I definitely was *not* expecting such a name to lead to a Nashville, TN, "no digital reverb or samples", traditionalist roots-rock band. 4AD atmospherics, industrial thrash, funk metal, impenetrable art noise, I was expecting something *extreme*, and this is a phenomenally conservative album and band, making rock and roll that isn't trendily modern or trendily

retro. Take the Black Crowes, strip them of their Seventies affectations, and use a strong wind to eliminate their insufferable lead singer, and you'd be left with something like Chagall Guevara. Alternately, tie Dramarama to a chair so they don't wander around so much. The band *looks* like a cross between the Wonder Stuff and the Fabulous Thunderbirds (and, come to think of it, they sort of sound like that, too, which I realize says nothing). REM after listening to a lot of Lynyrd Skynyrd, or vice versa.

Two guitars, bass, drums and a singer, that's Chagall Guevara's time-proven formula. Both guitarists provide harmony vocals, and the guitars are tuneful. The rhythm section is solid and straightforward. It's hard to know how to take the band, though, and I almost took the album back because I had a hard time trying to figure out what it would mean to like it. At times, as on "Take Me Back to Love Canal" or "Play God", they sound like they want to be part of the resurgence of southern-rock boogie. At other times, like the giddy delights "Murder in the Big House" and "Escher's World", they seem to be leaning more toward the REM/Guadacanal Diary/dB's axis of the New South. After saying "I'll just listen to it once more before I take it back" enough, though, I came to the conclusion that whatever it is they're doing, I like it pretty well. For my year-end lists that year (1991), I inaugurated the "Send My Paycheck to Tower Records Award", just so I'd have somewhere to mention them and Law and Order.

## Dramarama

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*Vinyl* was the album where Dramarama first came to my attention, and I could swear that the first three sprang into existence, fully formed and backdated, on the spot, just to take some more of my money. Not only had I never heard a Dramarama song, I'd never even heard the band's name *mentioned*. Trouser Press didn't have them in the fourth edition, either. Maybe the first three albums' distribution was basically local, and it was only the added corporate muscle of Elektra around *Vinyl* that got some copies of the earlier records shipped out behind it. The other theory is that the first three are an elaborate hoax, the point of which isn't totally clear. Hoaxes without an obvious purpose, though, are *the most dangerous*!

This will probably seem like a mysterious equation to everyone but me, but the more I listen to early Dramarama records, the more it strikes me that something about the way vocalist John Easdale sang phrases and sentences reminds me of Scott Miller. I've doggedly associated the band with Game Theory ever since I realized this, but it is such a strange feature to



focus on that I feel relatively confident that few people who know both bands will have made the connection, and so I have resisted the temptation to put them in Boylan Heights where they manifestly don't belong.

### *Cinéma Vérité*, 1985 CD

Whatever the plot behind it, Dramarama's back catalog proved worth investigation. On this first album they musically resemble the early Psychedelic Furs more than Game Theory. The guitars churn and the drums have a booming thumpiness like "India" or "Soap Commercial". Easdale's deliberate vocal pacing is not much like Butler's drone, though, and the music tends to break into bluesy guitar riffs every once in a while, instead of horns.

It is very much Easdale's voice that makes this record remarkable for me. The music is competent, solid rock, but it is only the sung melodies soaring (and often climbing and scrambling) over it that turn tracks like "Scenario", "Some Crazy Dame", "Etc." and "Emerald City" from agreeable to exciting.

All four Dramarama albums contain at least one cover, and this one has two: the Velvet Underground's "Femme Fatale" and Bowie's "Candidate". "Femme Fatale" is actually a 1982 recording, and sounds like a cheesy lounge band rendition. You could tell it is a cover even if you've never heard the original, because it has absolutely no sense of direction on its own. If I were them I would have left it off. The Bowie cover is a little better, but doesn't have much of the spirit of their own songs. In other influences, is that a hint of BÖC I hear on "Transformation"?

Listening to this album, I think that I've heard "Anything, Anything (I'll Give You)" before, though whether it was in 1991, on a radio station going through the same back-catalog discovery that I did, or back closer to when it supposedly came out, I couldn't say.

### *Box Office Bomb*, 1987 CD

Dramarama's second album shows distinct musical improvement. Brighter guitars, better production and more interesting dynamics make the music more remarkable. "It's Still Warm" uses a good high keyboard part on the chorus to enliven the static verses, and "Out in the Rain" uses it on the verses, too. "Modesty Personified" has clanging drums and wailing guitars, like the Smithereens (who, along with the Psychedelic Furs actually, get thanks in the liner notes).

It's still Easdale's singing and lyrics that carry the album, though. "Whenever I'm With Her" is a great dysfunctional relationship study. "It wouldn't be so bad if she'd tell me what's the matter, / And I wouldn't get so mad when I heard her vicious chatter. / I hear voices in my ear: 'Am I thinking with my zipper?' /

But they always disappear whenever I'm with her." "Baby Rhino's Eye" reminds me for a moment of Tommy Keene instead of Scott Miller (and contains the eternal questions "How's about that Johnny Carson? / Isn't he a scream? / Did you ever have a lady analyze your dreams?"). "Worse Than Being By Myself" executes a powerful slow burn on the subject of another messed-up relationship. "I'm all alone whenever we're together; / When we're alone it's worse than being by myself."

I have a hard time really recommending this album, though. Only "Modesty Personified" really combines musical and vocal appeal for me, and I continue to feel that Easdale's vocal style is the only thing that makes this music special to me, and that's just too subjective to use as basis for a recommendation. Although this album's improved musicianship should make it substantially better than the first one, for me it loses in freshness what it gains in confidence, and the two come out more or less tied.

### *Stuck in Wonderland*, 1989 CD

The band's third album finds them without their keyboard player, and trying to look like Bon Jovi on the cover. These are not good omens, and pessimism about the album turns out to be alarmingly accurate. This time out, Dramarama seem set on levering themselves out of "alternative" into "hard rock", with the result that I find this album oppressively bland and uninteresting. Easdale's vocals have completely lost that awkward singing-too-many-words quality that made them appealing, and the band slugs through standard guitar-rock clichés with no audible sense of their own identity or even particular enthusiasm. It's significant that the cover here (Ian Hunter's "I Wish I Was Your Mother") is way better than the originals, rather than the other way around like on *Cinéma Vérité*. Bleah. I say avoid.

### *Vinyl*, 1991 CD

For the fourth album, drummer Jesse has departed, and Wire Train drummer Brian Macleod sits in in his place. I know this from reading the liner notes only, as the difference isn't audible in any way I can discern.

Thankfully, this album is not a repeat of *Stuck in Wonderland*. Neither is it a return to their first two. Instead, this one begins to forge a new sound for the band, incorporating a slight countryish flair. "Haven't Got a Clue" is the single that introduced the band to me, and I still like it, and "In Quiet Rooms" offers an interesting cross between Bruce Springsteen and Simon and Garfunkel. The two other songs that almost salvage the album for me are "Ain't It the Truth",

which reminds me of something I can't place, and "I'd Like to Volunteer, Please", which reminds me of the Replacements.

Once again, the cover (of the Stones' "Memo to Turner") seems to have more presence than the songs the band wrote, and the two throwaway joke songs, "What Are We Gonna Do?" (about Earthday) and "Classic Rot" don't help matters much. I find both more awful than amusing, and they drag the album even farther down. I still appreciate this album for leading me to the first two, but it has worn very poorly on me itself, and though as I wrote this review the band's next album, "Hi-Fi Sci-Fi", was just two days away from release, I didn't rush out to buy it.

## 54•40

54•40 are, evidently, practically superstars at home in Canada. Here they are pretty obscure, partially, I'm sure, because they fall into the gap between mainstream and alternative. In reviews I've seen them compared alternately to REM and Tom Petty, and while I don't think either comparison makes a bit of sense, they do demonstrate the quandary 54•40 find themselves in. The best comparison I can think of myself is to Hunters and Collectors, but that only really shows up on the occasional 54•40 song to use horns.

### 54•40, 1986 LP

I assume this is 54•40's first album. The self-title is one clue, as is the fact that permanent drummer Matt Johnson is credited as a full member, even though he only plays on one song. The band is a four-piece in the usual vocal/guitar (Neil Osborne), guitar/vocal (Phil Comparelli), bass/vocal (Brad Merritt), drums (Johnson/Darryl Neudorf) arrangement, with occasional piano from David Osborne, who I would guess is related to Neil.

Neil's voice is the focal point of these songs, at least for me. It has elements of Pop Art's David Steinhart and the Psychedelic Furs' Richard Butler (and thus by extension is probably what I subconsciously think *my* voice would sound like if I was Canadian), and a strained sincerity that is his own. Backing vocals from the rest of the band support his voice well, though you'd hardly mistake them for barbershop. The band's playing is understated, but effective. Neudorf and Merritt keep up steady, simple rhythms, while Neil and Phil Comparelli's guitar parts rely heavily on sustained chords and notes. This all combines to give the band's music an emotive quality that transforms their simple-bordering-on-simplistic lyrics into plaintive emotions. Lines like "Baby ran, she ran away" and

"Take my hand" come out invested with all the pain and longing and desperation and desire and self-doubt that fuels such moments in real life. At least, that's the way I feel when I'm listening to this album. Reading the lyric sheet you get none of that, which leaves me convinced that they have somehow encoded the emotional richness into the *music*.

How? Beats me. Listen to it yourself and see if *you* can explain it.

### Show Me, 1987 CD

*Show Me* finds 54•40 a little more confident and accomplished, but not much changed in style. Comparelli is credited with keyboards on this one, in addition to guitar and trumpet, and indeed synthesizers crop up around the edges and in the backgrounds of most of these songs, along with some acoustic guitars, which both help to give the music a little more energy and range than on 54•40. Merritt's bass is more prominent here, as well, and at moments I hear a vague resemblance to Midnight Oil, especially on "One Day in Your Life" and "All the Love is Gone". Still, the rhythmic backbone is strong and straight, and guitar noise fills most of the spaces.

The most notable improvement is in Neil Osborne's lyric writing. He must have *listened* to 54•40 after they made it, because this time around his words fit the mood all by themselves, rather than having to be *transformed* by the music from clichéd to affecting. Compare the chorus of "Baby Ran" ("Baby ran, she ran away. / Why she ran I got to say / I'm lonesome all the time") to that of *Show Me*'s "Get Back Down" ("Who here smiles? / Who here sobs? / Who here looks to see what's lost? / Who here lies? / Who hears truth? / Who here even wants to choose?"). The former reads like every bad rock stereotype, the latter like a poet asking the world what should be simple questions.

Some rumbling bluesy howl creeps into a few of these songs, such as "Come Here", partially supplanting the band's more customary subdued dramatic sense. Byrds-y jangle shows up in "Because of You", a CD-only bonus track, and the other bonus track, "Open Fire", features some spaghetti-Western chord-bending. The title track, which closes the album, brings in strings and extra keyboards, for an unsteady but impassioned slow finale that seems to beg the world to prove all 54•40's saddest thoughts foolish.

If worldwide peace would mean no more music like this, though, perhaps it isn't as clear a goal as you'd think.

### Fight for Love, 1989 CD

The cover of this album, which substitutes a fish, a globe, an archery target, a book, a flag, a candle

chandelier, scales, shoes, a loaf of bread (with knife) and a suburban house for the heads of ten otherwise-anonymous figures, might lead you to believe this album is a lot stranger than it is. The small-print notation "File under 'F'" on the back cover, and the song titles, which show a clear fixation with love, or the lack of it, hint otherwise. The second song, "Kissfolk", is the one that introduced me to the band, thought the "promotional use only" stamp and \$1.99 price tag testify to the fact that I picked up the album more because it was cheap enough to risk than because the song really blew me away.

David Ogilvie, who produced *54•40*, returns for this album, and in many ways it is a return to the band's earlier style. Comparelli plays no keyboards here (though David Osborne returns to contribute piano and organ), and though a Mellotron and a Mini-Moog are listed on the credits, no reference is made to who played them, as if nobody wanted to admit to it. Like the first album, then, this one relies purely on the band's core sound. The three years (and possibly more than one album—was there one in 1988 that I missed?) since their debut had more effect than just a lowered antipathy toward electronics, though, and the band's maturity shows all the more clearly in this simpler setting.

In fact, if you've heard the first two albums I discussed here, and read their reviews and that explanation of this one, I'm pretty sure that your guesses about what *Fight for Love* sounds like are staggeringly accurate. In almost every sense it is a remake of *54•40*, informed by *Show Me*. If you liked the other two enough that this sounds like a good idea, you'll like this album just fine. If you didn't like the others, or thought they were okay but inspiring, this one is unlikely to strike you any differently. If you don't know the band, but are curious, this is a fine starting point. The truth, frankly, is that the differences between these albums are really only evident on close inspection; *54•40* is either consistent or limited, depending on whether you like them or not, and it's easy for me to imagine people loving them, hating them, or being simply indifferent.

Or, like me, being drawn to them for no explicable reason.

(The CD reissue is an interesting example of how to convert LP art to a CD booklet effectively. The LP's ten figures are arranged in a circle on the front cover, feet towards the center, and the back cover arranges head close-ups around the informational text. The CD booklet takes the ten full figures and lays them out side by side along the insert, three per panel. The close-ups also get lined up, three per panel, but they start from the other end of the five-panel foldout. The middle six spots, then, have close-ups overlaid on figures. Since

the important part of the figures are their heads, which stick out above the centered, smaller close-ups, this preserves all the important detail while keeping each individual image about as large as is convenient. I actually like this arrangement *better* than the overly symmetrical LP jacket, which is a rare twist indeed.)

### *Dear Dear*, 1992 CD

Evidently the rest of the US didn't take to *54•40* as firmly as I did, for the next time I heard of them was three years later, in a Q Magazine review of the UK release of *Dear Dear*, which I gather had by that time already been out for a while in Canada. To date I've yet to see a copy of this album in the US; I got mine as an "import" while in Amsterdam on business (rough, eh?) in 1993.

If I lived in Canada, this might be the point when I abandoned *54•40* as having become a bunch of sanctimonious, self-righteous fair-weather adherents to political correctness, like REM here in the US. The liner contains a short essay on "The Facts about AIDS" (in the same typestyles as the adjacent song lyrics—I was somewhat disappointed to find out that "The Facts about AIDS" *wasn't* a song), as well as plugs for transition houses, safe homes, and encouraging fans to help stop violence against women and children. The band's info address is followed by those of Earth Communications Office and Amnesty International, and Osborne is wearing an Amnesty t-shirt on the liner photo. Worthy causes, all, and the plugs don't bother me at all on a CD liner, but if I had to see the band's stylishly ragged selves on awards shows, benefit stages and news blurbs day in and day out, like I see Stipe, I can readily imagine being utterly fed up with them by now.

I haven't, though, so I'm not, and *Dear Dear* is the band's most impressive album yet. Not that it's that different from the others, mind you, but in the subtle ways that each *54•40* record shows the band's slow evolution, this one is yet another step up. Producer Don Smith cuts back a bit on the reverb and feedback, and lets each instrument stand out clearly. The band accordingly sounds rawer, *closer*, their appeal more direct. This aural setting doesn't *directly support* their angst the way the more textural arrangements on the previous records did, but precisely because Osborne's distinctive sense for ennobling painful emotions comes through despite the simple production, the production ends up indirectly underscoring the band's *own* power.

Left reliant on its own devices again, the band responds with their most varied album, as if restricting the number of variables they could manipulate actually increased their willingness to experiment with them. Both their prettiest songs and their loudest ones are

here. The production means that this isn't a superset of the other albums, by any means, and I bet that some of the band's fans will find that this album lacks some quality that the others had, for that reason, but to me it takes the band's essential nature and explores its reach more effectively than any of the others did.

This album also has my favorite 54•40 song, "Lovers and Losers", a slow, deliberate near-ballad that is mostly bass and drums during the verses, bringing in the roaring guitar only for the cathartic chorus. It encapsulates all 54•40's strengths in my mind, with Osborne's strained singing alternately carrying the song and being swept up in it, just as the characters in his songs are sometimes beaten down by their troubles and hopes, and at other times saved by them. The band's steady pacing and simple arrangement are as perfectly crafted here as anywhere.

I still don't think I've explained what is so special about 54•40 to my own satisfaction, but their albums grow on me with every listen, and the band grows on me with every album. Hopefully the Canadians keep them well-enough fed that they'll make lots more albums, and perhaps as the sample size grows I'll find it easier to isolate the components that define them for me.

## Band 19

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### *Dictate*, 1987 EP

Moving to Boston again for a few entries, here are some examples of what Crispin refers to as "corporate rock" (though I doubt *he* meant to include the Neighborhoods in that class). Band 19 is one of innumerable projects by Boston rock-scene veteran Rich Parsons. This five-song EP has two good songs on the first side, and three less-memorable ones on the back. Both "Your Eyes" and "Animal Grey" have a charming low-fi amateurishness about them that makes their flirtations with melody and harmony seem all the brighter. The second side's songs, though, have less personality, and just sound to me like a band trying to make the sort of music they think will make them big stars, but not quite having the technical skills or production equipment needed to do it successfully.

## Shake the Faith

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### *Shake the Faith*, 1987 LP

This *is* the album Crispin was referring to as "corporate rock". Indeed, the seven songs here sound

as much like an audition for a beer commercial gig as anything else. You know it's a bad sign when a Boston band affects slight English accents without seeming to realize it. From the battered jeans in the black and white cover shot to the rousing name, to the band's blazing power-trio sound, Shake the Faith is a band whose goals in life seem more likely to include opening a Bon Jovi show than local credibility or musical originality.

On the other hand, I think they pull it off. I'd *rather* listen to this album than a Bon Jovi record. Sure, the production is laughably "huge", with every drum amped like a cannon shot, and Casey Lindstrom and Todd Erikson's vocals forever on the same strained-passion edge as Jon Bon Jovi, but the fact that the band doesn't multi-track themselves to death gives this steroidal assault a counterbalancing honesty. "Wild World" and "Already Gone" are infinitely preferably, in my opinion, to "Living on a Prayer" and "You Give Love a Bad Name". The rest of the album doesn't provide anything that's better than those two, but Shake the Faith is very consistent, and if you like the first two songs you'll listen through the rest quite happily.

## The Neighborhoods

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### *Fire is Coming*, 1984 LP

The Neighborhoods are another Boston trio with a little less obvious ambition to be idolized by underage girls. This short first album, which comes after *years* as Boston club-circuit favorites, is appealing in its own way, but thin, indifferent production dulls its edge, and if you don't know the band (which I didn't) it's hard to hear much more than potential here. "Fire is Coming" and "Shake" *want* to be big, powerful rock songs, but just don't get there. Covering "If I Had a Hammer" was a great idea, but this rendition doesn't deliver on the potential. Other songs, like "It All Makes Sense" and "Heatwave (Downtown)", I might have edited out entirely. Whether the band still has some maturing to do, or whether this album just caught them at an off moment or two, it's hard to say, but I don't find much here to interest anybody who isn't already a serious Neighborhoods fan.

### *The High Hard One*, 1986 LP

The next record is mightily improved. Either producer Vic Steffens has learned a few tricks since *Fire Is Coming*, or the band has. Whichever, the Neighborhoods sound *great* on this album. Dave Minehan's guitar is loud and punchy, and bassist Lee

Harrington and drummer Mike Quaglia deliver a punishing beat. Minehan's vocals are direct and clear, and he uses his largely unremarkable voice as an advantage rather than a liability, not trying to force it to be anything it isn't. Lee and Mike's backing vocals fill out the sound, with only occasional keyboard help from Steffens.

"WUSA", the first song, blows Shake the Faith away completely. A rousing anthem, I used to play it constantly freshman year in college, until my roommate Peter admitted that it was driving him completely crazy. "You're tuned to W.U.S.A." just *begs* to be shouted along with, in my opinion. I was very disappointed that when I finally saw the Neighborhoods play a couple times, years later, they didn't do it. The rest of the album isn't as baldly fist-in-the-air, but builds intensity in more roundabout ways. "Uniforms and Insignia" and "Arrogance" trade in determined persistence, a bit like Mission of Burma. "Real Stories" is an ode to the masses that sounds like Translator covering Hüsker Dü. "Think It Over" and "She's So Good" are live recordings from the Living Room, in Providence, and they sound noisier than the studio tracks but just as dynamic.

They still haven't completely mastered editing, I don't think. I would have ditched "Mess" and "Yeah You", and possibly "Faith" as well, as I don't think they live up to the standard of the other songs. I imagine Restless wanted a "full" album, and it feels to me like the band was forced to pad it out just a little to reach an acceptable running time. Even so, this is a solid album with plenty to recommend it.

### *The Neighborhoods, 1991 CD*

Subsequent albums *Reptile Men* (1987) and *Hoodwinked* (1990) didn't interest me, for some reason, but when the Neighborhoods finally got their shot at major-label stardom on Atlantic, with Aerosmith guitarist Brad Whitford producing, and a supporting slot on a Cheap Trick world tour, I felt obliged to show my support. This eponymous album is mostly a re-packaged *Hoodwinked*, but it adds "Pure and Easy", the song I liked best from *Reptile Men*, and a great new version of "Prettiest Girl", the Neighborhoods' classic single from way back in '78 or '80 or something.

Sadly, those two are the only songs I really am enthusiastic about here. "Prettiest Girl" is a masterpiece, that kind of one-of-a-kind freak piece of perfection that some bands luck into and build entire careers on, without ever making anything else remotely as good. The Neighborhoods didn't do that with this song, but they probably could have, and perhaps *should* have. The simple, timeless bass line and straight four-four drumming carry the song along

effortlessly, and the melody is at once fresh and familiar. The lyrics? Well, they have something to do with pretty girls, so what more do you need? This album is worth the price for this song alone.

But wait, there's more! You also get "Pure and Easy", whose repeat presence on this album will be no mystery to you once you hear it. It is very much in the spirit of *the high hard one*, a simple, straightforward, energetic song with marvelous harmony vocals and a winning ascending guitar hook.

And there's more, but it's harder to rave about it. In fact, the rest of the material on this album is actually kind of, well, *bad*. Drummer Mike Quaglia has been replaced with Carl Coletti, who is technically more proficient, but who propels the band into the unfriendly territory of overblown arena bluster. Prolonged association with Aerosmith may also have warped the band's judgment, and the *Hoodwinked* portions of this album are completely lacking in the charm of the band's earlier work.

In the way of too many Boston bands, the Neighborhoods' brush with national fame led promptly to their dissolution. Guitarist Dave Minehan went on to tour in Paul Westerberg's band, and stood in for Brad Whitford during part of Aerosmith's 1994 Japan tour, and as I write he's putting together a new band with ex-Red Rockers bassist Darren Hill.

## Heretix

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### *Gods and Gangsters, 1990 CD*

Heretix are the first of a series of Boston bands in this chapter. I'm not a huge fan of theirs, but this album has its moments. Heretix share some sonic characteristics with Cliffs of Dooneen, the Cavedogs, O Positive and the Zulus (particularly like a mythical combination of the first two of those, or even the last two). Ed Stasium, who produced *Joyrides for Shut-Ins*, produced this, too, and he seems to think that big guitars and straightforward AOR production can carry the record. They don't for me, but not because they aren't well-executed. Too many songs just seem painfully *ordinary* to me, and Heretix are neither powerful enough to carry the big stick the production tries to imply, nor unique enough to dispense with the stick and just speak softly.

The saving grace, the song I bought the disc for, is "Heart Attack", a simple song that, like School of Fish's "Three Strange Days", just lodges firmly and unaccountably in my mind and drifts through my consciousness at its own whim. Never mind that the guitar riff sounds like it was cribbed simultaneously

from the Cars and Rick Springfield, never mind that Georgia just walked in and said "Hey, I was just *hearing* O-Positive on the radio." It's a simple, classic, beautiful rock song, and if every album had one as good the element of risk would just go right out of CD buying.

Then again, if the rest of every album was as unexciting as the bulk of this one, a lot of *thrill* would go out of the process as well. Safety is boring.

## Big Dipper

### *Craps*, 1988 LP

This is the third Big Dipper record, and echoes of other Boston bands bounce through it like superballs in a zero-gee racquetball court. The offkey guitars of Mission of Burma, the upbeat drive of the Cavedogs, the vulnerability of O Positive, Heretix's occasional knack for a nearly flawless song: all these find their way into *Craps*, along with rumbling bass, Translator-style plain-voiced harmonies and plenty of guitars played through cheap-sounding amplifiers. Boston mainstays Lou Giordano and Paul Quick Kolderie produced the album at Cambridge's Fort Apache.

It gets off to a great start. "Meet the Witch" has a great chorus it swings into and out of, and interesting rhythm changes. "Ron Klaus Wrecked His House" is my favorite Big Dipper song. The chorus is one of those perfect drawn out rock moments, like the way Aerosmith sings the words "sweet emotion". The vocal harmonies, guitars, bass and drums all lock into a mystical communion and for a few minutes Big Dipper's portrait of Ron Klaus' inexplicable post-party self-destructiveness seems to stand in the company of U2's evocation of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination ("Pride") or Peter Gabriel's of the death of South African activist Steven Biko ("Biko"). This serves as a good reminder that, like most artforms, rock music doesn't derive the bulk of its power from its subject matter. It's up to *you* to give epic-sounding songs suitably epic texts. (And only *you* can stop forest fires.) In fiction writing this is referred to as "earning" your affecting moments; Big Dipper doesn't earn this one, but all bands get one automatic pardon for unearned musical apotheosis. At one point I even knew who Ron Klaus was (some other Boston music-scene personality, perhaps a bass player), but I've forgotten.

"Stardom Because" reaches back for a rawer sound closer to Mission of Burma and even the Buzzcocks, with rattling drums and shakier vocals that make an appealing combination. Unfortunately, the rest of the album gets lost for me in the flat land between punk and pop. Not enough melodies, or not enough attitude.

"A Song to Be Beautiful", which I find monotonous and noisy, comes closest to Mission of Burma's droning dissonance, but while I think the band intends the song to be cathartic, I don't feel it. More polish, or less, seems needed.

### *Slam*, 1990 CD

*More* is the answer Big Dipper hits upon for their major-label debut on Epic. "Love Barge", the opening song and single from *Slam*, has bigger, stronger guitars, a steady, straightforward drumbeat, smooth vocals and a catchy melody untempered by the slightest trace of cacophony. It's definitely the band's most accessible song, and one any hit-hungry record-company mogul should slobber over. The downside is that there aren't very many more where that came from. "Life Inside the Cemetery" and the superfluous cover of "All the Way to Memphis" are the only tracks here that sound like they're from the album that "Love Barge" wants to sell you. The rest sound to me like underachieving studio outtakes ("The Bond", "Baby Blue", "Father's Day"), mysterious half-speed funk experiments ("Slam", the verses of "Another Life"), or cloying sing-song ("Picnic", "Impossible Things", "Baby Doll").

The one song that seems to me to show some unique potential is "The Monsters of Jazz", a raw, roaring elegy to nameless, aged, forgotten jazz greats. It is closer to achieving what I think "A Song to Be Beautiful" wanted to, but in the context of *Slam* it's merely a non sequitur.

My opinion of *Slam* is also influenced by the fact that I saw Big Dipper open up for the Connells shortly after it came out, and they put on one of the worst shows I have ever seen. If I didn't recognize the members from the jacket photos of the two albums I have, I would never have believed the band on stage was the band who made the records, and I'm still not without my doubts. Not only did they not play a single song from *Slam* or *Craps* or any of the ones I've heard from *Heaven* or *Boo-Boo*, but they didn't even play any songs of the same *type*. Melodies? Harmonies? Hooks? These were nowhere to be heard. Instead they played out-of-tune, out-of-sync pseudo-conceptual garage noodlings for way too long. The contrast with the Connells could hardly have been stronger, and it made Big Dipper look like a bunch of surly, obnoxious high-school kids appearing in the school talent show without bothering to rehearse, just for the sheer pleasure of annoying the audience.

To paraphrase Phil Lynott, if that band doesn't want to play, forget 'em.

## O Positive

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### *Cloud Factory, 1987 LP*

O-Positive is Boston's contribution to the field of extremely earnest, reedy-voiced, sensitive, melancholy pop-rock. Most large cities probably have a band like this, hometown favorites but doomed to seeming largely undistinguished in whatever brief forays into the national scene come their way. O-Positive sound to me like a midpoint between REM and 54•40, with the former's early mellowness and the latter's directness and larger sound. My friend Matt is a big O-Positive fan, but I find them uninspiring. Matt and I rarely disagree on bands, which leads me to compare O-Positive to Dinosaur Jr., another band he likes and I don't. I actually *dislike* Dinosaur Jr., so that's a more severe case, but there is a kernel of shared style between the two bands that probably explains my feelings: both O-Positive vocalist Dave Herlihy and J Mascis have a singing style that I would characterize as "limp". Mascis takes this to a farther extreme than Herlihy, and often sounds as if he was partially asleep during the recording of the vocal tracks, but Herlihy shows signs of it on occasion.

Now, I guess there's nothing a priori wrong with limp, gutless singing, but I feel a practically physical discomfort hearing it. I wince, quite literally, when Dinosaur Jr. comes on the radio, or MTV. O-Positive doesn't affect me as strongly, leaving me less repulsed than just numbed. I find it hard to concentrate on their music. My mind wanders, my eyelids inch toward each other, I remember that I left the waffle iron out on the kitchen counter to cool, and should probably go clean it soon. Eventually I realize that the radio is playing that hateful McDonald's Lobster Sandwich commercial again. I change stations.

Still, they play well, they write decent songs, they have a large, loyal following here in Boston, and Matt likes them, so if you don't share my visceral antipathy for low-energy singing, you might like them a lot.

## The Stunning

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### *Once Around the World, 1992 CD*

This little music store called Sandy's, down Mass Ave from our apartment, had a poster in the window for a while promoting "The Stunning, Ireland's Greatest Rock Band". The Celto-phile in me immediately filed the band's name under "investigate". Unfortunately, when I began looking, no recordings of the band seemed to exist.

The name hung around on my "Someday" list, though, and eventually I ran across this album in the catalog of an Arizona Celtic-music importer from whom I was already ordering my copy of Tonight at Noon's *Down to the Devils*. And here it is.

I quickly realized, listening to it, that I had misinterpreted the sign. When it said "Ireland's Greatest Rock Band", I thought it meant "The Best Irish Rock Band". What it really meant, I believe, was "The Greatest American Rock Band Who Happen to Come From Ireland". There is nothing remotely Celtic about this record, and if you'd told me the Stunning were a Boston band who were great friends with O-Positive and Big Dipper, I wouldn't disbelieve you on sonic grounds. They have a few more retro tendencies than those two bands, with more organs and horns, but mostly this is melodic guitar-pop-rock with standard side-orders of harmony and "alternative-rock" jangliness.

"She's Not There" casts a barely perceptible nod towards Del Amitri's sad grace, the Connells' wistfulness and Pop Art's folkiness, and throws in some trumpets and shuffle-hop drums of its own, for a pretty good mixture, my favorite on the album. Elsewhere a few too many Fifties-isms creep in for my tastes, and despite making attempts I cannot quite connect with this album.

## Translator

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### *Heartbeats and Triggers, 1982 LP*

Translator is a fascinating case study on how things can seem ordinary to some people and extraordinary to others. To me, Translator is the world's most blandly normal band, a workable but overwhelmingly manila quartet playing undistinguished guitars, bass and drums, and singing with the plainest voices I've ever heard. To me the one noteworthy moment on this album is "Sleeping Snakes", and that only for the way the repeated chorus line "Stop this missile building" has six beats so that by singing it several times in succession they make the downbeat accent cycle around from "Stop" to "build" to "miss".

To my surprise, though, Translator actually has some very enthusiastic fans who claim that not only is Translator not as irrepressibly bland as I find them, but that the band is actually exceptional. This seems completely bizarre to me. I asked a few of them who I discovered on CompuServe what it was I was missing, and as best I can tell their responses amounted to acknowledging how *normal* the band is, and actually liking them *because* of that, because they don't try to be

extreme in any particular way, and instead just make what they consider nice music. I guess I buy that. There are bands and albums that I like a lot which I am unsurprised to discover that some people find unremarkable, so I guess this is just one I don't get.

### *Translator, 1985 LP*

They seem quite a bit better on this, their third album. Producer Ed Stasium brightens their sound, and plays up Robert Darlington and Steve Barton's vocal harmonies, which remind me of what Simon and Garfunkel might have sounded like if they sang in plain everyday voices. The best of these songs, like "Come with Me" and "O Lazarus", sound to me like half-hearted covers of Winter Hours' "Wait 'til the Morning" or "Hyacinth Girl", but that's more than I thought of any of Winter Hours' *other* songs, so it's more of a compliment than it may sound. Actually, if the band's very existence doesn't bore you to sleep, this is an impressively consistent album. The first album was "Sleeping Snakes" and "other" to me, but the songs on this one all have their own individual clean-cut personalities, sort of like the way on a team of English cricketers each player will wear his v-neck sweater and floppy English boarding-school hair in a slightly different way, none of them shocking but no two of them exactly the same, except to giant alien space hedgehogs, who can't tell one human from another because, well, they're not a very discerning sort of creature.

"Another American Night" strikes me as the successor to "Sleeping Snakes". From "Stop this missile building" *Translator* has moved to "I'd rather play guitar than to pick up a gun / And point it at the face of someone / That I've never even met". "Breathless Agony" is the other one that stands out most clearly in my mind. It isn't a villanelle, but it does flow like a structured poem rather than a pop song. There is no chorus per se. There are only two verses, and they are eight lines each, with each verse's last line the same as its first, and lines six and seven of each verse the same as the other verse's. It's kind of cool.

But still, mind you, quite normal.

## **The Smithereens**

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### *Behind the Wall of Sleep, 1986 7"*

The Smithereens are another solidly normal band. Every time I hear them on alternative radio, which is often, I ask aloud "Now, what the hell is 'alternative' about the Smithereens? In what possible sense is this 'cutting edge'?" To date, nobody has answered me.

Undaunted by my skepticism, the Smithereens grind out album after album of songs that I can't tell apart for the life of me. I can't even tell "Behind the Wall of Sleep" from the flip side, "Blood and Roses". It's a good song, big and meaty, but I have no idea why I'd need more than two of it.

Mark this up as another band whose appeal simply escapes me.

## **Dire Straits**

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Dire Straits are probably as close to being patron saints of what I call "normal rock" as anybody in this book comes. Bruce Springsteen is the perfect exemplar, but I don't have any Springsteen records, so Dire Straits, who are essentially the UK's answer to Bruce, will have to do.

I read somewhere once that one in every three households in Great Britain owns a Dire Straits album. The Guinness Book of Hit Albums is filled with mentions of Dire Straits, and in their climactic list of the top album-charting bands of all time, Dire Straits come in third, after the Beatles and Simon and Garfunkel, but before Elvis, Queen and David Bowie. As Dire Straits were still making albums as of the end of 1991, when the fifth edition went to press, it is a pretty safe bet that by now they've moved into second (they were nine chart-weeks behind Paul and Art), and are closing on first (about a chart-year away). Billy Bragg once explained the success of Bryan Adams' saccharine "Everything I Do (I Do It For You)" by noting that it had been a long time between Dire Straits albums, and speculating that a strung-out British public simply lost control and had a premature purchase.

### *Making Movies, 1980 LP*

Whatever the case, I've always kind of liked Dire Straits, but seldom liked them a *lot*. The center of my affection for the band was "Telegraph Road", and my feelings about their other work are pretty much proportional to the length of the songs. *Making Movies*, which contains the long songs "Tunnel of Love" and "Skateaway", and the long-feeling "Romeo and Juliet", shows some of the same epic slow grace that makes "Telegraph Road" such a great experience. Leader Mark Knopfler has a knack for the sort of lyrics that turn small working-class dramas into something noble and meaningful, and at their best he and the band set these narratives to music that elevates them yet another level. Knopfler's languid, expansive guitar-playing is like smoke-rings rising into clear, slightly cool night air, and the haze of Dire Straits' songs is the filter that most people really wish they could see their own lives



through. "Romeo and Juliet", rather than bringing Shakespeare down to the level of the tired characters in Knopfler's version, raises those characters up to Shakespeare's dramatic level.

The mood falls apart when/if you flip *Making Movies* over. The four shorter songs that conclude the album are of the same sort of low-key bluesy boogie as Dire Straits first hit, "Sultans of Swing". Now, "Sultans of Swing" made them a lot of money and a lot of fans, so it's *understandable* why they would make more songs like that, but that isn't the side of their style that I like.

### ***Love Over Gold*, 1982 LP**

This is the one Dire Straits album that I like almost all the way through. The five songs here are all long (14, 7, 6, 6 and 8 minutes), which isn't itself *why* I like them, but song length correlates very well with *how much* I like Dire Straits songs.

"Telegraph Road", the longest, is, as I said, my favorite Dire Straits song. Musically, it's a vast, rolling panorama, sweeping dramatically from the slowest, quietest, saddest single guitar notes to rousing ensemble work and soaring guitar solos. Dire Straits demonstrate pretty much their entire range within this one song, and it's quite impressive. The text is a working-class fable very much of the sort that Knopfler specializes in: lone settler, civilization follows, mines, war, no more mines, no work, love, love faded, desperation, hope, desperation, determination, and a whole bunch of lines like "I've run every red light on memory lane". It's corny, it could have been shorter, etc., but I think it's marvelous.

The rest of the songs don't quite live up to "Telegraph Road", but they come close enough to keep the album satisfying. "Private Investigations" has throwaway lyrics and spoken vocals, but is a very nice piece of music, with an even wider dynamic range than "Telegraph Road".

"Industrial Disease" breaks the somber mood of the rest of the album, admittedly, but it does so with such a hilarious, fascinating novelty song that it's hard for me to think of it as anything more related than an intermission to the rest of the record. Both musically and lyrically it has shades of Dire Straits' later megahit "Money for Nothing". With lines like "Two men say they're Jesus; one of them must be wrong" and "I don't know how you came to get the Bette Davis knees", and the sheer density of words here, it is one of those songs that cries out to be memorized as a party trick, like some cynical Dylan-esque monologue. On closer investigation the words don't quite hold up that well divorced from the kinetic music that sweeps them along, but as lyrics they are great.

Intermission over, the relaxed, cinematic pace takes over again. "Love Over Gold" skirts jazz territories, using some vibes, marimba and flamenco-ish guitar to complement the standard bent-guitar-note-heard-drifting-across-moonlit-desert aesthetic. "It Never Rains" speeds up just a little, and reminds me a lot of "Tunnel of Love". Knopfler sounds a *lot* like Dylan on this one, enough so that I hazard it's intentional. I'd like to say that this song, since it's the last, recapitulates the various themes of the album and brings them together, but it doesn't do that, so I won't. In fact, "It Never Rains" is the most out of place of the five songs. "Industrial Disease" is the least like the others, but it sounds so different that there's no mistaking it for the same sort of thing. "It Never Rains" has enough of the panoramic qualities of the slower three to be identified with them, but its flanged organs and raw guitar refuse to settle into the tranquil hush of the others. I find it a disconcerting way to end the album, but it doesn't take long after it ends for my mental equilibrium to return, and the album seems coherent to me again.

### ***Brothers in Arms*, 1985 LP**

It's back to the short songs for the next Dire Straits LP, and this is where I get off. This is a decent, and perhaps even remarkable album, but it isn't the sort of thing that I feel like I need more than one of, and it makes it pretty clear that "Telegraph Road" was an anomaly, and that slow 14-minute epics aren't going to ever be the bulk of Dire Straits' output.

Some of the songs here are slow and moving ("Your Latest Trick", "Why Worry" and "Brothers in Arms" are the ones I have in mind), but even they don't have the same feeling of peace that permeates *Love Over Gold*. "Brothers in Arms" is my favorite of the three, as it has the timeless melody of a centuries-old folk song.

The rest of *Brothers in Arms* moves faster, and loses me. "Ride Across the River" and "The Man's Too Strong" sound like covers of half-completed Bruce Cockburn demos. "Walk of Life" and "So Far Away" return to the blues-bar jive of "Sultans of Swing".

The song that drives the album, though, despite the fact that it doesn't sound anything like the rest of the songs, is "Money for Nothing". If you watched MTV in the latter half of the Eighties, you probably had this insidious, mechanical, throttled-guitar Sting-laced anthem pounded firmly into your skull, where bits of it remain to this day, in defiant mockery of your most diligent attempts to scour the wound. When I first heard it, I felt it was great. After a few hundred replays I *thought* it was great, but I didn't *feel* much. Now I'm not so crazy about it in theory, but I like it again. Like "Another Brick in the Wall", "We Are the

Champions", "The Devil Went Down to Georgia" or "Rock and Roll Fantasy", this song filled the aural space around me at an impressionable time in my life (as if nothing makes impressions on me any more...), with the result that I find it hard to step back and evaluate it fairly. Oh well. That's not *my* fault.

## Gerry Rafferty

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### *City to City*, 1978 LP

"Baker Street" is another one of those songs. I didn't own a radio until, I think, 1979 or so ("Accidents Can Happen" was on the top 20 countdown, *Spirits Having Flown* had just come out), so this is a song that I heard in the car with my parents, or at friends houses, or in stores, or wherever, and the bo bap bap badaduh sax hook lodged in my head alongside James Taylor's "Handyman", the Eagles' "Hotel California" and a slew of Steve Miller songs as the sounds of my pre-teenage, pre-musically-aware existence.

I have listened to this album several times, in an attempt to assimilate something more than just "Baker Street" from it, but I have failed. Rafferty's style is somewhere between Bob Seger, ELO and Gordon Lightfoot, I can tell you that much. I know that "Right Down the Line" isn't *technically* the second verse of "Baker Street". Other than that I can't tell you a damn thing, and the album is playing as I write. "Baker Street" it is.

## Joe Walsh

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### *But Seriously, Folks...*, 1978 LP

"Life's Been Good" is yet another of those songs. At one point in my life I liked the Eagles, and this solo record by Joe Walsh dates from that unfortunate period. I got rid of *Hotel California* at a garage sale long ago, but for some reason this record has hung around. It's not half as bad as I would think I would think it is, if you follow that. "At the Station" and "Life's Been Good" are great songs, and if you like those, "Over and Over", "Second Hand Store", "Indian Summer" and "Tomorrow" are fine, too. This sounds like an Eagles record that some of the band didn't show up for, and so were replaced by whatever studio players were handy. Given the Eagles usual cast, this isn't a wholly negative situation.

## Don Henley

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### *Building the Perfect Beast*, 1984 LP

There was a time when I didn't look on Don Henley with a mixture of disgust, disdain, butter and almond extract. Many times I've been tempted to steal all the Don Henley records I could find and throw them in Walden Pond, but every time I get this album out to start the pile, I remember that it has "The Boys of Summer", "All She Wants to Do Is Dance" and "Sunset Grill", and my heart just goes out of the gesture. You see, even if I can muster some bile for "Not Enough Love in the World" or "Land of the Living", and even if "Building the Perfect Beast" and "Drivin' With Your Eyes Closed" seem pretty annoying now, those other three songs are far too good to hate, even for external reasons.

"The Boys of Summer" is exactly what the title implies. It is a classic wistful end-of-summer song about lost romance, lost youth, lost culture and lost luggage, and listening to it I understand what was so appealing about *Miami Vice*. Its simmering synthesizers are everything that was good about mainstream rock in the mid-Eighties, and there isn't a blemish on the tune to mar its impact.

"All She Wants to Do Is Dance" I kept thinking that I was about to get *thoroughly* sick of, but it never happened. It got overplayed on radio and video, and it has a dangerously monotonous chorus and stupid lyrics, but it also has this amazing guitar sound (leastways, I *think* it's guitar) that sounds like an engine being played through a hand-muted trumpet, and I could listen to it cycle through its pulses for a real long time before I got sick of it.

"Sunset Grill" is the best of the three. Cool synthesizers (arranged by Randy Newman), cool drum-machine rhythms, Patty Smyth on backing vocals, Pino Palladino on bass, a very impressive lead vocal from Don himself. It's very hard to believe that this song came from somebody who was in the Eagles, even if he did have help.

For celebrity guest followers, the roll call here also includes Mike Campbell, Steve Porcaro, Danny Kortchmar, Larry Klein, Benmont Tench, Lindsey Buckingham, Charlie Sexton, Belinda Carlisle, David Paitch, J.D. Souther and Waddy Wachtel, which is a virtual who's who of LA session players, plus Belinda.

## David and David

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### *Boomtown, 1986 LP*

The other seminal *Miami Vice* song (not that it had anything to do with the show, or appeared on it, or anything like that) was David and David's "Welcome to the Boomtown". The slick production, cool, and drug references stamp it as a combination of Don Henley, Bruce Cockburn and Don Johnson (as an actor - I haven't the slightest idea what Don Johnson's *album* sounds like), but it retains just enough melodic tension and critical distance to remind me more of "If I Had a Rocket Launcher" or "Lovers in a Dangerous Time" than something like Glen Frey's "Smuggler's Blues". David Baerwald and David Ricketts, democratically sharing all the album's performance credits, weave a true pop classic into the weft of mainstream rock.

Nothing else on this album lives up to "Welcome to the Boomtown" for me, providing more grist for Marty's theory about avoiding albums that begin with the hit. "Swallowed by the Cracks" is good, "River's Gonna Rise" is okay, but the album falls apart very quickly for me. Mind you, it is still probably worth its price just for "Welcome to the Boomtown", but don't expect more songs with the same appeal.

## Roger Hodgson

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### *In the Eye of the Storm, 1984 LP*

While we're still near the subject of former members of Seventies supergroups, Roger Hodgson was the lead singer of Supertramp. I didn't like Supertramp. The first song on this album, however, "Had a Dream (Sleeping with the Enemy)", I really love, and the rest of the record isn't half bad either, or not much more than half anyway.

If the credits are to be taken literally, the solution Hodgson hit on for transcending his former band's lame sub-Yes cheesiness is to just get rid of them. This is ironic since you wouldn't have sounded crazy if you'd contended that the cheesiest thing about Supertramp was Hodgson himself. There is a drummer on most of the record, a fretless bass on a couple tracks, saxophone and harmonica on one each, and backing vocals on a few, but Hodgson plays the rest of the numerous instruments himself. He's pretty good at just about everything, it seems.

"Had a Dream" is a wonderful, chiming song that takes the cyclical momentum of Supertramp's "The Logical Song" and applies acoustic and electric guitar to it with ebullient effect. You could say, if you wanted to

be cruel, that it is basically half-assed Jon Anderson, just like Supertramp was half-assed Yes, but you don't *have* to say that if you don't want to. This album is perfect bargain-bin material, so if you kind of wanted to like Supertramp if they weren't quite so repulsive, and don't mind having the value of one great song diluted by the presence of some less-impressive ones, give it a try.

## Traffic

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### *The Low Spark of High Heeled Boys, 1971 LP*

This is the oldest album I have that isn't either something my parents had or something I bought backfilling the catalogs of bands I discovered later. Why do I have it? Well, I like the title track. Actually, I like the *chorus* of the title track. Actually, I like the first halves of the choruses. "The man in the suit has just bought a new car, / With the profit he's made on your dreams" and "The man was shot dead by a gun that doesn't make any noise": you know, *those* bits. At a quarter of its length, this would have been a brilliant song. Plus, it could have been a single and I wouldn't have had to buy this LP, the rest of which is not at all to my taste.

## Warren Zevon

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### *A Quiet Normal Life, 1986 CD*

The Seventies, you see, are all the same to me, so we move effortlessly from Traffic to this Warren Zevon compilation, *most* of the songs on which are from the Seventies (4 from Warren Zevon in 1976, 6 from *Excitable Boy* in 1978, 1 from 1980's *Bad Luck Streak in Dancing School*, and 3 from *The Envoy* in 1982). Warren Zevon is the only person I can think of who has somehow managed to have a long and pretty successful career in which each album ends up seeming like a comeback. I can't quite figure out why that is. Musically, he is something like a mixture of Don Henley and Bruce Cockburn, and *they've* done well enough.

Perhaps the problem is the way in which Zevon tries to combine those two. (I assume that Warren doesn't *try* to combine anybody with anybody, mind you, I'm just projecting my own experience onto him.) Henley's success to me lies in his recruiting the best LA studio talent and production, and making slick commercial rock that suits itself to mainstream FM radio like, well, something that suits something else *really well*. Cockburn, on the other hand, writes political-

poetic lyrics and sets them to a solid, *appropriate*, folk-rock score. Zevon tries to write scathing political diatribes, which is fine in itself, and then set them to very standard LA session-player arrangements, which to me drains them of much of the stridency they seem to aspire to. It sounds strange to say, but I bet I'd like Warren Zevon a lot better if he had a bad band instead of good studio backing.

Nonetheless, there are plenty of good songs on this compilation. "Roland the Headless Thompson Gunner" is a great song that feels like an epic despite the fact that it's not very long. "Mohammed's Radio", with harmony from Stevie Nicks and Lindsey Buckingham, is pretty, as is "Accidentally Like a Martyr". "Lawyers, Guns and Money", with its piano hook and tight guitar/bass/piano/drums arrangement, is probably the most rousing and the most memorable. I think it's my favorite performance here, though probably not my favorite *song*.

The three 1982 tracks, with prominent synthesizers, seem the most out of place here among the older songs. The one song from 1980, "Play It All Night Long", is great, though, a scathing rejoinder to Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama", which was itself a reply to some Neil Young song ("Southern Man"?). Any blow against shit-kicking, Confederate-flag-flying, gun-rack-equipped-jacked-up-Bronco-driving, two-stepping, tobacco-chewing southern-rock cretins is a good one in my book.

## Billy Joel

### *Piano Man*, 1973 CD

I feel much the same way about Billy Joel as I do about Warren Zevon. He's clearly a gifted performer and an excellent song-writer, and it's really hit or miss whether the albums he makes out of those skills appeal to me. This is the one I really like. "Piano Man" itself is a true classic, one of those songs, along with "American Pie", that will, decades from now, make the Seventies seem like less of a lacuna in musical history. It's emotionally overwrought, overpoweringly melodramatic, melodically overburdened, and badly self-referential, but it's *so* good that all those things turn into virtues.

"The Ballad of Billy the Kid" is like a twin of "Piano Man", raised apart and dramatically reunited with it at the age of 34 on some sleazoid mid-afternoon talk show. The self-reference is a little more coy here, the arrangement a bit less histrionic, at least at moments, but there's the same sweeping orchestra, the same storytelling sense, the same killer melody.

The third of the trio of songs that make this album for me is "Captain Jack". Longer than the other two, with better lyrics (especially lines like "Your sister's gone out - she's on a date. / You just sit at home and masturbate"), I consider it the synthesis of just about everything great about this album. Slow and quiet, loud and wildly cathartic, bitter, sad, funny, smart and seedy, for a time this was what FM radio was all about.

The rest of the album isn't as amazing, though there are many good moments ("Stop in Nevada" I like a lot), but like with *The Joshua Tree*, the three great songs here are more than good enough to carry the album on their strength, even if the rest of it was complete crap, which it isn't.

### *Matter of Trust*, 1986 7"

By the Eighties I was pretty sick of Billy Joel, so when he put out another song I really liked, "Matter of Trust", I bought the single and ignored the rest. "Matter of Trust" updates the appeal of "Piano Man", turning Joel's lyrical gaze outward, and upgrading his instrumentation to match. The guitar sound here is a lot like the one on Henley's "All She Wants to Do is Dance", though I think Henley (or whoever it was) gave it better emphasis. Anyway, I think this is a really cool song, with Joel doing an excellent job of using the changing intensity of his voice to provide the song's dynamic variation, while the music surges along at a single level. This makes it an interesting counterpoint to me to earlier songs like "Piano Man", where every one of the legions of musicians involved in the song tries to cover the emotional spectrum themselves.

The flip side, "Getting Closer", isn't bad either. Good single.

### *Storm Front*, 1989 LP

I let the fact that I liked both sides of that single affect my judgment, and the next time I liked a Billy Joel song I shelled out for the album. Bad mistake. With the exceptions of the amazing "We Didn't Start the Fire" and the nice "The Downeaster 'Alexa'", this album is pure, painful, unmitigated garbage. Laden with lyrical and musical clichés, this album attempts to turn Billy Joel into a gutsy, vital modern-day rock star, and ends up making him look to me like a complete idiot who can't tell a masterpiece with a brilliant gimmick from a cringe-inducing, self-rebutting joke like "I Go To Extremes", and a patronizing jerk who happens to be married to a model ("That's Not Her Style").

Oh well, pretend that this was a single. The a-side, "We Didn't Start the Fire", is fabulous. Its gimmick, in case you haven't heard it or didn't get it, is

that it is a name-dropping tour through the last forty years of history. 1949-1963 get a couple couplets each, but after JFK's assassination things speed up and the next 25 years are packed into 16 pairs. This works fine, however, and the sense of sweeping through the past is palpable. This may well be the most heavily researched rock song ever recorded, and one of the most meticulously rhymed, despite the constraint of referring to actual people, places or things. The effort is worth it. Cool, cool, cool. An unalloyed pleasure to listen to.

The b-side, "The Downeaster 'Alexa'", in which Joel takes on the narrative persona of a beleaguered fisherman struggling to make a living while yuppie professionals eat his working class island home out from under him and the very fish turn traitorously on him (it's almost like they don't *appreciate* being dragged out of the sea by the thousands...), is of questionable validity (isn't Joel himself precisely the sort of person who is driving the poor honest fishermen out?), but if you can overlook that detail it's a quiet, moving song.

The drop from here to the rest of the album, however, is vertiginous.

## Elton John

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### *Kiss the Bride, 1983 7"*

Elton John, Elvis Costello, David Bowie and Billy Joel are, to me, one composite musical personality. I am well aware that this is utterly preposterous, but there it is, and while I could probably disentangle them with a little more attention to the issue, they are all doing just fine without me, so I prefer to reserve my efforts for less-fortunate artists who need my patronage more.

Anyway, in the Elton John guise, this composite only has one song, "Kiss the Bride", that doesn't seem overplayed in the world to me. So I bought it. I can't say I pull it out to listen to it very often, but it's excellent dance-tape fodder.

## Elvis Costello

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### *Imperial Bedroom, 1982 LP*

In this creature's Elvis Costello aspect, I don't like it a whole lot better. I've always hated Costello's voice in that way that you find yourself just despising somebody's voice instinctively, for absolutely no rational reason. It grates on me. I also detest the rockabilly leanings that Costello has displayed at various points in his career. This album is quieter and

more lush than much of his work, and thus I would probably prefer it to many of the other ones. That isn't why I bought it, though. To tell the truth, I can't remember *why* I bought it. Probably it was in the bargain bin and I thought I should have at least one Elvis Costello album, seeing how he's such a central figure in modern rock history. The same lame reasoning is all that keeps me from leaving him out of this book entirely, as I have nothing else useful to say about this album.

## Adrian Belew

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### *Young Lions, 1990 CD*

Adrian Belew's *Young Lions* is the closest thing I have to a real David Bowie album. Bowie wrote and sings "Pretty Pink Rose", and co-wrote and sings "Gunman", and even the parts of the album that Bowie doesn't appear on have a feel very similar to that of Bowie's work of about this time. Belew is a well-traveled guitarist, but compared with his guitar work for Laurie Anderson and the two great ensemble albums by his band the Bears, this album seems extremely mainstream to me.

It's also pretty diluted. After you take away the two Bowie tracks, the inexplicable remake of "Heartbeat", a song from Belew's tenure in King Crimson, the Traveling Wilbury's cover "Not Alone Anymore", and the sound-bite audio-collage "I Am What I Am", you've only got five actual Adrian Belew songs left. Of these, two, "Looking For a UFO" and "Phone Call from the Moon" I think are just abysmal. Of the other three, "Small World" is okay in a King Crimson-ish way, "Young Lions" is decent in a Bowie-ish sort of way, and only "Men in Helicopters" replicates the kind of odd-angle pop charm that the Bears managed, and though it's of the same *type*, I don't think it's as good. A pretty thin album from my perspective.

## The Bears

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### *The Bears, 1987 LP*

Belew works *much* better, in my opinion, in this short-lived quartet. Like Bowie with Tin Machine, Belew attempts to make the Bears a *band*, not a vehicle for himself, and the strength of the other three players helps them pull this off. Guitarist Rob Fetta, bassist (stand-up, solid body, no less) Bob Nyswonger and drummer Chris Anduser may not be fixtures of the musical counterculture like Belew, but they can hold

their own as pop performers and songwriters, and the resulting composite sound is a fascinating blend of catchy and warped.

The best song, I think, is the second one, "Fear is Never Boring", a Fetters composition. Fetters and Belew's dual leads mesh gorgeously, and the music combines steady drumming and chiming rhythm guitar with burbling bass and chattering lead guitar. It's a driving, violently catchy tune, and has just enough odd edge to complement the sinister bent of the lyrics.

"Trust", which reminds me of Peter Gabriel, and the keening "None of the Above" (I mean keening in a good way, if you can accept that) are almost as good. The slower, eastern-flavored "Raining" has more ringing harmony. "Meet Me In the Dark" sounds like a Let's Active song run through a pitch bender operated by somebody who is very, very cold.

As an *album* this set is marred by occasional silliness ("Honey Bee" and "Superboy"), some too-obvious King Crimson emulation ("Man Behind the Curtain") and some just plain dullness ("Wavelength"). It ends on a high note, however, with "Figure It Out", which plays interesting processor tricks with Belew and Fetter's voices. The distinguishing characteristic of the Bears' sound for me is a sort of taut-string boinginess that *sounds* like it *feels* to hit a racquetball right in the sweet spot (or a tennis ball for those of you who don't like enclosed areas or actually *prefer* to spend most of the game retrieving errant balls). It's a combination of guitar sounds, mostly, though Nyswonger's bass support is part of what makes it possible. "Figure It Out" has it. The album as a whole doesn't have as much of it as it could, but there's enough to garner my recommendation.

### ***Rise and Shine, 1988 LP***

The Bears sound *really* comes together on their second album. "Aches and Pains", which begins the album, slows down and kicks back a little, and sidles along at its own pace rather than forcing anything weird. This idea, on paper, may sound like a bad idea, even one that could kill the band's unique appeal, but in effect it does just the opposite: it makes it clear that the weird guitar tricks are a fetish (and an interesting one), but the band's real strength is a deft pop-rock sensibility and a melodic knack that could probably have made a band of much worse musicians than these. The hard part for these guys, actually, is restraining their creative performing impulses enough that they don't take away from their songwriting instincts.

"Robobo's Beef", actually, finds a middle-ground between the two. The verses chirp and simmer on a seven-beat groove (7/4, 7/8, 7/something) with a

backwards lead guitar line. The tightly linked melody and support lines keep you hooked, though, long enough for the straight-ahead 4/4 chorus to kick in. The offbeat verses make the chorus an even better resolution (more tension means better release, an equation stenciled on the director's side of all cameras used to shoot horror films), yet they also hold their own, which is a hard combination to achieve.

The energy flags for a while at the end of side one, with the silliness of "Nobody's Fool" and "Highway 2", and the slight "Little Blue River". "Rabbit Manor", which opens side two, has little to recommend it other than some of Belew's flex-neck guitar squeal. "Holy Mack" starts off slowly, too, with some near-spoken verses, but its chorus swings back into gear. "Complicated Potatoes" takes its cue from there, and the album roars back to life. A hilarious story about the domestic life of an undiscerning fat man and his gourmet-chef wife, it churns and howls into a powerful, half-joking half-serious classic rock crunch, not entirely unlike something like that Queen song about wanting to ride a bicycle.

"You Can Buy Friends" is more in character with the first four songs on the album. The pitch dive-bomb (and pull-out) on the second beat of "friends", at the end of the chorus, is a trademarkable Bears manoeuvre, cleverly echoing Belew's guitar style in the vocals. "Old Fat Cadillac" sounds like the Bears rendition of a Roy Orbison song, or perhaps like their *attempt* to sound like a rendition of a Roy Orbison, an attempt that starts to fall apart about the time the lyrics veer into an imaginary dialog with the President.

The album ends, as the first one did, on an especially good song. This time it's an unassuming number called "Girl with Clouds". Besides the band's special twang, it makes excellent use of some background dialog and noises, too low in the mix to follow (at some points I think they're even running backwards), just loud enough for atmosphere. As with the missing beat in "Robobo's Beef", this helps add tension, which makes the pretty melody of the chorus all the more compelling.

So yes, this album, like the first one, is somewhat erratic, and I think the two records have about the same number of first-rate Bears songs, but, perhaps because it concentrates the songs I don't care as much for into a single run in the middle of the album, this one strikes me as more consistent, and thus slightly the better of two very worthy albums.

## **The Call**

I'll say that the Call are my favorite mainstream band, but that is undoubtedly misleading. You might

think I mean that I think the Call do the sort of thing that Eddie Money and Elton John and Boston do, only better, and that isn't fair to anybody involved in the comparison. Rather, of the artists in the chapter, the artists I consider "mainstream", the Call is the band I like best.

Calling the Call "mainstream" is at least somewhat odd, though less bizarre in the context of the Bears, above, and Penn and Robertson, below. Commercially, the Call have straddled the line between alternative and mainstream. On the one hand, they are free enough from clichés, and strong enough on principles, for middle-of-the-road to look warily on their records. On the other, their *attitude* toward rock tradition is much more reverent than alternative radio would like. Put positively, they are original enough to be alternative, but have a strong enough sense of rock's heredity to pass for mainstream.

For me, several factors combine to make up my mind that they belong more in this chapter than any other. Michael Been's voice, for one, is a rock voice. I don't hear pop, punk, country, metal, or any other flavors in it, I hear a strong, confident singer who owes all his debts to bands far too old to appear in this book. Secondly, the Call have an uncanny instinct for the *huge*. Call records are some of the biggest sounding things outside of *The Joshua Tree*, yet this musical power is harnessed in service of introspection and spirituality more often than it is for politics or musical excess, and somehow the Call pull it off without their grand musical sweep ever sounding like pomp, and without forsaking rock's rhythm. Their instrumentation uses synthesizers freely, but the technology never dominates the music. Lastly, there is a stiff martial cadence to many of their songs that really belongs nowhere other than here.

### ***Modern Romans*, 1983 LP**

There was one album before this one, but I've never seen a copy, so my version of the Call's history begins where most of the world's exposure to them does also, with the song "The Walls Came Down", the opening track to *Modern Romans*. With its easily remembered "na-na-na-nah, na-nah-na" hook, and the classic line "I don't believe there are any Russians, / And there ain't no Yanks, / There's just corporate criminals / Playing with tanks", this was something of a novelty hit, but a hit just the same.

Michael Been is the soul and mind of the Call, despite the three other perfectly competent musicians that join him here. Been wrote all the songs, sings them, plays guitar and some keyboards, and produced the album. It is his persona and charisma which carries it, for me. Scott Musick's drumming is solid, with an intentional stiffness. In no sense is this music funky or

groovy, but neither is it mechanical. It sounds like a human playing drums, just playing them very precisely. Greg Freeman's bass and Tom Ferrier's guitar help humanize the music. Guest keyboardist Garth Hudson is at least as important as any of the three full band members, contributing foreground and background synth parts that flank Been's central vocals. Without Been's earnest delivery to focus it, though, these songs would be very empty.

"The Walls Came Down" falls somewhere around the middle of this album's stylistic range, but it's quite possible to expect an entirely different album than this one if you're just going on that single. You could confuse it with "Safety Dance", though the novelty factor isn't near as large, and expect synth-heavy, slightly silly dance music. *Modern Romans* isn't synth-heavy, is completely devoid of silliness, and I wouldn't play it at a dance party. Instead, there are a bunch of mid-tempo songs like "The Walls Came Down", "Turn a Blind Eye", "Modern Romans" and "All About You", a couple slower, more impassioned songs like "Back From the Front" and "Violent Times", and a couple faster, rawer songs ("Destination", "Face to Face"). I don't think any of them other than "Walls" have the same spark, so you might not find a casual scan through the album very rewarding, but once you realize what sort of music the band really makes, this is an impressively focused album of it.

### ***Scene Beyond Dreams*, 1984 LP**

The next album finds the Call bigger both literally and musically. Greg Freeman is gone, replaced by Joe Read, and there are lots more keyboards. Been himself, who was credited with keyboards on only one song on *Modern Romans*, gets an unqualified keyboard credit here, and the new fifth member, Jim Goodwin, does nothing else. Hudson chips in on one tune, and a couple other players fill in around the edges. The sound is an order of magnitude larger than on the previous album. Thick keyboards are the biggest factor, of course, but the whole production reinforces them. The drums echo, the guitars strike chords and hold them, and Been's singing is more impressive than on the last album, where he often half-spoke lines. If he began as an angry poet, by this album he is becoming a poetic singer. There isn't a political word on the album. And though there is nothing *overtly* religious, either, these songs are shot through with surrender, faith, suffering, life, death and strength. Been's poetic sense is acute, and where often rock singers repeat choruses for no better reason than that that's the way rock songs are usually structured, when Been repeats a line I feel as if he *means* to, and that he

has structured the *poem* that forms the lyrics that way first, not the music.

This is a faster album than *Modern Romans*. Even the most soaring songs, like the title track, move faster than the slower numbers on the prior record. Been and Goodwin use warm, French-horn-like synth timbres and envelopes for the slow background movement, and brasher, more-synthetic tones played more like pianos for the foreground parts. Most of these tracks conceal a moment or two of stridency somewhere within them, and at times here the Call remind me of the Skids, circa *Days in Europa*, or *The Absolute Game*. "Tremble", "Delivered", "Heavy Hand", "Promise and Threat" and "Notified" all move from Been singing the verses on his own, to backing vocals from the rest of the band on the choruses, from detailed articulation to bright glare.

The three songs that stand out most clearly are "Scene Beyond Dreams", "The Burden" and "Apocalypse". "Scene Beyond Dreams" is remarkable for *sustaining* its epic tone all the way through, which most of the other songs don't do. "Apocalypse" is a short cover (Peter Lewis wrote it, whoever that is), performed mainly on acoustic guitar. If it weren't for the purring synthesizers in the background, it could be a folk song. Been sings it way down in the bottom of his range, where he rarely goes, and the slightly strangled edge that usually distinguishes his voice is completely absent, which is very strange. But cool.

My favorite song is "The Burden", for the way it presages the band's later music. Like "I Don't Wanna" and "Let the Day Start", later, it is built on repeated vocal and melodic phrases. Each couplet, save two, begin the same way, and the melody repeats in groups of four, two or three. And repeats *exactly*, which is quite unusual. The three-line chorus, "Can I take this weight upon me? / Can I take this burden on me? / Can the darkened halls of death be far behind?", seems to take three runs at the ends of its phrase, finally breaking through to the triumphant concluding notes of the figure only on the third attempt. The careful symmetry of this song makes its melodic movement all the more compelling to me, precisely because the low number of changes makes each one more significant.

### *Reconciled*, 1986 CD

The Call must have been very hard on bass players, because Joe Read is gone by the next album. Evidently despairing of getting a replacement, Been himself takes over the bass chores on this album. The rest of the players from *Scene From Dreams* remain, and this album features extra help from Robbie Robertson, who plays guitar on one song, and Jim Kerr and Peter Gabriel, who sing backup on a couple songs. Been

produces again, and writes almost all the songs, but Jim Goodwin gets co-writing credit on a pair.

This records finds an already accomplished and talented band reaching a new musical level. Been and Goodwin back off quite a bit on the sweeping synth fills of *Scene Beyond Dreams*, but the sound is even *bigger*. Musick's drumming is stronger and more prominent, Been's vocals more limber than ever, and these two factors carry the rest of the instrumentation along behind them. "I Still Believe (Great Design)", the album's semi-hit, shows what PIL's "Rise" could have been if Lydon had had a more normal childhood (with music lessons). It and "Blood Red (America)" share a drum approach that uses sixteenth-note hi-hats with bass and snare alternating on the quarter-notes, and the hi-hats emphasize the deliberate, pounding stomp of the drums. Been's bass-playing is terrific, and make you wonder why they ever bothered with anybody else. At times it reminds me of the Simple Minds, which is ironic and/or understandable given Kerr's presence.

This album reminds me of Translator in at least two places. "Everywhere I Go" is a little like Translator's "Everywhere That I'm Not", and the lines about Oklahoma nights in "Oklahoma" bring to mind Translator's "Another American Night". Everything that Translator does with an aw-shucks modesty, however, the Call has the courage to take completely seriously, and the result is quietly stunning. "Oklahoma", "I Still Believe", "Sanctuary", "Tore the Old Place Down" and "Even Now" bring the Call's style snappingly into place. Hearing this album it becomes obvious that the ones leading up to it were those of a band trying to figure out how to make the music it heard in its head, and knew it *could* make. The thick keyboards of *Scene Beyond Dreams* and the comparative rawness and political lyrics of *Modern Romans* are revealed as reasonable impulses, but in the end slight miscalculations. The key to the band's epic sound wasn't the keyboards, but Been's voice, after all. The missing element in the lyrics wasn't politics as such, or an analysis of American, but rather a feeling of being *in* it, a part of it, the sense of a nation's identity and mythology as the music's context. This is a truly great record.

I'll admit that I really don't know what to make of the cover. The front has a baby sitting in an old-fashioned doctor's black bag. The back has a tornado overshadowing a flat, empty country landscape. Both pictures are grainy and dim, the former apparently from age, the latter due to the black clouds and the amount of prairie that has been relocated into the air from its more habitual haunts. How they relate to each other I have no idea. How either relates to the album is almost as mysterious, though there's an implied sort of



mid-western Americana element to them which fits with some of the texts.

### *Into the Woods*, 1987 CD

Having arrived unexpectedly at relative perfection, the band overshoots a bit on their next album. *Into the Woods* takes everything the Call did on *Reconciled* and tries to do *more* of it. Been's singing is even more impassioned, pushing and at times even hitting the limits of his voice. Musick's drumming is clearer, harder and crashinger. More crashing. There are more crashes in it, is what I'm trying to say. The American essence that pervaded *Reconciled* is here made more explicit, as in the bluesy vocal slides and call-and-response of "In the River". Been, Ferrier and Goodwin's performances are dazzling, and these songs pulse and quiver with bass, guitar and keyboards.

Yet, I find it just a little less affecting than *Reconciled*. There was a sense, on the previous album, that the band themselves didn't wholly realize how good what they were doing was while they were doing it, and that the proportions of the artwork only became evident when everybody involved backed off and looked over the completed work. Here it sounds more like the band thinks they know the exact impression they want to create, and are determined to get it right. They *do*, in a sense, as I think this album accomplishes everything it sets out to do, it's just that the fact that it sounds intentional makes it a shade less perfect than when things seemed to fall together almost on their own.

Mind you, a shade less perfect than *Reconciled* is nothing at all to be ashamed of. If you liked that album, you'll like this one, and vice versa. If "I Still Believe" was the return of "The Walls Came Down", then "I Don't Wanna" is the second coming of "The Burden". "It Could Have Been Me" and "The Woods" are a pair on par with "With or Without Reason" and "Sanctuary". "Day or Night" reminds me of "Everywhere I Go". "Memory" is slow and graceful like "Tore the Old Place Down", only more so. "Too Many Tears" starts slow, but speeds up.

The last two songs are the least like anything on *Reconciled*. "Expecting" makes more of multiple voices than the Call usually do, with the backing singers handling a low, half-chanted refrain while Been wails his part off the beat like a guitar soloist. "Walk Walk" takes the bluesiness of "In the River" and speeds it up until it sounds like John Phillip Sousa conducting the Stray Cats.

Anyway, though I like this album just less than *Reconciled*, I can easily imagine some fans' preferences being reversed, so treat everything I've said about the

two albums as a set describing the pair, and you'll probably have a pretty fair representation.

### *Let the Day Begin*, 1989 CD

*Let the Day Begin* completes the band's second trilogy, and sounds like it. Whether the band themselves decided they liked *Into the Woods* better than *Reconciled*, or whether they just realized that if they tried to go back they'd waste a lot of effort and not succeed, they forge ahead at full speed. As much as *Into the Woods* was *Reconciled* writ large, this album is it writ even larger. Been leaves the keyboards to Goodwin and he and Ferrier fire up their guitars in earnest. Although guitars have been an important part of the Call's sound all along, this is the first time I've noticed them as prominent elements in their own right, down to actual solos in "You Run", even.

The next thing I notice here, and this may be the main reason why this trilogy seems to be of descending quality to me, however small the overall drop, is that this album is the closest to being actually religious. "Let the Day Begin" is *clearly* a prayer, even without the line about "blessings from above". "You Run" mentions "holy ground". "Surrender" mentions God and the "heavenly choir". "When" is, I believe, about wondering how to recognize your loved ones in the afterlife. The trail peters out after that, but it was enough to put me ever so slightly on edge. The spiritual quality of Been's lyrics is much more interesting to me when it seems to be spirituality for its own sake, and connecting it to religion, and especially to organized Christianity, threatens to spoil a great deal of its appeal to me.

This album also has the first signs of the Call slipping into sappiness or corniness, previously dangers they avoided handily. "Jealousy", in particular, I find limp, and "Same Ol' Story"'s country twang doesn't amuse me. On the other hand, "Closer" is just as slow as "Jealousy", but I like it tons, and "For Love" has some of the Western ethos of "Same Ol' Story" without letting it ruin the song for me.

The Call is definitely moving closer to real rock as time goes on. "Communication", the CD bonus track here, reminds me a lot of 54•40. Notorious hard rocker Harry Dean Stanton (huh?) plays harmonica on one track, and co-wrote another with Been ("Watch", which is particularly guitar-centric). At the very end, though, they seem to recant, and the last song, "Uncovered", is a soft ballad that finds Been's voice dressed in his very best vibrato, accompanied only by a gentle organ. It's a supremely spiritual moment, but musically the least characteristic Call track since "Apocalypse". What does it bode for the future?

### ***Red Moon, 1990 CD***

Well, you'd never guess *this* album from it, that's for sure. To my dismay, the Call choose to enter their career's third phase with a retro-acoustic blues-rock album. Goodwin rolls in a piano and props a sax up on the end of the bench. Been studies up on gospel vocal technique, Musick punches the bypass switches of all the reverbs on his drums and buys a set of wire brushes and some maracas, and Ferrier gets one of those big semi-electric Gibsons. Bono and T-Bone Burnett are dragged in for appropriately soulful backing vocals on a couple tracks, and the band just in general settles down to play the kind of swampy roots-rock you expect to hear in a bar that sells a *lot* of hard liquor that comes out of unmarked bottles and some hours later mingles with the sawdust on the floor (which is why it's there). It's a pretty good album of such stuff, and worth checking out if you like Robbie Robertson (who is listed next for just this reason), but it *ain't* my thing, and certainly ain't what I liked the Call so much for.

"Floating Back" and "This Is Your Life" are the *only* songs here that sound like band's previous incarnations, and *they're* just redundant. The band, of course, is entitled to take whatever turns they want with their life, without regard to my preferences, and so be it. If this turns out to be a consistent new identity I'll be disappointed, but as of this writing it's been three years since a new Call album, so perhaps there's hope yet. I mean, it's not like they've slipped into a *groove* or anything.

### ***The Walls Came Down, 1991 CD***

To fill the space in which a new Call album didn't appear, or perhaps to wring some profit out of the back catalog (much more likely, given that this compilation is on Mercury, the band's *old* label), this collection was issued, apparently in lieu of releasing the first three albums on CD in their own right. The eighteen tracks here consist of six from the unlocatable first album, seven from *Modern Romans*, and five from *Scene Beyond Dreams*.

The ones from *The Call* are the collection's biggest draw for me, obviously, since I hadn't heard them at all before. They are all I'd hoped for, and exactly what I expected, the logical precursors to *Modern Romans*. Rawer, faster, making up for their inexperience with vigor, they relate to the albums I knew very much like the compilation tracks from the first Payola\$ album relate to *that* band's later work. You can hear seeds of what would make the Call unique, and at the same time you can hear why Been opted to produce their albums himself after this first outing. All six songs are

eminently worth hearing, with the last two, "Flesh and Steel" and "Waiting For the End" being my favorites.

The selection from *Modern Romans* leaves out only "Time of Your Life" and "Face to Face". "Face to Face" is in some ways a regrettable omission, since it was different in an interesting way, but for anything but fanatic Call fans (or people who already have *Modern Romans*), this sample is quite sufficient, and reason enough to shell out \$11.99 for the CD, even if it didn't have the other eleven songs.

*Scene Beyond Dreams* is apparently Been's least favorite of the three early Call albums, which explains why it gets the smallest share of space here. Though five of the nine original songs are here, I don't consider this an adequate replacement for the album, due to the grievous omissions of "The Burden", "Promise and Threat" and "Apocalypse". In fact, I would have ditched "One Life Leads to Another" (there are plenty of other Call songs like it), kept only one of "Tremble", "Delivered" and "Heavy Hand" (which are three very similar songs in my opinion), and included the three I mentioned instead. Watch your used vinyl stores. Somewhere, right now, a less-thoughtful Call fan than you and I just bought this CD and is about to unload their copy of the original albums.

## **Robbie Robertson**

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### ***Robbie Robertson, 1987 LP***

There is one word for Robbie Robertson's first solo album, and it is "swamp". Robertson's previous musical life was in The Band, but this album sounds essentially nothing like that. Instead, it is steeped in bayou and simmered in atmosphere, for a mixture that exudes humidity, grit and Cajun soul. Daniel Lanois' production transforms it from hoarse old-style Louisiana blues to dense, textural new-style half-drunk bog folktales.

A host of guests is on hand to welcome Robertson back to music. Garth Hudson plays keyboards almost throughout. The BoDeans and Maria McKee contribute some country-flair backing vocals. Peter Gabriel, to whom Robertson's new style owes more than a little debt, plays and sings on a couple songs. Manu Katché and Terry Bozzio alternate on drums. Larry Klein and Tony Levin switch off on bass. U2 arrives complete to back Robbie on two songs, one of which they co-wrote with him. Ivan Neville even shows up to give the record some more New Orleans credibility. Lanois himself chips in on several tunes, and Robbie plays keyboards and guitar throughout. Guitarist Bill Dillon,

whose name isn't otherwise familiar to me, is also a major contributor.

The record is beautifully crafted, but runs up against a stubborn personal fact: I don't like swamps. I don't like blues, and I don't pine for bayous, and this whole Big Easy aesthetic simply isn't one I appreciate. It speaks to me not of stories and passions and life, but of poverty, insects, disease, whiskey-induced stupors and toothless banjo-playing illiterates who wouldn't know Wittgenstein from Morgenstern, even if properly cooked. The two songs I like best, "Sweet Fire of Love" and "Testimony", are the U2 ones, and I like them because U2's presence keeps them from sounding as rootsy as the others. Robertson's second record, 1991's *Storyville*, is even *more* ensconced in this tradition (higher Neville brothers count), and even the creditable presences of David and David and the Blue Nile on it couldn't sell me a copy. If you like this sort of thing, though, both of Robbie's records are precisely the sort of thing you'll probably like.

## Peter Gabriel

### (melting face), 1980 CD

Peter Gabriel was the lead singer of Genesis, back in the days when they were one of the four seminal progressive bands (with Yes, King Crimson and ELP), and Phil Collins was just the drummer. I'm not into them (or ELP), but Peter himself passes through a territory I like on his way from progressive theatricality to world-pop megastardom. This, his third eponymous solo album, has an impressive collaborator list, including producer Steve Lillywhite, Phil Collins drumming on several songs, Kate Bush singing backing vocals on two ("No Self-Control" and "Games Without Frontiers"), Tony Levin on bass, and Paul Weller, Robert Fripp and XTC's Dave Gregory each playing guitar on a song or two.

I got this record for two songs. The first, "Games Without Frontiers", was an alternative-rock anthem (even if I did think for years that they were singing "She Is So Popular") back when Gabriel was "alternative". The second, "Biko", is an *everything* anthem, a swaying, epic eulogy to South African activist Steven Biko that would later be recycled to lend a movie about apartheid (whose name escapes me now) the proper awesome drama. Live, this song is riveting, its chanting of "Biko" perfect for "world-united-in-a-cause" crowd sing-along, as it goes on for a really long time, isn't that hard to sing, and doesn't require the memorization of a lot of words.

Although none of the rest of the songs here have as much resonance for me as those two, several are close, notably the JFK assassination tale "Family Snapshot" (told from the *assassin's* point of view!), and the sinister cyberspace-anticipation "...And Through the Wire". Later Gabriel fans expecting the multicultural funk of *So* or *Us* will probably be pretty disappointed to find these stiff programmed rhythms, and old Genesis fans probably won't find as much conceptual or musical complexity as they might like, but I think this album captures the start of the musical art circa 1980 pretty well.

### Security, 1982 LP

Gabriel abandons the irritating habit of not titling his albums in time for the fourth one. He also abandons most of the celebrities from the previous record, co-producing this one himself with David Lord, and relying mostly on the core players Jerry Marotta, Tony Levin, Larry Fast and David Rhodes. His incipient world-music fascination begins to become apparent here, with the Ekome Dance Company's Ghanain drumming on "The Rhythm of the Heat", traditional Ethiopian pipes on "The Family and the Fishing Net", and timbales on "Lay Your Hands on Me". His turn to dance music also makes a preview appearance on "Shock the Monkey", the one song here that I strongly dislike.

Apart from that, the album is very interesting. It is very percussion-centric, with almost every track built around Linn programming, live drums, and multiple extra electronic and acoustic percussion parts (what's a "Surdo drum"?), and even the musical parts (a neat anachronistic touch: the credits list patch names for the CMI, including "Saxy", "Piztwang" and "scraped paving stone") are mostly percussive by nature. There aren't as many inviting melodic moments as on the prior album, and certainly no songs here that I would hold up as great *songs*, but as an album of mood music for the hyperactively depressed, it's virtually ideal.

My ambivalent impression of this album may also be affected by the fact that I bought it for the song "Lay Your Hands On Me", only to discover when I listened to it that the song by that title here *isn't* actually the one I wanted. The one I wanted, I eventually deduced, was a much more upbeat composition by the Thompson Twins. This album doesn't sound like that, and I'm not sure I've completely forgiven it yet.

### Red Rain, 1986 7"

Peter Gabriel went on to make *So*, an album that made me, for the most part, ill. I hate "Sledgehammer" and "Big Time" with a vengeance, and the more they got played, the more obvious it became that they were

the songs to turn Peter Gabriel into a full-fledged world-wide star, the more I hated them and hated him by extension.

All the same, this one song is pretty good. It has some of his new funky shuffliness to it, to be sure, but it's mostly a higher-tech "Biko" sequel, and for that I like it. It's slow, dramatic and emotional, none of which are "Sledgehammer" or "Big Time". It doesn't impress me quite as much now as it did at the time, and I'm still glad I got the single rather than the album.

### *Don't Give Up, 1986 7"*

And of course, I had to buy this Gabriel/Kate Bush duet just for Kate's presence. I would have bought it even if it was terminally listless and uninspiring, just to hear her voice. And, as a matter of fact, it *is* terminally listless and uninspiring, but you can hear her voice *clearly* on her sections, and that's all I was asking for.

### *Passion, 1989 CD*

I can't remember what possessed me to buy this world-music soundtrack album. I'm not really into world-music, per se, and I'm not really into instrumental soundtracks, per se, and I hadn't heard anything from it beforehand. Perhaps I thought that its context would be enough in opposition to Peter Gabriel's pop tendencies from *So* that it would end up being a whole album of "Biko"s. Well, it isn't. It's a collection of instrumental (there are some voices, but they are treated strictly as instruments) tracks inspired by (and often incorporating) traditional North African sounds, instruments and song structures. If you're interested in that sort of thing, this is probably a pretty good album of it. To me it's functional background music, but nothing more.

## Indio

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### *Big Harvest, 1989 CD*

In a way, this album by one-man-band Gordon Peterson is the record I wanted out of Peter Gabriel. It's got Gabriel's world-awareness, with Alex Acuña's percussion and L. Subramaniam's sawing Middle-Eastern violin. It's got Joni Mitchell on backing vocals on a couple songs. It's even got Gabriel-collaborator David Rhodes playing guitar on about half the album. It manages, however, to do many of the things that I seem to find wanting in Gabriel's albums. The percussion doesn't bury the *songs*, and Peterson himself is a much more prominent vocal presence in his songs than Peter was on the two albums of his that I have.

Gordon comes off as something of a cross between Gabriel, Robbie Robertson and Sting, and his combining of their traits manages to steer clear of almost all of the individual characteristics of them that I don't care for.

"Hard Sun" was this album's minor hit, a slow, meditative song built on acoustic guitar and a long, rumbling drum pulse, with the refrain "There's a big, a big hard sun / Beating on the big people / In the big hard world". Backing vocals from Brenda Russell and Karen Peris inject a gospel-ish flavor into the choruses that give the song the feel of a tribal mantra, of something larger than just another four minutes on Boston radio, and propelled the album onto my wanted list even though I had no idea what to expect from the rest of the record.

In fact, the rest of the songs are more of the same, mystical, emotive and introspective. Most of the others are a little more animated than "Hard Sun", driven on Larry Klein's bass and Manny Elias and Vincent Colaiuta's drumming (Vinnie has also played with Tori Amos), but the weary, detached observer's air that permeates "Hard Sun" is never far from Peterson's voice. *The Unforgettable Fire*-era U2 comes to mind more than once as I listen to *Big Harvest*, and when I go looking for Daniel Lanois in the credits I'm at least a little surprised not to find him.

I've no idea what has become of Petersen since this album. In Amsterdam I picked what I thought was another Indio album, a worrisome-looking 1992 effort called *Indecent Obsession*, and not only did it turn out to be mind-bogglingly awful, but it was actually *Indio*, by Indecent Obsession, not vice versa. There ought to be a law that bands can't name their albums anything that is already the name of another band that would appear in the same Misc. bin as them. That, or I should learn to examine these things a little more closely before buying them.

## Michael Penn

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### *March, 1989 CD*

For what Robbie Robertson might have sounded like stripped of both ethnic influences and Lanois atmospherics, this is probably a decent approximation. Michael Penn's debut album is an impressive introduction to a talented songwriter with a real knack for setting his songs simply but effectively. Penn and keyboardist Patrick Warren make most of the noises on this album, and they give the record a little of the made-in-somebody's-living-room charm that made the Posies' first album so winning. In particular, Penn's

spare, slightly stiff drum programs are the detail that makes the album for me. He's not a drummer, but this turns out to be a *good* thing, as he sets up the songs' rhythms without bringing any unnecessary stylistic baggage to clutter up the space. He places drums where they are needed, and nowhere else, which is a hard restraint for a person actually sitting on a drum stool the whole time to have. The resulting tracks have a crisp snap to them that I think is really terrific.

The rest of the music leans lightly on Penn's guitar (often acoustic) and bass, and Warren's keyboards. Producer Tony Berg's fondness for odd keyboards is only strongly in evidence on "Cupid's Got a Brand New Gun". Wendy and Lisa help out with "Bedlam Boys". The key here, though, is that all these elements are used in strict moderation. Where Robbie Robertson's dense, moody sound would be at home in a dim, smoke-filled bayou bar shack, Penn's is clean and light fern-bar folk-pop-rock. "No Myth", the opening track (and single) begins with just acoustic guitar and the drum track. A bass comes in after a while, followed eventually by a keyboard. The keyboard fades away again for a while, leaving the song to be carried mostly on the stiff, sketchy drum pattern and Penn's acoustic guitar, which is blended so carefully with the drums that often it's hard to tell it's a separate instrument. When additional instruments kick in toward the end, like an electric guitar, the sound is startling, and when's the last time an electric guitar in a rock song startled you?

It's a tribute to the overall quality of this album that "No Myth" is *not* clearly the best song here. I like "Half Harvest" and "Battle Room", which are similar-feeling songs, just as well. "Bedlam Boys" is a little busier, but also excellent, and the last song, "Evenfall", manages to bring in a full band, complete with horns, two drummers and Warren on piano, while preserving the album's essential charm. I don't think a whole album of songs like "Evenfall" would have been as powerful, but like the electric guitar in "No Myth", power is relative, and in the established context of *March*, "Evenfall" brings it to a crashing, fiery close.

#### *Free-for-All*, 1992 CD

Penn's second album I find disappointing. The first one's fragile charm is irretrievably damaged by the addition here of a real band. I can hear the echoes of the first album in this one, and *Free-for-All* is good and all, but *March* was special in a way that this just isn't.

The most obvious factor is that the real bass players and drummers that play here are not able to successfully simulate Penn's own naiveté, and they leave these songs sounding much more conventional

and less-fresh than the ones on the debut. Secondly, Tony Berg's odd-keyboard fascination seems to be indulged more here, and this gives much of the album a slightly warped funhouse undercurrent that *is* intriguing, but that I don't think complements Penn's musical persona that well. Thirdly, Penn seems to be *trying* to make this a louder, harder-rocking album than *March*. The presence of the words "No Unnecessary Noise" on the cover notwithstanding, this album hasn't the same simplicity that the other one had. There still aren't many extraneous *notes*, but *March* managed to have no extra *sounds*, either, and *Free-for-All* doesn't repeat that second feat. Lastly, Penn has unnecessary facial hair in the liner photo, which I always take as a bad sign that he's trying to dispel the clean image that *March* conveyed.

I saw Penn play shortly after this album came out. He was one of the last acts of the night at Boston station WFNX's annual multi-venue birthday-party blowout, following Juliana Hatfield, Carter the Unstoppable Sex Machine and the Breeders, all of whom I'd also wanted to see. Carter USM performed with just the two guys and some machines, and I really wish that Penn had done the same. His solid backing band only made my impression of the new material even worse, because their presence cluttered the *old* stuff, too. The sight of Penn in an undershirt and slacks, jamming with the band, put the coup de grace on this stage of his career for me, and after he played "No Myth" mid-way through the set I couldn't see any reason to stick around.

## Dennis Phelps

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#### 27, 1991 CD

The nominal story behind this album is that Phelps had spent many years playing guitar for other songwriters, and eventually came to feel that he should be writing songs himself. He couldn't seem to get started until an old friend happened to show him a pile of lyrics he'd written, and then suddenly songs came pouring out. This album contains twenty of the first 27 songs Phelps wrote. He released the CD on his own, and then was picked up by California independent Racer Records, who were the first label with a presence on CompuServe, which is how I heard of them and him.

The real story implicit in this album is pretty much all of mainstream Western pop and rock. 27 is an unabashedly conventional album, and you will have no problem believing that these songs were written by someone who spent a lot of nights playing in small-time

cover bands. Gusts of Boston, CSN&Y and hosts of other practitioners of the softer side of commercial rock waft through these songs. Phelps is a good guitarist, a perfectly acceptable singer, a competent drummer, and knows his way around the studio, but he isn't trying to do anything here that a million other people before him haven't already tried to do. The best these songs could hope would be that cover bands like the ones he was in would play them in Ramadas across our great land. The worst is that listening to them will make people's eyes glaze over and their shoulders, almost involuntarily, shrug.

My impression is somewhere in the middle. On the one hand, there is no denying that publishing twenty of the first 27 songs you ever write is a way-high ratio. The fact that the CD is 72:00 long, as well, leads me to guess that the other seven weren't left off from any sense of editing, either. Much of this album is either forgettably cheesy, or tries to do blues that Phelps is far too white for, and these dud songs greatly detract from the overall effect of the record. This is unfortunate, because there are quite a few very good moments here. A bit like Michael Penn's first album, Phelps' newness to the process gives some of his songs, especially the drum parts, a fresh awkwardness that makes them stand out. The earnest, untutored drum programs contrast with the meticulous guitar work and carefully-processed mainstream vocals, and at times are able to keep them honest.

I would have tossed out half the album, and kept numbers 1, 2, 3, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 19 and 20. These songs make the best use, in my opinion, of interesting rhythms, Phelps' smooth guitars, and some nice double-tracked vocal harmonies. Listen to a copy of 27 programmed this way, and you won't hear any good reason why Phelps couldn't replace Richard Marx and leave the world significantly improved.

## Matt Keating

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### *Tell It To Yourself*, 1993 CD

I first came across of Matt Keating on the *Hot! Cinnamon Churros* Alias Records sampler (reviewed under the Loud Family). Of his three songs on the sampler, "Sanity in the Asylum" and "Lost Again" are on this, his first album. "Sanity in the Asylum" is a boisterous romp with loud guitars, whirling organ and an enthusiastic rhythm section, like a cross between Matthew Sweet and John Wesley Harding. "Lost Again" is slower, imparting a long country sway to Keating's folky verses. At times something about the timbre of his voice reminds me of Joe Jackson,

particularly as Keating sings "Nothing's ever as concrete / As the sidewalks down on my street", and I hear Joe in my mind singing "Why don't you, why don't you, why don't you", on his way to "play us a *slow song*."

The range implied by these two songs was enough to get me to pick up this album when it appeared, and Matt more than delivers. "Sanity in the Asylum" is largely anomalous, and nothing else here is as manic or noisy. There are several songs slower and more emotional than "Lost Again", though, and a number somewhere in between the two. Keating himself plays guitar and keyboards, and sings, and guitar, bass and drums fill out the four-piece group who perform most of this album. Musically the band has elements of both Del Amitri and American Music Club, to my ears. The moods are mostly melancholy, with lonely guitar notes escaping every once in a while, and things at times getting very quiet. Shifts into minor occur frequently, and Keating's double-tracked harmony makes good use of his strong (if not amazingly distinctive) voice.

My favorite song on this album is its longest, "Arrangements", on which Matt is actually supported by two completely different people from everything else on the record (except "Nostalgia"). For most of its length, "Arrangements" moves at a glacial pace, Matt's low, almost-speaking vocal part inching along on the barest of accompaniments. Around the choruses, as the line "And the one thing I want is the one thing I fight" coalesces out of the fog, the band comes momentarily alive, but is quick to subside again. The tension of this entrances me. Morrissey and Richard Thompson both flash through my mind as points of comparison for parts of this song.

In the end, then, I'm left somewhat uncertain what to make of this album. On one hand, I like it, and the songs I cited here aren't the only remarkable ones. On the other, there aren't that many moments here when Matt isn't reminding me of *somebody*, and I wonder whether that isn't a flaw. You could say that combining influences into something new is a perfectly valid approach, and I've at least half a mind to say just that, but a part of me isn't sure that Keating has really developed a musical personality of his own. It'll take a longer career to be sure.

## School of Fish

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I first heard School of Fish while driving around with my then-new girlfriend Georgia, her brother Crispin and his then-fiancée Yvonne, bridesmaid-dress shopping. As horrifying as it sounds in retrospect, even to me, several of Georgia and my first weekends together were spent in this intimidating pursuit, though

I distinctly remember opting to sit in the car and read Lensman books rather than step inside Sandy Jan the Wedding Man's frightening establishment.

Anyway, we were driving, and a song came on whose guitar part's timbre reminded me of the Meat Puppets' "Paradise". I listened more closely, interested, but it was quickly clear that this wasn't the Meat Puppets. The song ended, and the DJ identified it as "Three Strange Days", by "School of Fish". Paranoid that I would mangle this silly name in my mind somehow, and end up wandering vacantly through record stores in search of "The Three Strange Fish Eggs", "Chicken of the Sea" or "Busload of Zombies", I forced us all to scour the car in search of a pencil and paper, all the while chanting "Three Strange Days" and "School of Fish" in rounds, so as not to lose track of it. We found one, and I wrote it down.

WFNX then preceded to play the song every two hours for the next 11 months.

### *School of Fish, 1991 CD*

School of Fish made no less than five appearances on my 1991 year-end best-of lists. This album itself was #4, "Three Strange Days" was the #7 song, the WFNX concert they headlined (with the Wonder Stuff and the Milltown Brothers, reviewed elsewhere) was my concert of the year, and the band itself was my pick for best new artist. (The fifth mention was a tie for best cover that I explain under *Live in L.A.*, below.)

Really, though, the album earned all the other mentions. The songs are deceptively simple, and the band is deliberate and contained, but put together these eleven songs quietly form a thoroughly captivating album that I've listened to more times than I could possibly estimate, but which shows no signs of wearing out its welcome in my life.

Lead-singer/background-guitarist Josh Clayton-Felt and lead-guitarist/background-vocalist Michael Ward wrote all the music, and programmed the drum machines that poke their heads in at various points in the album. It is easy to imagine that this album began life as their demos, and the band only acquired a bass player and drummer when it came time to record it for Capitol. Whether that is true or not, bassist Dominic Nardini and drummer M.P. are definitely support players, and it is Josh's sad voice and Michael's rich guitar that make these songs, and they back each other ably, as well. With the notable exception of the barreling "King of the Dollar", most of the songs are slow to mid-tempo, with steady but spare rhythms. The album makes me feel sad, in a good way, or happy, in a sad way, or possibly vice versa.

"Three Strange Days" itself is a *very* simple song. The drumbeat is wooden and mechanical (which most

drums are, also), the lyrics vague and not apropos of anything in particular. There's some bass playing, but you probably won't notice it. What draws me in is the tension between Ward's blazing feedback guitar hooks (there are two of them, and he repeats one or the other through basically the whole song) and Josh's languid but lithe vocal delivery. As Josh sings the chorus, Michael cycles endlessly through a two chord pattern, and when the chorus comes around, he switches to a solo that uses heavy reverse-envelope reverb so that the notes surge in without having discernible starting points. It makes a great single, because it is instantly accessible and quickly familiar. It got *me* to buy the album.

"Talk Like Strangers" is slower, its drum-machine beat a methodical cadence that would be a march if armies on parade weren't so, well, *military*. The way even the human drum parts on this album have the feel of drum machines might sound like a bad thing, but as with the first Michael Penn record, I think it really enhances the music. The patterns are simple, so fancy drumming doesn't get in the way of hearing the songs themselves, and more importantly, the machine shows no tendency to slip into rock clichés, which real drummers often have a tendency to do.

"Deep End" is the most moving song on the record, in my opinion. "Somewhere in the world", Josh's plaintive voice starts, "It's three a.m.", and the song *evokes* that gut-level certainty. "King of the Dollar", for contrast, cranks up the intensity and the distortion, and runs through a blistering rock blitzkrieg that only on close analysis do I realize isn't actually that much *faster* than anything else here. "King of the Dollar" also earned the band a little unwanted legal attention, for the three second musical quote from the Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction", which they slip in momentarily after the line "and he don't understand / why he gets no satisfaction". It's a pure aside, having nothing to do with the rest of the song, but the Stones (or possibly their label) had a fit anyway. Hey, at least they *heard* it...

Swinging through various moods a second time, "Speechless" is close to "Deep End", and the second single, "Wrong", is more like "Three Strange Days". "Wrong" also has an especially cool drum box intro. "Rose Colored Glasses" is most like "Talk Like Strangers".

Having now been through most of the faces of this album twice, the band switches gears for "Under the Microscope". A keyboard and the quiet rustle of a crowd heard from afar open the track, and when the band kicks in the sound is murky and sluggish, like "King of the Dollar" on half speed. As it ends the crowd sounds drift back in, barely audible. With the energy level thus depressed, the next song, "Fell", is

an acoustic ballad. Although it is, arrangement-wise, the quietest song on the album, the bright, jangling acoustic guitar actually makes the song in some ways more upbeat than many of the more electrified, harder-edged ones.

The album then ends on a slight return, with "Euphoria", which is essentially another acoustic ballad, but which is played on a relatively undistorted electric instead, with an intentionally cheap-sounding drum-machine shuffle for nearly the first two minutes. Presently real drums replace the box (playing the same pattern), the bass comes in, the guitars get louder, and Josh's voice drifts over it all like a cloud, the perfect vehicle for the chorus, which repeats "I'm in euphoria" until it begins to take on near-religious import. I am convinced; I am transported.

### *Three Strange Days*, 1991 CD5

The CD-single for "Three Strange Days" features the LP version, an edited version, the "Cramshaft Mix", and "Dub". The edit I could easily have done without, but the two alternate versions are pretty cool. The reason to get this single, though, is that it has the excellent non-album track "Where Have I Been" and the marvelous Prince cover "Let's Pretend We're Married". As I've said elsewhere, covers are a source of perpetual fascination to me, and School of Fish has a real knack for picking songs that would seem like the farthest remove from their territory and co-opting them completely, without making themselves or the song seem in any way ridiculous. In fact, it's hard to tell whether this version of "Let's Pretend We're Married" is more convincing as evidence that Prince is a good songwriter, or that School of Fish can imbue anything with their characteristic poise.

### *Wrong*, 1991 CD5

The promotional sampler for "Wrong", which I acquired only recently, doesn't even put "Wrong" first. Instead, you get to start with two funny but potentially annoying tracks, "The Greatest Living Englishman" and "The Turtle Song". The third song, "Disconnected", bears the caption "Josh's mom wanted to know what a b-side is. Now she knows." It isn't quite as good as "Where Have I Been", but I'd still put it in the same basic quality bracket as most of *School of Fish*. A cover of the Kinks' "This is Where I Belong" finishes out a set that only serious collectors will be able to find, and that nobody else will miss.

### *Live in L.A.*, 1991 CD5

This promotional disc, though, is a must! Besides the album version of "King of a Dollar", this six-track

EP has live versions of "Talk Like Strangers" and "Deep End" that are worth searching for themselves. Even more importantly, there are three more covers here. The brief "That's All Right (Mama)" I don't recognize, but it was written by somebody named Crudup. Around it, though, are BTO's "Takin' Care of Business", which is great, and George Michael's "Father Figure", which is phenomenal (and was School of Fish's fifth entry in my 1991 year-end review, tied with Kate Bush's version of "Candle in the Wind" for my favorite cover of the year). I *detest* George Michael, but this rendition forces me to conclude that it must just be his presentation that turns me off. I've seen more copies around Cambridge used record stores than just the one I bought, so perhaps there are still copies out in the world to be had. Why labels *don't* put these promotional disks on sale I'm sure I don't know.

### *Human Cannonball*, 1993 CD

After *School of Fish*, I awaited the band's second album with breathless anticipation. That lasted less than a minute, as holding my breath was not a skill I ever cultivated assiduously. Still, when *Human Cannonball* came out I was very excited. First listen, I was thrilled. Louder, faster, heavier, killer rock album from a great band! Second listen, the initial appeal started to seem a little hollow. By the third listen I was officially disappointed.

Like the Cavedogs and Michael Penn around the same time, School of Fish evidently decided that their first album had been far too sedate, and so set out to make the second one crushingly powerful and intense to compensate. The drum machines are gone, as is *School of Fish's* rhythm section. The presences of new bassist and drummer John Pierce and Josh Freese (borrowed from somebody on Giant) are much more evident than Nardini and M.P. were on the first album, although Josh and Michael still claim all songwriting credits.

Michael's guitar and Josh's voice are both muted in this bass and beat-heavy production, and neither seems as special here as it did on the first record. All of the songs here have as much potential as the ones on *School of Fish*, if not more, but the throbbing bass, pounding drums and wailing guitars streamroller right over any chance they have of establishing a mood. At the same time, Josh's sophisticated voice isn't up to (or down to, actually) the challenge of converting School of Fish into a punk band, and the songs aren't simplistic enough to benefit from the heavy production hand in the way that, for example, Social Distortion's do. They also fail to strike the delicate balance that the Posies managed on *Frosting on the Beater*, merging their original charm into a new sound (but that call is especially subjective).



Anyway, all that is what I concluded once my opinion of this album seemed to stabilize. Since then, though, *Human Cannonball* has been growing on me again, and I'm starting to come to terms with it, seeing the band's old characteristics more clearly amongst the new as my ears adapt to the level. Ask me again what I think of this album after I've heard the band's *third* one...

### ***Take Me Anywhere*, 1993 CD5**

The *Human Cannonball* outtake "Unrecognizable", the first of three tracks backing "Take Me Anywhere", is actually my favorite song from this School of Fish era. It has the strong new rhythm section, but only hits full album speed on the chorus; the verses are more like *School of Fish*, albeit faster. Josh (or maybe Michael) provides some berserk, screaming background vocals that justify the song's edge in a way that I rarely felt the songs on the second album did. I like it.

Another live version of "Talk Like Strangers" appears here, for public consumption. It sounds like *Human Cannonball*. As much as I resented the band changing gears on this album, I *really* resent their subjecting one of the old songs to the new treatment. I guess it shows that they really believe in their new sound, but I liked it better the old way.

The disc ends with the band's latest cover, the Beat's "Save It For Later". I saw them do this song while playing on a boat floating in the middle of a man-made lagoon behind a multi-million-dollar shopping mall at two in the afternoon, and it was wonderful. It isn't quite as surreal recorded "live in Los Angeles" and included on a CD-single, but it sounds great all the same.

## **The Judybats**

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### ***Native Son*, 1991 CD**

Moving back to more cheerful music, the Judybats take country twang and instead of applying it to individual voices and instruments, they somehow cram their whole sound through it, so that it sounds as if they whole album has somehow been detuned half a pitch, or the CD is oval instead of round, or *something*. "Native Son" itself, which opens the album and introduced me to the band, rides on lead vocalist Jeff Heiskell's sawing nasal ahh-hahs, which leave me with the impression that he has a kazoo lodged in his windpipe. The music has that same flavor, taking electric and acoustic guitars, bass, drums and some unobtrusive keyboards and making them all sound

*sharp*, not in the sense of being half a note high, but in the sense of being pointy, edged, cutting.

This overarching nasality really intrigued me at first, then quickly came to bother me, then slowly came to seem cool again, and in the long term has re-lost some of its regained charm yet again. Some songs here work very well. "Don't Drop the Baby" moves in waves, parts fading in and out as if mounted on a passing ambulance. Despite the fact that the title leads me to associate the song with those little LCD juggling games, the song is one of my favorites here. "Waiting for the Rain" is the closest the Judybats come to playing their country influences straight, and its simpler arrangement serves the band well.

The rest of the album is more uneven. The worst songs grate on my nerves, the repetition that can be delightful when it works drilling into my head instead. The tongue in cheek weirdness of "Native Son" and "Don't Drop the Baby" also gives way too often to a seriousness that I don't think the band's style agrees with. The spoken "chorus" of "The Wanted Man" is the lowest ebb of this, as the Judybats try to do the kind of surreal western-soundtrack trick that Thin White Rope thrives on. It doesn't sound spooky, and it doesn't sound like it's *meant* to be funny, and so I find it ends up being pathetic.

The singles from the subsequent Judybats albums confirmed my fears about the band, as they seem to have slipped toward the cloying sincerity of Live, away from the sardonic Les-Claypool-does-REM appeal that "Native Son" had for me. What was wrong with fun?

### ***When Southern Bells Ring*, 1991 CD5**

While I still really liked the Judybats, I picked up a couple singles from *Native Son*. This one has the album's Roky Erickson tribute cover, "She Lives (In a Time of Her Own)", and the non-album tracks "When Southern Bells Ring (Here Comes X-mas)" and "Kindness Kills Me". "When Southern Bells Ring" is a gentle acoustic number that makes good use of keyboardist Peggy Hambright's violin playing. It isn't what I liked the Judybats for, but if they had made albums that alternated between the sardonic bite of "Native Son" and this quiet, folky ballad style, I think I would have stuck with them longer.

"Kindness Kills Me" is the sort of song I liked the Judybats for. Heiskell winds his way from octave to octave with a strained vibrato, and the band backs him up (and stays out of his way) with a restrained arrangement that doesn't assault you with the fact that there are six members in this band.

***Daylight, 1991 CD5***

The other Judybats single I got is the apex of the band's career in my opinion. The first of the two bonus cuts here is a hilarious live rendition of "Alliwannadois Fuck Your Hair", which Heiskell notes that he wrote "in the late Eighties when I was young and hair was still big enough that I could dream...". It sounds like a bar band playing a cross between the Dead Kennedys and the B-52s. I wouldn't want a whole album like this, but this one song is a treasure.

The other track is a cover of Gary Numan's "Cars". As I said in reviewing Gary himself, it perplexes me that there haven't been *more* covers and/or imitations of his work, so I pounce on one when I see it. This version retains the essential flavor of the original, using Hambright's synthesizer to reproduce the most distinctive lines of the original. The space around these lines, though, the Judybats fill in with their acoustic guitars, normal drums and such. Heiskell's voice isn't as robotic as Numan's, but it has enough nasal whine that it doesn't sound entirely incongruous. A good cover that puts the song in a different perspective without ridiculing, aping or ignoring the original.

**Bruce Hornsby*****The Way It Is, 1986 LP***

If Boston, who began this chapter, seem to me the original masters of the form, then Bruce Hornsby and the Range are the apotheosis of what FM rock has *become*. Take rock music and pulverize it until it takes on the utterly smooth consistency of vanilla pudding, and you've got Bruce Hornsby. All those radio stations that advertise "Rock without the hard edge", this is exactly what they mean. Pretty, soothing, tuneful and predictable, this is music that you can hum along with even if you've never heard it before. Even Bob Seger seems strident next to Hornsby and his band. It is the music of American elevators, American offices, American shopping malls and grocery stores; irrepressibly pleasant to put you in a consumer mood, and so plainly inoffensive that the intermediary step of converting it to Muzak is completely unneeded.

But it *is* pleasant, and though it's background music no matter how loud you turn it up, as background music it works just great. Piano, synthesizers, dulcimer and mandolin, violins and acoustic guitars, bass and drums combine for a seamless flow of music, and for times when generic "music" is all you need or want, here's an album of it. If people like Huey Lewis send you running for Slayer CDs, though,

you'd best stay away from the Range, because Huey looks like James Brown next to these guys.

**Boris Grebenshikov*****Radio Silence, 1989 LP***

Just when you might (or might not) be thinking that it takes an American (or a Brit) to make mainstream American rock and roll, along comes Boris Grebenshikov to demonstrate that with enough American AOR production, even a poetic Russian (pre-Iron Curtain collapse!) can have a hit. "Radio Silence" is a killer rock song (#8 on my top ten that year) of the one-hook-repeated-over-and-over variety, a variety which I happen to like. "The Postcard" is of a similar ilk, throbbing synth-bass reminding me a little of Peter Gabriel's "Big Time". Boris' emotive voice (it's hard to tell how much of its odd character is intentional, and how much of the time it's just a bad accent or some phonetic singing, but the effect is cool for whichever reason) is the touch that makes these otherwise standard songs special.

Elsewhere on the album his Russian roots do poke through a bit more. "Young Lions" is almost exactly like "Radio Silence", but it's sung in Russian. "Winter" is a quiet poem that sounds just enough like the theme music to Tetris for me to know that it is Russian in origin. "China" is sung in Russian, with only Boris' own guitar accompaniment (and China is actually near to Russia(!)).

The best compromises, to my ears, come on "Real Slow Today" and "Mother", which best integrate the Western production (Annie Lenox and Chrissie Hynde sing backing vocals on both) and Grebenshikov's own style. In the end, the album stands as a mainstream rock record with just enough personality quirks to make it distinctive. At the time, I was very taken by it, and it was #7 on my album list in '89. Looking back on #s 8-10 (Jane Siberry, the Blue Nile and the Posies), this seems totally stupid, as *Bound by the Beauty, Hats and Failure* are on a completely different (and much higher) plane than *Radio Silence*, but for what it is it's worth some attention, and I don't begrudge it its list slot.

(The strangest touch on this album, for me, is that the Beatle-esque "Fields of My Love" features a guest vocal from, of all people, Harry Dean Stanton. Having formed my impression of Stanton from seeing him in *Pretty in Pink* and *Repo Man*, I find it hard to attribute any of the voices on this song to him, but that's what it says on the liner.)

## various

For lack of a better place to put them, here are some compilations that don't have strong hooks to other locations in the book.

### Q DCC CD II, 1993 CD

I've got a pile of unsolicited samplers from Q and Pulse, and for the most part they have nothing of interest that isn't from albums I have anyway. This is the one exception, as it has Don McLean's "American Pie", a true classic that I never got around to actually purchasing (and now never will). My parents were Don McLean fans, and I heard this a lot growing up. The song was also a gold record back in 1971 when that was an accomplishment, so *everybody* probably heard this one a lot. DJs undoubtedly relished the opportunity to get eight minutes of peace. Anyway, it's a timeless epic, eminently suitable for memorizing. And, I got it free.

This CD actually serves *two* purposes for me, as the *first* track ("American Pie" is the last one) is U2's "Numb", which is a cool single that I would never have stooped to buying *Zooropa* to get.

### Red Hot and Blue, 1990 CD

My sister, who introduced me to a number of significant artists in our youth, hasn't had as much success influencing my musical tastes lately. This compilation was a Christmas gift one year, an obvious attempt to expose me to a segment of the musical mainstream that I would otherwise avoid. The problem with this particular approach, of course, is that I *hate* musicals, so this material makes the artists who perform it *less* appealing to me than their own work would have.

On the other hand, the money from this goes to a good cause, and there's some interesting stuff here. Neneh Cherry's rap version of "I've Got U Under My Skin" is seductive, Deborah Harry and Iggy Pop's romp through "Well Did You Evah!" is gloriously sloppy, Kirsty MacColl and the Pogues' "Miss Otis Regrets" is eerie, U2's "Night and Day" has a nice synthetic buzz to it, Lisa Stansfield's traditional "Down in the Depths" is kind of charming, and Aztec Camera's "Do I Love You" is a soothing conclusion. Your preferences will probably vary, but there's enough variety here that most people will probably find *something* they like, which makes this useful as party-music for mixed company, if nothing else.

### No Alternative, 1993 CD

Red Hot +Blue, the organization, has become a compilation-generating machine. Soul Asylum has my favorite moment on this product, a cover of Marvin Gaye's "Sexual Healing" that shared cover-of-the-year honors with Big Country's version of "(Don't Fear) the Reaper" on my 1993 year-end summary. There's plenty here that I don't care for, but if I program my player to whittle the generous 19-track selection down to Buffalo Tom's "For All to See", Soul Asylum, American Music Club's "All Your Jeans Were Too Tight", Bob Mould's "Can't Fight It", Sarah McLachlan's "Hold On" (which made #9 on my 1993 song list), Barbara Manning's "Joed Out", the Breeder's "Iris" and Nirvana's unlisted "Verse-Chorus-Verse" (that's 2, 3, 5, 9, 10, 13, 17, 19), then this turns out to be a pretty strong collection. The Nirvana and Soul Asylum songs are the only ones I'd consider essential here, since "Hold On" is on Sarah's album *Fumbling Towards Ecstasy*, but the others are decent, and there are enough of them to make this one of the better miscellaneous compilations of late.

### Rubáiyát, 1990 2CD

Elektra records celebrated its fortieth anniversary by releasing this lavish double-disc album of thirty-eight of the label's artists all covering songs by *other* of the label's artists. The meticulous 52-page booklet gives complete credits, tells the history of the label, and has pictures of dozens of actual record labels from over the years that are sure to prompt waves of nostalgia were you actually alive during the bulk of the years in question.

This is one of those cases where a track listing is about the most useful information I can give you about the set, and so here are the artists, songs, original artists, and original years, of the songs featured.

#### Disc One:

The Cure: "Hello I Love You", the Doors, 1968. I hate the Doors, and don't much care for the Cure, but together they aren't so bad.

Tracy Chapman: "House of the Rising Sun", Glenn Yarbrough, 1957. Not a bad job.

Billy Bragg: "Seven and Seven Is", Love, 1966. I would never have guessed that this is Bragg without the credits telling me so.

Jevetta Steele: "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing", New Seekers, 1971. Schmaltz alert.

Gipsy Kings: "Hotel California", the Eagles, 1976. In Spanish! This is hilarious.

The Black Velvet Band: "Werewolves of London", Warren Zevon, 1978. Celtic soul turns out to suit this song quite well.

The Sugarcubes: "Motorcycle Mama", Sailcat, 1972. Sounds like an early ABBA demo.

Shinehead: "One Meatball", Josh White, 1956. Unlistenable.

The Havelinas: "Bottle of Wine", Tom Paxton, 1965. Bluesy.

Pixies: "Born in Chicago", Paul Butterfield Blues Band, 1965. Noisy.

Faster Pussycat: "You're So Vain", Carly Simon, 1972. Wow. You probably didn't realize that this song was a heavy-metal anthem. My favorite track on the collection, by far.

Kronos Quartet: "Marquee Moon", Television, 1977. The second coolest track here.

Phoebe Snow: "Get Ourselves Together", Delaney and Bonnie, 1968. Soulful disco.

Happy Mondays: "Tokoloshe Man", John Kongos, 1972. I don't like the Happy Mondays.

Ernie Isley: "Let's Go", the Cars, 1979. A brilliant over-programmed roboticizing of the music, with humanized lead vocals, this is almost the original turned inside-out.

Lynch Mob: "Going Down", Don Nix and the Alabama State Troopers, 1972. Ick.

Ambitious Lovers: "A Little Bit of Rain", Fred Neil, 1965. Limp.

Anita Baker: "You Belong to Me", Carly Simon, 1978. Faster Pussycat did her better.

Howard Jones: "Road to Cairo", David Ackles, 1968. Limp again.

Disc Two:

The Big F: "Kick Out the Jams", MC5, 1969. Loud, but not in any particularly inspired way.

The Georgia Satellites: "Almost Saturday Night"/"Rockin' All Over the World", John Fogerty, 1975. Well, they're well-matched, anyway.

Sara Hickman: "Hello, I Am Your Heart", Dennis Linde, 1973. Jazzy.

Teddy Pendergrass: "Makin' It With You", Bread, 1970. Wow, I *hate* music like this.

Linda Ronstadt: "The Blacksmith", Kathy and Carol, 1965. A cappella, and very pretty.

Bill Frisell / Robin Holcomb / Wayne Horvitz: "Going Going Gone", Bob Dylan, 1974. Noisy.

Jackson Browne: "First Girl I Loved", Incredible String Band, 1967. Yep, sounds like Jackson Browne.

10,000 Maniacs: "These Days", Jackson Browne, 1973. Yep, sounds like Jackson Browne.

Metallica: "Stone Cold Crazy", Queen, 1974. Look out. Queen *never* sounded like this. Too bad.

Danny Gatton: "Apricot Brandy", Rhinoceros, 1968. Instrumental.

Shaking Family: "Union Man", The Cate Brothers, 1975. Fast.

They Might Be Giants: "One More Parade", Phil Ochs, 1964. Hmm. Protest polka!

Howard Hewett: "I Can't Tell You Why", Eagles, 1979. Listless.

Leaders of the New School: "Mt. Airy Groove", Pieces of a Dream, 1982. I have a feeling that the original didn't sound like this.

Shirley Murdock: "You Brought the Sunshine", The Clark Sisters, 1983. This and the previous one make quite a contrast.

John Eddie: "In-between Days", The Cure, 1985. Another of my favorites, a rousing, passionate country-rock rendition of a song whose original whininess I guess *isn't* integral.

The Beautiful South: "Love Wars", Womack and Womack, 1983. What I want to know is, what were the Beautiful South doing recording this here in Boston?

Michael Feinstein: "Both Sides Now", Judy Collins, 1967. A beautiful song, done beautifully.

John Zorn: "TV Eye", The Stooges, 1970. An ugly song, done uglily. The slight return of the Cure doing "Hello, I Love You" is in the same vein, and ends the album on an unexpectedly strident note (and I use the word "note" loosely here).

### *Theodore*, 1990 CD

One of the better "alternative music" samplers, *Theodore* actually remains in my collection on the strength of *several* songs that I don't have elsewhere. Poi Dog Pondering's stately "Bury Me Deep" has a winning folk sway, the Rave-Ups "She Says (Come Around)" is straightforward but pleasant, one Social Distortion song is about all I need of them and "Let It Be Me" does nicely, and Living Colour's live version of Tracy Chapman's "Talkin' 'Bout a Revolution" is a truly inspired match. The Psychedelic Furs' "House" confirmed my suspicion that I didn't need to buy *Book of Days*, Nuclear Valdez' "Run Though the Fields" is okay, Shawn Colvin's live "Shotgun Down the Avalanche" is an excellent sample from an album I've avoided buying because it remind me too much of a former girlfriend, and Public Enemy's "Welcome to the Terrordome" is a *tremendous* song that I'm glad to get on a compilation since PE's albums consistently annoy me.

If I didn't already have *Slam*, Big Dipper's "Another Life" would be another draw, as would the Kate Bush b-side "Be Kind to My Mistakes", which I have several copies of.

The liner notes have good bios of all groups involved, and the CD was dirt cheap to begin with. All samplers should be this good.

***Just in Time for Christmas, 1990 CD***

I *hate* traditional Christmas music, so albums of modern music that is nominally Christmas-related are essential for me to survive the season with my sanity intact, and without being *too* Grinch-like. This one is bouncy and cheerful, with songs by Squeeze, Rebel Pebbles, Klark Kent, Torch Song, Reckless Sleepers, Steve Hunter, the dB's, Molly Johnson and Norman Orenstein, Deborah Holland, Timbuk 3, Kennedy Rose, Dread Zeppelin and Wall of Voodoo. The Johnson/Orenstein version of "Silent Night" tricked me into buying their miserable debut album (as Infidels), but other than a grudge for that, I have nothing bad to say about this album. Fun and inoffensive; everything I could ask of a Christmas album.

***A Lump of Coal, 1991 CD***

After you've softened people up to the idea of pop Christmas music, slip in this slightly darker selection from First Warning. Here you'll find the Hoodoo Gurus, Crash Test Dummies, The Wedding Present, Drunken Boat, Divine Weeks, Carnival Art, The Primitives, Young Fresh Fellows, The Odds, Clockhammer and Henry Rollins.

Some of these play straight. The Crash Test Dummies' "The First Noel" is a gorgeous duet between singers Ellen Reid and Brad Roberts. The Primitives' "Silent Night" is a little fuzzy, but nearly normal. A few, like the Young Fresh Fellows' "O Little Town of Bethlehem" and the Odds' "Kings of Orient", are friendly pop updates of classics. Others, like Carnival Art's "Bring a Torch Jeannette Isabella" and the Wedding Present's "Stepping into Christmas", are distorted and loud and irreverent and guaranteed to irritate people, which is fun, though perhaps not quite in the season's spirit. The most chilling moment, though, is Henry Rollins' ominous-sound-effect-accompanied flanged reading of "'Twas the Night Before Christmas", which gives the album a *very* disconcerting ending.

# Earth

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from Fiona's "The Nights We Spent on Earth", Pat Benetar's *Live from Earth*, Shona Laing's *New on Earth*, Kate Bush's "Hello Earth", Tori Amos' *Little Earthquakes*...

## Soundtrack

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Kate Bush: "Running up That Hill"  
Cyndi Lauper: "That's What I Think (live)"  
Missing Persons: "Words"  
Fiona: "Life on the Moon"  
Patty Smyth: "Downtown Train"  
T'Pau: "The Promise"  
Happy Rhodes: "Mother Sea"  
Jane Siberry: "The Taxi Ride"  
Tori Amos: "Silent All These Years"  
Sarah McLachlan: "Into the Fire"

## Introduction

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Half of me wonders if this chapter isn't evidence of a pervasive sub-conscious sexism on my part. The other half is content to observe that men and women's voices are *different*, and that if some sorts of music seem to be distinctly female, while some seem distinctly male, calling that *my* fault is searching a long way for something with a pretty simple answer. Singing is an art form where sex is almost always immediately evident (like ballet, unlike sculpture); rock and roll is a traditionally male enclave. Put these together and what we get is that most of the time women in rock and roll are either clearly working *within* the male model, or they are outside of it. At least, that's how it seems to me. Earth, then, is my chapter of sirens, of women making what is discernibly rock and roll, but what is not *male* rock and roll.

As you might hope from such a painfully general characterization, this chapter covers quite a span of styles and degrees of feminization. At the first extreme are artists who define their femininity mostly in male terms. Trashy sexuality is, I'm convinced, *critically* underrated as a component of modern pop (that is, underrated by critics). Plenty of people have been commercially successful with it, but sales don't keep them from being looked down on as not-very-serious artists. To many readers (presuming this book ever *has* "many readers"), the number of overproduced, over-commercialized, under-dressed (and either giddy or

sleazy, depending on how you take them) records in this chapter may make it start to seem like "guilty pleasures", but I don't feel the slightest bit guilty about any of this stuff, with the possible exception of ABBA. After all, there doesn't seem to be any stigma attached to *men* in rock whose personas are overtly sexual. Quite the contrary, macho sexuality has served a great many male rock musicians quite well (Elvis, Jim Morrison, Terrence Trent D'Arby, those guys who were too sexy for their shirts). When women try it, however, the ridicule flows freely. The few female musicians who've managed to get taken really seriously (*by men*), like Joni Mitchell and Suzanne Vega, have had to carefully avoid looking like Joan Jett or Deborah Harry (or maybe it came naturally). The overwhelming male domination of rock criticism, which I guess I'm part of, as much as I don't *mean* to be, is undoubtably responsible for these slights, even as the male domination of rock *music* is responsible for the way women feel they have to act to make it.

The other end of the range this chapter spans finds women whose personae seem to me primarily *self-generated*, in no way simple products of male media images. For some this means sexual presences that eschew traditional stereotypes, and for some this means styles in which sexuality just isn't that important. Women in this second category tend, unsurprisingly, to exert more auteurial control over their work (if you can control your image, controlling your music is comparatively simple, after all). And, perhaps also unsurprisingly, the resulting musical styles make as coherent a set independent of sexual-political origin as they do with it. So, whether you see this chapter as a journey from girl-group pop to ethereal ambiance, or from Hollywood vixenry to metasexual independence, and no matter which end of either of those continua you weight your sympathies toward, I encourage you to make the entire journey with an open mind, open ears, good speakers and a friendly record store that takes credit cards.

## ABBA

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### *Greatest Hits Vol. 2, 1979 LP*

ABBA is a good place to start, as in a sense there is nothing cheesier than ABBA. Left to just sing and look Swedish while the men handled the instruments, ABBA's two female singers (known to the world only as "those two women in ABBA whose names begin with 'A'") were the music world's equivalent of *Charlie's Angels*. The music is bland, gutless, soulless, annoying, shrill and absolutely instantly memorable. An ABBA

song like “Does Your Mother Know” or “Dancing Queen” needs only a fraction of a second to embed itself permanently in your long-term memory, and it can never be erased. ABBA-appreciation may be the most communicable malady in modern times.

You may not think you suffer from it. “Nah”, you say, “I don’t know ABBA from the Bay City Rollers”. But you’re wrong, you do. Go to your nearest record store and pick up any ABBA hits collection. This one will do. Read the titles through, once, quickly. Now put the CD down and place your fingers in your ears, firmly, shutting out the Mark Cohn song the store is playing. Try to do this when the store is not very crowded, not because people will think you’re strange, but because if somebody bumps into your elbow while you have your finger buried in your ear, it hurts like hell. Anyway, now that you’ve shut the sound of the store out, let your mind empty for a few seconds. There’s no need to consciously think about the titles you just scanned.

Yep. See what I mean? There they come, welling up out of your past, songs you didn’t think you remembered. “Knowing Me, Knowing You”. “Take a Chance on Me”. “The Name of the Game”. Then, faster, “Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man after Midnight)” and “Money, Money, Money”. When the soft opening of “Chiquitita” starts up, you know you have lost the battle. ABBA has defeated your best attempts to hate them, just the way they’ve done to everybody else.

How they do it is beyond me. Perhaps it’s the phonetic-sounding singing. Perhaps it’s the fact that the name is trademarked. (Naw, that didn’t work for Billy Joel...) Perhaps it’s some sort of chemical coating they apply to the discs at the factory, or maybe it’s some secret Swedish mind-ray fired from a huge generator hidden in a fjord somewhere. It can’t be that the songs are actually really good.

Can it?

## Frida

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### *Something’s Going On*, 1982 CD

Frida was in ABBA. Striking out on her own, under the firm hand of producer Phil Collins, she had a big hit with “I Know There’s Something Going On”, a song whose crashing drums and driving guitars were a far cry from ABBA’s homogenized wimpiness. In the ensuing years I periodically ran across reviews of this album that suggested that, contrary to what you’d probably expect, the whole album was similarly powerful, a lean, muscular rock record the likes of

which you wouldn’t have imagined Frida or Phil had in them. After reading enough such reviews, I figured they must be onto something, and I bought the album.

Don’t you fall for this like I did. Those reviewers weren’t *onto* something, they were *on* something. Aside from the title track, this album is painful. It doesn’t sound exactly like ABBA, as ABB are missing, but calling this “muscular rock” is using those words without regard for how they are commonly defined. The drums and guitar of “I Know There’s Something Going On” do not reappear anywhere else, and after about ten minutes of this lifeless soft-rock drivel I find myself yearning for the rest of ABBA to return and take Frida out of her misery.

## Tracey Ullman

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### *You Broke My Heart in 17 Places*, 1983 LP

ABBA owned the Seventies, so when British comedienne Tracey Ullman went to make an album, she skipped them and reached, instead, back to the fifties and Sixties (i.e. musical prehistory, to me), and made an album that is as much a tribute to those decades’ girl groups as it is to the reliable show-business principle that states that TV stars can sell an album without knowing a single thing about music.

In the case of this album, rather than rely entirely on her star-appeal, Tracey also recruited Kirsty MacColl to write her a buoyant pop hit, “They Don’t Know”, and help her sing it. Before leaving, Kirsty also wrote the title track, and those two songs are two of the three glittering moments on an album that, I’m afraid, is otherwise too retro for my tastes.

The third highlight is the last song, “(Life is a Rock) But the Radio Rolled Me”. The chorus of this song is forgettable, but the verses feature Tracey rattling off, in falsetto, some of the fastest lyrics in pop music, a pink-plastic-machine-gun barrage of musicians, albums, labels and other assorted pop references.

Appropriate to the sound of this album, the sleeve gives no musician credits at all, but lists six backing vocalist credits, three of which are groups (The Flying Pickets, the Sapphires and the Wealthy Tarts). Tracey’s own voice is not very powerful, but with all the support she gets here, it hardly matters if she sings at all.

Although this album wasn’t actually why, I was once madly in love with Tracey Ullman for nearly a month. She was passing through Boston once while I was in college, and called up the Harvard Lampoon to say she wanted to come by and see the place. When she showed up, for some reason, the entire staff became pathetically quiet and respectful and painfully boring,

and sat completely awestruck in a circle around Tracey, while she, bemused, commented that we were "much quieter than I expected". I suppose, in retrospect, we should have just gone ahead with how we normally spent our time, namely playing pool on a badly tilted table with intricately warped cue sticks while listening to "Dancing in the Streets" loudly enough to cause one or another of the several pairs of ceiling-mounted speakers to cut out every minute or two. Tracey could have joined in on a game of cutthroat (though Simms probably would have made her pay a dollar if she lost), and could even have helped us keep the lights on by perpetually resetting the exasperating timers that some parsimonious Sanctum had attached to them years ago. This would not have been a very dignified reception for a world-famous comedienne paying a formal visit to the nation's oldest humor magazine, and thus would have been much better than what we actually did.

Regardless, just sitting on the floor of the Narthex listening to Tracey answer whatever painfully polite questions we stammered out, I fell completely in love with her. As she was getting ready to leave I careened back to my room in Adams House across the street (literally the closest dorm room to the door of the Lampoon, in fact, which means this was my junior year, '87-'88), grabbed my camera, and got back just in time to meet her at the door and get a skewed arm-extended self-shot dual portrait of the two of us: me, grinning as if I'd just won a lifetime supply of Pez, and Tracey, grinning with the serene and heart-rending beauty of someone who is thinking to themselves that they might only be a comedienne and singer, but even they know that when you're taking pictures you're supposed to be looking through the camera somehow.

## Madonna

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### *Papa Don't Preach, 1986 12"*

I don't like Madonna. I found her annoying in the beginning, and haven't thought that any of her subsequent identity makeovers have helped the situation. She makes dance music, but nothing I'd want to listen to.

Except this. It's hard to say what makes "Papa Don't Preach" different from the rest of her songs, but it's the one I like. Maybe it's because it isn't really a very good dance song. The beat is one you want to do calisthenics-type moves to, but it's just slow enough to make that difficult. I also like the orchestra-sample hook, and I even like Madonna's singing on it. Her voice breaks ever so slightly as she turns the corner into

"I'm keeping my baby", and she sounds sincere for once.

Actually, to be truthful, I like the song. I checked Georgia's copy of *The Immaculate Collection*, but writer Brian Elliot's only credit was this. Perhaps he's just the one place where Madonna and my tastes coincide.

## Cyndi Lauper

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### *She's So Unusual, 1983 CD*

There are positive and negative sides to beginning your career with a novelty megahit. You sell lots of copies of your first record (that's the good part), and then when you go on to make other records that aren't so gimmicky, critics line up to take shots at you about how disappointing your failure to live up to your "potential" is. Thomas Dolby and, to a lesser extent, Big Country, come to mind as victims of this phenomenon, but surely Cyndi Lauper is the definitive example. "Girls Just Want to Have Fun", Cyndi's exuberantly silly remake of Robert Hazard's song, established her firmly in the public consciousness as a squeaky, crazily dressed, neo-feminist munchkin. Cyndi and Madonna hit the public stage almost simultaneously (in fact, *British Hit Singles* lists "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" and "Holiday" as hitting the chart there the same week, and the two songs overlapped on the US charts for well over a month), and they seemed pretty clearly to be two of a type.

To be truthful, the first fifty million times I heard "Girls Just Want to Have Fun", it made me want to throw up. Cyndi's voice was like a large metal rasp being jabbed into the side of my head, and the song was everything I hated about Doctor Demento and nothing that amused me. It wasn't until I broke down and bought *True Colors*, several years later, because I liked its title track, that my mind let the blocks against her slip, and I remembered that as much as I hated "Girls", I really kinda liked "Money Changes Everything", "When You Were Mine", "Time After Time" and "All Through the Night". The realization that cinched Cyndi's startling change in favor in my eyes was, hearing "She Bop" again on the radio one day, that it had one of the coolest surging synthesizer sounds ever recorded.

I've now made my peace with "Girls". It isn't my favorite of Cyndi's songs, any more than "Sex..." is my favorite Berlin song, or "She Blinded Me With Science" my favorite of Dolby's, but I can listen to it, and enjoy it. I can even watch the video, with Georgia trying to point out to me her friend Alex, who is in the bedroom party scene, because her father was Cyndi's lawyer



(he's the funny-looking guy with the mustache earlier in the song).

The other five of the first six songs, though, are the ones that make this album. "Money Changes Everything", originally by the Brains, is one of the best debut-album openers I can think of while writing this review and listening to it really loud. Cyndi's sand-blasted voice combines with the heavily synthetic arrangement, mostly by Hooters members Eric Bazilian and Rob Hyman, in a fascinatingly disconcerting way. Anton Fig's steady, heavy drumming gives the song a firm forward momentum, and Cyndi turns this deliberate pace into a cruise-control drive-by shooting, flipping her voice around her head, down her throat, up into her nasal cavity and out through her teeth like a combination of a superball, a really tart Jolly Rancher and a neutron star. I like it, in other words.

"When You Were Mine" is a Prince song. I like Prince songs sometimes, but I can't abide Prince, so this is my favorite way to hear them. Bazilian and Hyman's extremely white rendition of the music doesn't look like an inspired idea on paper, but in practice I think it is perfect, diverting attention from the music to Cyndi's voice, which I'll take over Prince's any day. She delivers the song's belated-jealousy lyrics with sincerity, but neither bitterness nor melodrama.

"Time after Time", a Cyndi and Rob co-composition, is the first of two slow ballads. Particularly after the charge of the first three songs, this change of pace is impressive, showing the softer, non-squeaky lower end of Cyndi's range well. The pace picks up again immediately, though, with "She Bop". Unquestionably one of the greatest songs about women masturbating (admittedly not an overworked subgenre), it has some of the novelty appeal/kitsch of "Girls", but the driving synth/bass combo hook that powers the verses keeps it on course.

The first six conclude with another slower song, Jules Shear's "All Through the Night". Shear himself provides backing vocals, but Cyndi's singing and the arpeggiated synth lines give this song a richness of character that Shear's own charming acoustic version just can't match. As with "Time after Time", this is a good song to dispel any illusion that Cyndi has a shortage of real singing ability.

The rest of the album, only four more songs, is forgettable, but who cares? Six great songs is plenty for one record. It would be a stretch to conclude from just this album that Cyndi was a true songwriting talent, a truly astute judge of other people's material, or even that she could survive without the studio assistance of Rick Chertoff and assistant producer William Wittman, but neither is there any real evidence against those things.

### *True Colors*, 1986 CD

For her second album, Cyndi traded Eric and Rob for Jeff Bova and Jimmy Bralower, and they give these songs a floorboard-rattling Linn drum drive that the Hooters' aw-shucks 4/4 synth formations just didn't have. "Change of Heart", the opening track, combines this with Nile Rodgers' guitar and backing vocals from the Bangles, and immediately establishes this album as a quantum leap more accomplished than the first one. "Boy Blue" relaxes the drums a little, and throws in extra synth-bass. It starts out sounding a little like Madonna, passes through a short section that sounds a bit like the Thompson Twins, and then breaks out of both similarities with a dizzying chorus vocal. Cyndi sings this one all by herself, though I had to listen to it several times to assure myself that she really covers all those notes without apparent assistance.

"True Colors" itself is "Time after Time" done one better, or perhaps seven or eight better. Cyndi's voice drops to a near-whisper at times, and writers Tom Kelly and Billy Steinberg provide even better material and settings for it than Lauper and Hyman did on "Time after Time". Both "True Colors" and "Boy Blue" are nicely understated, especially compared with the relatively busy instrumentation of *She's So Unusual*.

Cyndi and Rick Derringer co-wrote "Calm Inside the Storm", a nice little song that falls somewhere between the turbo-pop of "Change of Heart" and the girl-group hop of the "Iko Iko" covers that comes later. Turbo-pop returns for the album's three concluding tracks, a triptych at least as impressive as the one that opens the first album. "The Faraway Nearby", another collaboration with the Brains' Tom Gray, assembles a vividly mechanical drum-track, accordion-like synthesizer reminiscent of the first album but better produced, big synth-bass, Aimee Mann on backing vocals, and Cyndi flying into falsetto at the most disarming moments, for one of her coolest songs. "911" kicks in the monster drums again, for a song that sounds *made* for dance-party mix tapes, especially with the Pee Wee Herman operator coda. "One Track Mind" is more produced, and more distant, closer in sound to "Papa Don't Preach"-era Madonna than anything else on this album, partly due to the processed vocal snippets that pop up along the way. The drums have an awesome room-reverb slapback, and Cyndi's voice run through an Emulator provides an atmospheric pad sound that helps make this a thoroughly impressive showcase for Bralower and Bova's studio skills, and, by extension, for Cyndi's excellent taste.

There are a few songs here I'm not as crazy about, but where on the first album I actually think the last four aren't much good, here I think the ones I don't like just aren't to my taste. "Iko Iko" is the only one that I'd

really say *bothers* me. Like “He’s So Unusual” on the first album, it’s a calculated anachronism, and I’m just not into it. “Maybe He’ll Know” isn’t an old song, but it sounds like one, with a old fashioned bounciness and backbeat organ. Fellow retro-offender Billy Joel helps out on vocals, and if you like this sort of thing, you’ll probably enjoy it, but it’s not my vibe. I also think Anton Fig’s simple drumming here suffers by comparison to Bralower’s programming on the songs I like better, but that’s clearly a matter of personal preference, and bound to cause furrowed brows on people who don’t think of drum machines as real musical instruments.

The last song (actually, it’s in the middle of the album, but I’m covering them out of order) is a mixed bag for me. It’s a cover of Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On”, and the first verse is extremely quiet and *very* powerful. After that it picks up with some of the old-style finger-snapping and falsetto-scat soul that is why I never liked that genre to begin with. On the other hand, both Adrian Belew and ’til tuesday guitarist Robert Holmes play on it. On the third hand, it’s not like I can *tell* they are playing.

I honestly don’t understand what possesses the reviewers in other guides to say that this album is a disappointing follow-up to Cyndi’s debut. “Money Changes Everything” is the only song from the first one that I’d trade for. “True Colors” I like better than “Time after Time”. “Girls” and “She Bop”, despite their charm, I think this album is much stronger without. “Change of Heart”, “Boy Blue”, “The Faraway Nearby”, “911” and “One Track Mind” kick “When You Were Mine” and “All Through the Night”’s asses. And that isn’t meant to take away anything from *She’s So Unusual*, which I *said* I liked! I just think this one is better song-by-song, sound-by-sound, as a coherent whole, and even where I’m not personally crazy about it. Also, Cyndi looks prettier on the cover. It’s less silly, is all I can figure as a basis for criticizing it, but I don’t think silliness was Cyndi’s true artistic forte, no matter how many copies of “Girls” people bought.

### *A Night to Remember*, 1989 CD

Cyndi’s third album, a long time in arriving, gets dismissed even more peremptorily. I guess a few critics still held out the hope that it would be a return to earlier form, and when it didn’t they finally got tired of waiting and wrote it off completely. I had low expectations, but bought it, mostly because I knew “I Drove All Night” from Roy Orbison’s version, and figured I’d like hearing Cyndi doing it, no matter what I thought of the rest of the album.

Actually, it’s terrific! I couldn’t get it out of my CD changer for weeks; good thing I have four more slots, or I would probably have driven Georgia crazy (though she likes it, too). Bralower and Bova still play on this one, but the emphasis is shifted from their Linn-and-bass dance grooves to the songwriting of the team of Steinberg, Kelly and Lauper. There are five songs by the three of them (“Primitive”, “My First Night Without You”, “Heading West” and “Unconditional Love”), another one by Steinberg, Kelly and Divinyls singer Christina Amphlett (“Like a Cat”), and one by just Steinberg and Kelly (“Drove All Night”). The balance are by Cyndi, Desmond Child and Diane Warren (“Insecurious”); Cyndi, Franke Previte and Dusty Micalle (“A Night to Remember”); Cyndi, Frank and “P. Chiten” (“Dancing with a Stranger”), one by Diane Warren by herself (“I Don’t Want to Be Your Friend”), and one just by Cyndi (“Kindred Spirit”).

Cyndi’s participation in the writing process makes this album even more cohesive than *True Colors*. Part of what I find so impressive about this one is that it begins to show Cyndi having the courage to be a musician, not just a singer. *She’s So Unusual* was heavily reliant on outside material, and *True Colors* only partly less so. They were *very good* outside sources, mind you, but I’m into *artists*, not just performers, and I’m much more interested in hearing what Cyndi herself is interested in than I am in hearing even the best of the songs that were floating around LA record-mogul offices at the time. Collaborating is fine, it’s the sense of her participation that makes this album really sing for me.

It’s also no slouch on a song level. It continues the direction that the first two albums were going in, so it’s even less silly than *True Colors*, but it has a couple songs with the dance verve of “Boy Blue”: “Like a Cat” and “Insecurious” are the ones I have in mind. It also has several of a slower, more serious breed of song that “Calm Inside the Storm” is about the closest thing to on the first two albums. “I Drove All Night”, “My First Night Without You”, “Heading West”, “A Night to Remember”, “Unconditional Love”, and “I Don’t Want to Be Your Friend” are all of this sort. If you don’t like them, or their type, you won’t like this album much. They aren’t the kinetic, shiny pop that is the strength of the first two albums. They’re listening music more than dancing music, but that’s okay with me, and I think they make this a strikingly mature album, and one that begins to solidify Cyndi’s artistic credibility in a way that the first two, for all their other qualities, don’t.

### *Hat Full of Stars*, 1993 CD

I almost didn't buy this album. Nobody was playing stuff from it. It doesn't *look* like a Cyndi Lauper album: its blank-and-white cover art and simple Courier title-type are a world away from the other three albums' kaleidoscope costumes and design-riot graphics. I mean, you can't even tell what color her hair is! Worst of all, the only advance word I'd heard about it was "it uses lots of hip-hop beats". I don't like hip-hop, and its beats aren't exceptions to that. It looked bad, and the safest assumption seemed to be that Cyndi had embarked on a new career direction that wasn't going to appeal to me at all.

Still, there I was in the record store looking at this and the new Pat Benetar album, remembering liking both artists, and knowing that neither were likely to get played on the radio station I listen to, so if I didn't buy them I'd probably never know whether they were any good. Plus, they were both on sale. It's only money, I thought to myself, siphoning my latest raise directly into HMV's Swiss bank accounts.

Boy was that a good decision. As I write this review it's late September, 1993 (and Georgia actually *is* back at school), so I have to wait three more months to find out how this album fares in the year-end top ten, but you can skip ahead to the appendix and find out right now. Go ahead, have a look. Did it make #1? *No, don't tell me!* Gotta be careful about time loops. Anyway, if it did it wouldn't surprise me. This is *such* an incredible album. Listening to it the first few times, I felt like I'd picked up a dropped dollar bill on the street and discovered a stack of fifties under it. The next few times I felt like I'd discovered that one of the fifties was actually a check for \$1,000,000, made out to cash. I liked Cyndi a *lot*, already, but this record is on an entirely different plane from her previous work. I've tried to be sparing with the sticker "Masterpiece", but I peel one off and affix it here without a moment's hesitation.

What are the components of this great leap forward? Well, surprisingly enough, many of them are old ones. Eric Bazilian and Rob Hyman are back. Bova and Bralower are here. Nile Rodgers drops in. Anton Fig is around. William Wittman comes by for "additional production", whatever *that* means. Tom Gray co-wrote one song. For every old face, however, there is a new one. The two most significant ones are veteran hip-hop producer Junior Vasquez, who is the engineer of Cyndi's new sound if not its architect, and new writing partner and multi-instrumentalist Allee Willis, who has a authorial hand in five songs, and has as many instruments after her name in the credits as Eric or Rob. There are a couple new celebrity names, with both Nicky Holland and Mary-Chapin Carpenter

helping write a song each. There's a whole list of musicians I don't know from elsewhere. There are no Steinberg/Kelly songs.

Judging from the liner notes, this looks like a stylistic goulash at best, and a musical disaster at worst. In actuality, it's killer. Yeah, there are hip-hop beats in a sense, but this isn't hip-hop by anybody's standard. The touch of bringing back the Hooters, with their white musical instincts and occasional near-Celtic leanings, at the same time as employing a hardcore dance producer, was utterly inspired, and makes for a breathtaking fusion that you *could* dance to, but you'll want to hold still and listen, if only because you can't tell whether to do grind or a jig. If you can imagine a world whose four corners are Prince, Black 47, Tori Amos and Madonna, you're no closer to understanding what this album sounds like, but at least you've demonstrated enough mental flexibility to grasp it after a few listens. There are African backing vocalists, dulcimers, flügelhorn, drum machines, two Casios, accordion, static, little cartoon drawings in the liner notes, the best song called "Dear John" that I've ever heard, and a hat on the cover that has the whole sky inside it, which Cyndi's voice fills all the same.

Trying to describe the individual songs would inevitably miss the point. They come in various sizes, shapes and colors. Slow, fast, joyous, dark. On some Cyndi is restrained and elegant, on others wildly pyrotechnic. There are serious social topics lurking here, like wife abuse and teenage pregnancy (you really have to know where to look to see "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" from here), but the overarching mood is a much more complex one of introspection and self-awareness. Listening to the album and reading someone quoted in the notes as saying to Cyndi "We miss hearing you sing, when are you coming in to record?", I feel like I have glimpsed a moment of true personal epiphany.

In the end the most impressive thing about this album for me is precisely how impossible it is for me to dissect. I not only don't feel like picking the songs apart, I'm not even sure I *could*. Cyndi's first three albums are all *song* albums, in various degrees, and indeed this whole chapter is strongly oriented around single songs, but this record is fifty-three minutes long, and while it is playing I am powerless to alter its course. Its grip is magical. I don't dare put it on repeat, because once the first drum hits the craving to hear the whole thing through is almost physical.

I'll stop raving now. Make me happy, and go buy a copy. I know I tell you to do that a lot, but frankly, if you're not going to buy lots of CDs, what did you buy this book for? Just do it.

And if you don't like it, I don't want to know.

## Nena

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### 99 Luftballons, 1984 CD

No doubt you remember “99 Luftballons”, or the English variant “99 Red Balloons”. The first thing to realize about it is that “Luft” does *not* mean red in German, it means air. The second thing to realize about it is that Nena are from the city Berlin, they aren’t the band Berlin.

Five of the eleven songs on this CD are in English, and the other six are in the German, which is the language the band actually speaks. The English ones are uniformly awful. Even “99 Red Balloons” is painfully phonetic, and the music of the other four is of the blandest Berlin-wannabee New Wave sort. The six German ones are a good deal better. “99 Luftballons” in the original is a charming pop song whose nostalgia value for me easily justified the \$5.99 I paid. “Kino” and “Leuchtturm” are agreeable follow-ups. The tiny “power guitar” on “Rette Mich” is pretty laughable (you’d think Germans, of all people, could produce a decent metal guitar sound), but the song is okay. “Das Land Der Elefanten” and “Uner Kannt Durch’s Marchenland”, however, aspire to bigger, more percussion-heavy things, and fall, in my opinion, quite short.

## Berlin

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### Pleasure Victim, 1982 CD

This was, I’m pretty sure, one of the first two New Wave records I ever bought. Brought into the modern era on a diet of Black Sabbath, Blue Oyster Cult and Rush, I adapted to this newfangled synthesizer dance stuff slowly, and it didn’t help that I was only 15 at the time. At any rate, I bought this and Thomas Dolby’s *The Golden Age of Wireless* together, and thus began what I think of as my musical maturity.

This turned out to be the more ill-advised investment of the two. Five of the seven songs on this short album are quite bad, and the biggest hit, “Sex (I’m a...)” is one of the dumbest songs ever committed to vinyl. The jacket picture, from behind, of a mostly naked Terri Nunn, who is credited here with “Vocals, BJs”, is almost the album’s highlight.

What beats it out are two fabulous synth-pop masterpieces that appear, incongruously, among the crap. “Masquerade” and “The Metro” are edgy, cold and dangerous, bristling with synths but intensely melodic, and energized by Nunn’s brutally sexual vocal delivery. Slap them on either side of a 45 and

you would have had one of the best exemplar singles of the early Eighties, all ready for a time capsule.

### Love Life, 1984 CD

Berlin had one more single, “No More Words”, that nearly lived up to the potential of “Masquerade” and “The Metro”, so I shelled out for this, their second album. I should, I suppose, have bought the best-of, but I absolutely couldn’t countenance the idea of owning “Take My Breath Away”, their revolting *Top Gun* soundtrack hit.

This is a much better album than the first one. Producers Mike Howlett and Giorgio Moroder give the band a much more spirited synth-dance-pop sound, which goes a long way to cover up and/or excuse the fact that just about everything they do, Missing Persons did better. The bad songs here are insignificant in a pleasant sort of way, which I much prefer to the painfully embarrassing bulk of *Pleasure Victim*.

The good ones are all “Masquerade”/“The Metro” remakes, about as plainly as copyright laws will allow. “Pictures of You” and “No More Words” are the best, and the most obvious. Their calculation shows, and so they don’t quite recapture the spirit of the first two, but I think the world has plenty of room for a couple more of these songs.

## Missing Persons

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### Spring Session M, 1982 CD

Missing Persons is Berlin done right. This comparison is blatantly unfair to Berlin, as Missing Persons have a number of natural advantages that Berlin wasn’t blessed with. The most apparent of these is that the members of Missing Persons are musicians, while the members of Berlin appear to be out-of-work two-bit pornographers. Another is that Missing Persons can write songs, while Berlin seem to have stolen a couple from somewhere and learned to change the words around. A third is that Dale Bozzio makes Terri Nunn look and sound like Edith Bunker. But Berlin can’t help all that, can they?

Foremost among the actual musicians in Missing Persons is drummer Terry Bozzio, a former Zappa bandmate and UK member known for his studio work before and after. He displays a decidedly un-LA propensity for keeping his drum sound dry enough that you actually feel like you’re hearing a *drummer play*. As you know if you’ve read much else of this book, I have nothing whatsoever against running a drum machine through dozens of reverbs and calling it a rhythm track, but neither do I have anything against

giving a virtuoso human a pair of sticks and putting a band around him. Missing Persons might have been more successful with a dancier drum sound, but this way is stranger and cooler. You could take the vocal tracks off this album and still enjoy it, which is a rare thing to be able to say about dance-pop.

Terry's then-wife, Dale, is the band's face, and her face is the cover of this album. A striking figure, with wild multi-colored hair, a voice in the same general league as Cyndi Lauper's, and a collection of transparent plastic clothes, Dale made Missing Persons an instantly memorable presence, both live and on record. When she sings "Nobody notices me. / I think I'll dye my hair blue", she is exactly the mixture of extremism, disgust, impulsiveness and absurdity that made the good parts of New Wave so great. Punk took some of the same urges and tried to change the world with them. New Wave saw how little of the world punk really changed, and decided that if they couldn't actually change things, at least they could make them more interesting.

With that goal in mind, Missing Persons turned out an EP, and then expanded on it for this first full album, a brilliant collection of songs that today sounds historic to me, not dated. There isn't a bad song among the dozen here, and several are true standouts. "Destination Unknown", "Walking in LA" and "Words" are the ones you've probably heard, but "Noticeable One", "Windows", "It Ain't None of Your Business", "Tears", "Here and Now" and "Bad Streets" are just as good. I consider this album one of the crowning achievements of a short-lived genre that I, for one, really miss.

Capitol never reissued this album on CD in the US, but there is a Japanese CD version, which I eventually bought. For those of you with limited access or budget for imports, though, the best-of is a rather viable alternative.

### *Color in Your Life*, 1986 LP

It may come as a surprise to you that Missing Persons made more than one album. In fact, they made three, of which this is the third. The second one, *Rhyme and Reason*, I know of only from descriptions, but this third one I found on vinyl for \$1.99 in late 1993, an ultra-rare exception to my resolution to buy no new vinyl. I was forced to replace my copy of *She's So Unusual* with a CD that same day, to prevent an even momentary net increase in the six boxes of vinyl that I'm gradually trying to reduce to four.

Sadly, most of Missing Persons' charm has drained away by the time they reach this album. The songs are essentially in descending order of quality, and the line passes through the zero axis before the end of side one.

The skills of both Bozzios are almost unused here. Terry's drumming is disappointingly bland, and whatever drug was fed him to achieve this was slipped in Dale's drink as well. Gone are the fiery squeaks and hairpin vocal turns she delighted in on the first album. Terri Nunn *could* sing this stuff, but I'm not sure even *she'd* want to. The band hits rock bottom on the last song, "We Don't Know Love At All", which Dale doesn't even sing, and which thus ends up sounding like Spandau Ballet trying to play a discarded Fish song from sheet music. Yech. Trouser Press said to avoid this album, but I didn't listen. Don't you make the same mistake.

### *The Best of Missing Persons*, 1987 CD

Rather than re-release Missing Persons' three albums and one EP on CD in the US, Capitol decided to substitute this single-CD compilation. It's too bad, though I can understand the impulse. The fifteen songs on this hour-long collection include four from the debut EP ("Destination Unknown", "I Like Boys", "Mental Hopscotch" and the Doors' "Hello, I Love You"), six from *Spring Session M* ("Words", "Windows", "It Ain't None of Your Business", "Walking in LA", "Tears" and "Bad Streets"), two from *Rhyme and Reason* ("Give" and "Right Now"), and the first three from *Color in Your Life* ("Color in Your Life", "I Can't Think About Dancin'" and "No Secrets").

This certainly covers the bases. I half wish there was more from the second album, since I haven't heard it, but the two songs included here don't bode at all well for it, and the three songs from the third album are exactly the amount you need. If I had been compiling the album, I would have tossed "I Like Boys" and "Hello, I Love You". The band didn't really come of age until *Spring Session M*, and "Mental Hopscotch" is a fine token representation from the EP. The Doors cover is amusing once, but I hate listening to it (though keep in mind that I also hate the Doors themselves). Using those two spots, and the extra 15 minutes of CD capacity, I could probably have fit on the other five tracks from *Spring Session M*, making this that album with a few choice bonuses (surely there were two better examples from album two?), which would have been great. In lieu of that, though, the seven tracks here (counting "Destination Unknown") represent all my favorites but "Noticeable One" and "Here and Now", which is doing pretty well. Only a real fanatic (me, for instance) need buy both the Japanese *Spring Session M* reissue *and* this compilation, and on the whole I think "Color in Your Life" would sway the balance toward the collection even if the prices were the same, which they usually aren't. glenn says "Buy this one".

## Blondie

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### *Autoamerican*, 1980 LP

In terms of both commercial success and critical acclaim, Blondie dwarfs Berlin and Missing Persons. For some reason, though, they never really appealed to me. They didn't play up Deborah Harry's sex appeal as effectively as Terri's or Dale's got used, and on the other side they didn't manage to make a virtue of their nerdiness the way Devo did, and in the end for me they fell limply in between. This album, my token Blondie entry, has the mildly interesting "The Tide is High" and "Rapture", but otherwise I find it very dull.

## Bangles

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### *Different Light*, 1985 LP

Moving over into the mainstream, the Bangles polish up their smiles and put a coat of respectability over the dangerous bare patches that Berlin and Missing Persons showed. Sweet harmony is their strong point, and after some thought I've come to the conclusion that they can sing well, but they couldn't write their way out of a somersaulting Jeep. Their one great song from before this album, "Going Down to Liverpool", was a Katrina and the Waves cover, and the three really fine ones here are all other people's. "Manic Monday" was written by Prince, "If She Knew What She Wants" is by Jules Shear, and "September Gurls" is a Big Star cover. They do them all well, but "Manic Monday" is the only one you can't get elsewhere. I like it best, though, and that kept them in the book.

## The Go-Go's

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### *We Got the Beat*, 1981 7"

The Bangles' stylistic forerunners I consider much more successful. They write their own material, aren't afraid to sound like they play their own instruments, and come across with a charm that I don't find in the Bangles. My sister was a big Go-Go's fan at a time when that was not a factor in their favor, and so I got thoroughly sick of hearing their first two albums. Now I'd probably like them, but I haven't been inspired to bother. Their token representation here, then, is this single, which I picked up at some point, because I needed the song for some reason. "We Got the Beat" is a good, rough, pop hit, slightly over-shadowed by the

other first-album single, "Our Lips Are Sealed". "Can't Stop the World", on the flip side, is also fine.

### *Talk Show*, 1984 CD

The Go-Go's don't hit perfection, in my opinion, until their third album, *Talk Show*. A healthy dollop of Martin Rushent's production gloss here goes a long way. Gina Schock's drumming and Kathy Valentine's bass playing sound big and powerful, if straightforward, and they give these songs, especially Schock and Valentine's "You Thought", a muscular drive that much of the band's chirpy earlier work is missing. Jane Wiedlin and Charlotte Caffey's guitars have also been cranked up a couple amp-knob notches, to good effect. And although Belinda Carlisle has never been my favorite singer, she sounds just enough on edge throughout this album that I find her much more appealing than in her later solo career.

The strength of *Talk Show*, however, is its songs. *Beauty and the Beat* and *Vacation* I found to be plagued with dud tracks that warred with the solid singles to drag the *albums*, as wholes, down. *Talk Show* is unflagging. The obvious choice for a high point, "Head Over Heels", isn't even my favorite, and this album marks the first time I've felt that the Go-Go's can make any kind of song *other* than the fast dance-hit work. Songs here like "Forget That Day" and "Mercenary" have a dark smoothness that spunk alone couldn't have carried. Not that there *aren't* the true-to-form hits you'd expect from the band: "Turn to You", "I'm the Only One" and "Capture the Light" fill that slot admirably.

I choose my favorite here for personal reasons. "Yes or No" was meant, I think, as a simple song about wanting some companionship without any ulterior agenda. "I'm not asking for all your time, / A song or two would suit me fine." The insistent drive of the song, and the sinister edge to "I'll make it easy for you to decide", though, resonated profoundly with my melodramatic interpretation of a semi-relationship I was sort of in at the time when I bought the album. The idea of a woman luring me in with pretenses of casualness went a long way towards helping me invest some rather pathetic behavior on my part with greater danger-fraught import, thus turning the situation from one in which I was being an annoying jerk who didn't seem to feel that an evening was complete until I'd spent at least an hour explaining some vague existential angst I claimed to be feeling about the whole thing (but wasn't), into a valiant battle on my part to defend my fragile virtue against a siren seductress. (Stephanie, the real explanation was that 1) I was afraid of sex, and 2) I was still hung up on Jane. Both of these things were probably painfully obvious to *you* at the time. Oh well. Sorry. We had a lot of fun watching Friday

Night Videos, and I suspect that you're one of the only people to whom the first half of this chapter will really make sense. And aren't you glad I didn't mention your last name?)

## The Graces

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### *Perfect View*, 1989 CD

Go-Go's guitarist Charlotte Caffey recruited guitarist/singer Meredith Brooks, singer Gia Ciambotti, and a seemingly endless list of studio players, producers, engineers and other assorted hangers-on, and made one album as the Graces. It starts out splendidly, with a marvelously crafted anthem, "Lay Down Your Arms", easily worth comparing to Scandal's "The Warrior" as gratuitous overuse of war/love metaphors in service of a good cause.

The rest of the album goes more or less nowhere. The title track is a distant second, and things drop off sharply after that. Ciambotti and Brooks' voices don't seem like any improvement over Caffey's to me, and as they don't show up on any songwriting credits, it's hard for me to tell what they add to this project. Caffey does her best to carry the album herself, co-writing all but one song and taking three turns at lead vocals (I'd rank her other track, "Time Waits for No One", third, in fact), but it's a losing cause. The Graces don't sound like a band, the album doesn't seem to form anything coherent, and there aren't enough songs up to "Lay Down Your Arms" standard to make me willing to overlook the overall faults. I would have been interested to see if they could improve on that on a second album, because the band isn't completely without potential, but one album is, to date, all there is of them.

## Jane Wiedlin

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### *Jane Wiedlin*, 1985 CD

It doesn't take much more than thirty seconds of "Blue Kiss", the opening track on Go-Go's rhythm guitarist Jane Wiedlin's first solo album, for me to decide where the part of the Go-Go's that I liked went. Jane scraps the Go-Go's' band aesthetic completely, and opts for a synth and drum-machine powered dance-pop album that partially prefigures Cyndi Lauper's 1986 album *True Colors*. Jane's voice isn't as striking or powerful as Cyndi's, and the production of this record isn't as over-the-top as *True Colors*, but the principles are similar, and people who thought that songs like

"Change of Heart" and "911" suffered from musical steroid overdoses might well prefer this album. Jane's voice is small but charming, her songwriting instincts are sound, and she has friends who play and program quite well.

For me, this one is about half successful. I find that I like just about every other song. "Blue Kiss" is a great, giddy, pop gem. "Sometimes You Really Get on My Nerves" and "Somebody's Going to Get into This House" hit their grooves solidly. "Goodbye Cruel World", "East Meets West" and "Forever", though, seem either undercooked or missing some important spice. "Modern Romance" rearranges the ingredients of "Forever", though, and seems to come out right, so maybe it was a preparation step, not an herb.

"I Will Wait for You" is the first even-numbered song I really like. A lithe, rubbery bass line bolsters the snappy drum track, and a sleek chorus makes the most of the fact that while Jane's singing won't be used for those Maxell ads where the sounds blow the guy's martini out of his hand, she's really quite good at the oft-undervalued art of hitting notes. "One Hundred Years of Solitude" is probably not exactly what Garcia Marquez had in mind, but the song is a good deal shorter than the book, and has other virtues as well. "Where We Can Go" sounds like Berlin at about 1.5 speed, an innovation that it's a shame Berlin themselves never thought of, because it's kind of cool. That's two even numbers I like, but "My Traveling Heart" seems to lurch a bit too unsteadily to me, and that partially compensates. Overall, though, this album is a very encouraging solo debut, especially compared with how much I liked the Graces (not much) and Belinda Carlisle (not at all).

### *Fur*, 1988 CD

Actually, *Fur* was the first Jane Wiedlin album I was aware of. I got handed a promotional cassingle of "Rush Hour" outside of Tower Records in Boston one day, and although the cover looked pretty awful, the name seemed vaguely familiar, and it was free so I figured I might as well listen to it. I liked it, and listening to Jane's voice I quickly remembered why I knew the name.

This, her second album, shows all the maturation that the three year delay between the first one and it could indicate. On a few songs on *Jane Wiedlin*, Jane sounded a bit like she hadn't quite figured out how to best use the new tools available to her. This time out she sounds firmly in control. The "band" is pretty contained, personnel-wise, which probably helps. Rob Fisher's keyboards and programming provide the bulk of the noises. Jane and Neil Taylor add guitars, Bruce Smith percussion, and the Kickhorns add hammered

dulcimer, electric cello, bass harmonica, digeridu, accordion, bandoliers, three-string gridiron, acoustic colophon and the unmistakable strains of the Mallardtron, which will be the subject of my next book, *Chords of a Feather*.

For the most part, this album is the best you could ask for in perky dance-pop. Georgia, in fact, says it's *too* perky, and can't understand how I can like it and not like Madonna, as well. For me, though, Jane's music has a *cheer* to it that Madonna's lacks, and yet is genuine enough that it never seems to become cloying. There is a calculated, choreographed sexuality I see in people like Madonna, Janet Jackson and Paula Abdul, and a sense in which the music itself is secondary. Jane makes music that is, I suppose, in some sense similar, but I never feel that her girlish charm is manufactured, or that the songs she has written are intended to be merely a vehicle for it. Plus, you ever see Madonna play guitar?

"Rush Hour" and "Give!" are my favorites, but almost all the other songs are right behind. The only missteps this album makes, in my opinion, are when it slows down. "The End of Love" and "Whatever It Takes" turn sweet and bright into syrupy and turgid, and fall into the same murky swamp as such things as "Take My Breath Away" and that Madonna song from *A League of Their Own*. (Just to be consistent, Georgia confessed that she actually likes "Whatever It Takes", precisely because it *doesn't* have the perkiness of the rest of the record.)

Jane also isn't the world's most profound lyricist, and "Homeboy" and "Fur" cause me little twinges of pain. Poetry isn't the thing to like about the album, though. Happy people rarely write particularly good poetry, I think, but who cares? Smile, dance, don't wear fur. Sometimes, that's enough.

### *Tangled*, 1992 CD

*Tangled* is where Jane puts all the pieces together. Looking at the unclothed, but strategically-draped, cover shot, I was worried that in trying to be more overtly sexual, Jane would ruin the charm that had previously been one of her real strengths, but she doesn't. Instead, she heads to England, and recruits producer Peter Collins and a band made up of drummer Steve Ferrera, Nik Kershaw on bass, Tim Pierce on guitar, and a few other extraneous players. The resulting sound is a lot less reliant on keyboards than *Fur* or *Jane Wiedlin*, though there are still plenty of them. It also features the best songs on Jane's solo career, by far, songs that pester me to take the "dance" part of "dance-pop" off, or at least replace it with "party". The feeling of bouncy, ebullient happiness is still there, but the richer musical arrangements give it a

depth that suddenly brings to mind comparisons to more "serious" musicians like Kirsty MacColl, at the same time as it reminds me of the girl-group ooh-wa of Tracey Ullman. The album also sounds enough like Jane that I finally feel that she has fully established her own musical identity independent of the Go-Go's. As I write, a greatest-hits compilation has even appeared, and though I didn't buy it, looking over its track listing I was struck that Jane's body of solo work is, in its own way, perhaps now *better* than her former band's.

This is a very consistent album, and in that sense reminds me of Cyndi Lauper's *A Night to Remember*. For the first time, there are no songs here that feel like weak spots in the album. Rather, the album builds smoothly, hitting, in my opinion, three peaks as it develops. The first is the title track, halfway through. With ringing guitar, booming drums, soaring backing vocals, and several parts where the waves of delicious sound recede to give Jane space to sing, or Pierce room to solo, this is a mesmerizing song that sounds quite a ways more accomplished than any of the Go-Go's lower-tech tunes. The song's lyrics play "tangled" as both an entwined embrace and relationship confusion, but the music leaves me believing only the first sense. This is the song that you expect the picture on the cover to go along with.

The second peak is the most gleefully giddy, "Big Rock Candy Mountain". If you *were* to find a mountain made entirely of candy, this song is what I'd expect to hear playing there. Now, you might not *want* to find a "Big Rock Candy Mountain", and now that I have the soundtrack I'm not sure I need to, but that's as may be.

The last peak, fittingly enough, is the last track, "Euphoria". By itself, the song is a somewhat generic song of hope, defiance, persistence, and the usual "We shall overcome" sentiments. A few seconds of news samples at the beginning, however, anchor it to the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and the novelty of having a Jane Wiedlin song actually relate to something real is quite intriguing. I have no reason to assume that she isn't an intelligent, aware individual, but neither she nor the Go-Go's ever gave any sign *in their music* that the real world intruded on them in any substantial way. And, to be fair, this isn't "We Didn't Start the Fire", or even "Right Here, Right Now", but it does make a fitting conclusion to an album that elevates Jane Wiedlin into a different rank of musicians. It also has some nice fiddle, 12-string and bazookis, and this time I'm not kidding.



## Fiona

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### *Fiona, 1985 LP*

If I had to guess what will seem like the most incongruous part of my collection to you, the hypothetical reader, Fiona would be my bet. I remember hearing "Talk to Me" back when it came out, driving somewhere in Dallas with my father, and thinking to myself, "You know, for somebody whose album I would never be caught dead owning, she has a kind of cool voice." That impression stuck, but Fiona's career never really seemed to take off commercially, and the kinds of radio stations I listened to certainly wouldn't play her, so she didn't enter my consciousness again until, several years later, I came across this album in a cut-out bin, with a price tag very closely resembling the amount of money left in my record-buying budget that week. Suddenly nostalgic, I bought it.

It will be hard, but you have to try and believe me when I tell you, I *adore* it. First, so you'll know we're talking about the same artist, I'll give you the caveats:

Yes, she looks like a suburban nightmare, like the ultimate backstabbing bitch, somebody who just kicked the shit out of Tiffany and Debbie Gibson in the mall parking lot, and now is coming after *your man*. She has long reddish-brown hair, and on the album cover is wearing a sleeveless shirt whose sides allow a sizable quadrant of her breasts to function as tractor beams on the eyes of the average heterosexual American male. She wears gloves and leather jackets. She jumps, pouts and luxuriates in her long hair in a way that make you want to say "frisky" in that sickening way that wolves say it about young, lost, recently sheared sheep.

Yes, she is the sort of singer whose producer writes most of her songs for her, and whose band, for unspecified return favors, provides the rest. And yes, the songs sound very much like the sort of songs you expect a producer to write for a woman who looks like this. They are big on over-produced hard-rock bluster, and no song is complete until Fiona has had an opportunity to push her voice to the point where it begins, so attractively, to break.

Yes, the lyrics are the sort of thing to make NOW activists wonder why, exactly, they bother. All songs are about "love", by which she usually means sex, and women are almost invariably cast as the *object* of love, not its instigator, or equal participant, or anything enlightened like that. Things like "Every night I'm screaming out your name", "Oh no angels don't throw love to the wind" and "Na na na na na na na".

Yes, there is a song called "Na Na Song".

Yes, when some people say "trash", talking about rock music, this is precisely what they mean.

But none of that matters at all. No cynical sniping, however well founded in theory, can change one immutable fact: Fiona's voice and music make me very, very, very happy. She sings like her life depends on it. Sure, maybe it's a cushy, pampered life, but it makes no difference. This is the sound of the most powerful emotions a human is capable of, being ripped out of them in the form of a song which has almost no chance to avoid being overwhelmed by them. Next to that voice, the music is powerless to distinguish itself. The standard session-player rock backing that Bobby Messano, Donnie Kesselback, Joe Franco and Benjy King provide, then, attempts only to keep pace, to give Fiona's earthquake-force delivery an appropriately overblown backdrop, like a soap-opera desert-island matte-painting.

And no, all this passion is not done in service of anything in particular. Fiona belts out the chorus of "Na Na Song" with just as much desperate energy as anything else. In a way, this album is the perfect example of unearned drama, of pomp completely unconnected to the content of the artwork, and a demonstration of the essential flaw at the heart of art itself, which prevents it from ever, on a philosophical level, being taken seriously as a means of communication. Again, though, I cannot stress enough: I don't care. Fiona beats Kirkegaard, hands down. One sultry kick of a tapered soft-leather boot to the groin, and suddenly there's a lot of space on the K shelf of the philosophy section, and if you fill it with copies of *Fiona*, I'm not going to argue.

### *Beyond the Pale, 1986 LP*

Hundreds of years of progress in art history, fashion, sex roles, gender stereotypes, animal rights, philosophy, music, law and good taste are all blown to unrecognizable fragments on the back cover of Fiona's second album. As with any masterwork, it takes time for the full impact of this staged photograph to sink in. It looks, at first, like just another sultry picture of Fiona, this time trading the first album's black tank top for voluminous white jackets. But there is oh so much more to it than that. Look more closely.

Perhaps we should start at the top. Note the clenched fist raised above her head, an age-old symbol of power and courage. Look at it more closely, however. Notice how she has gathered the end of her sleeve into it. *What sleeve* is that? It doesn't belong to the long coat she's wearing, nor to the vest underneath, nor to the white shirt under *that*. No, it belongs to some completely separate garment only visible at the wrists, a practical purpose for which I can't begin to imagine.

As near as I can figure, it would only serve to lessen the impact of the fist's punches, and so saps this ancient gesture of power of most of its vitality, turning her fists into something soft, like a declawed cat's paw (remember this detail).

Next, descending her arm, we reach a formidable array of wrist jewelry (better visible on the front cover). Note that the jewelry is silver, to go along with the white clothes, white backdrop, and the mention of the word "pale" in the title (though, to be sure, the meaning of "pale" in "beyond the pale" has nothing to do with a lack of color). Note also that she's wearing enough of it to run a real risk of damaging anything she swings her arm too close to, and that's assuming that the stuff wouldn't fly straight off her arm if she didn't keep it upright, which may not be a safe assumption.

The rest of her right arm passes largely without event, save the various sleeves I alluded to earlier. Her hair I have commented on earlier, and here I only note that it is much more obvious in this photo that it is *red*, and that there are some bleached highlights to help with the transition from red hair to white clothes. Her pout I have also referred to previously. She's getting even better at it. Sliding down past her white tights without comment, for the moment, we find, at the base of all this white, nearly knee-high black leather boots of a decidedly kinky-looking sort, but in a soft, cuddly way, not like those pointy, shiny, thigh-high red-light-zone kind. These are *not* the sort of boot that you expect to come with a matching whip. In fact, in one of many stunningly brilliant details of this photo, wrapped around the right one is a strand of pearls. Notice how loosely the strand is draped. Any movement, and it will probably come loose. What better ornament for a woman than one that prevents her from so much as moving? Even better, the last loop of pearls passes directly under the upraised heel of the flat-soled boot, so that Fiona can't even put her foot down, much less walk, run, or do anything else. This is probably a good thing, since if her right arm wasn't raised so high, I'm pretty sure that her beautiful white linen coat would drag on the ground, which would be okay on the spotless white no-horizon photo backdrop, but which in any real place would soil the coat savagely.

Lastly, to her left, a sleek, fat, white cat, with a silver collar of its own. This is a *very* fat cat, and one imagines that it would be very soft, and very much unable to run away from you, even if it wanted to. It is only a small leap to speculate that Fiona, herself, shares these last two characteristics. She certainly isn't fat, though a tiny bit of plumpness can be discerned about the thighs, but this picture strongly suggests that the

hard-won indolence the cat has earned by overeating, Fiona can simulate by force of personality.

As a coda, note a few important pieces of text. There are more credits for the picture than for the music inside. The thanks have their moments, but the last two are the best: "This record is dedicated to Donnie Kisselbach because sentimental boys are hard to find." "And a P.S.: Mr. Face-If I could have made this record out of wool I would have...MMMMM...XX". Add to those the "Lent for Promotional Use Only. Any Sale or Unauthorized Transfer is Prohibited and Void" stamp filling the white space on my copy, and you have as round a condemnation of the decay into decadence of Western Society as any available.

Almost as an afterthought, there is another killer album inside. Beau Hill, who wrote "Talk to Me", takes over on production for Peppi Marchello, plays a tall stack of instruments, and helps out with writing a couple songs. Kisselbach, Franco and Messano return, along with several guitarists (including Nile Rodgers), percussionists, background singers (including Kip Winger) and others. Under Beau's stewardship, the arrangements use more synth bass, Linn drums, vocal effects and general odd noises than on *Fiona*, but all to the same end. Fiona does what Fiona does, just as well as she did it the first time around. The lyrics, with such things as "Living in a Boy's World", "Tender Is the Heart", "Hopelessly Love You", "Running out of Night", "He's on My Side" and "Keeper of the Flame", uphold the proudly politically incorrect standard of the first album (and those are just *titles*). In short, it's another fabulous album.

### ***Hearts of Fire* (soundtrack), 1987 CD**

In 1987, a man named Richard Marquand had the singularly questionable idea of making a movie about an aspiring young rock singer, played by Fiona, who falls in with a retired old hand, played by Bob Dylan, and a hot star/producer, played by Rupert Everett. One would think that simple reflection would have been sufficient to brand this idea misguided, and that would have been it. Against all odds, however, the movie went ahead and got made. I can't recall ever seeing it hit theaters, but the soundtrack appeared (I have it on both vinyl and CD, no less), and eventually the film showed up on video. One weekend when Georgia was away on business and couldn't object, I rented it. I make no comment about what I thought of Fiona's part in it, but the rest of the film is really pretty bad. It's hard to say whether Dylan or Everett is more justified in regretting agreeing to appear in it. Probably Dylan, but only by a narrow margin.

The soundtrack finds Dylan doing a couple of his own songs, and one by John Hiatt, all of which are

awful. Rupert Everett does two, one of which is "Tainted Love". These, also, are awful. Fiona does the other five, and they *rock*. "Hearts of Fire" itself is brilliant (and co-written by Beau and Fiona). "I'm In It for Love" is somewhat slight, but "Hair of the Dog (That Bit You)" is a gorgeous piece of metal stomp. "The Nights We Spent on Earth" is one of my favorite Fiona songs, and contains the fascinating science-fictional chorus lyric "Remember all the nights we spent on Earth? / Remember how we stood for hours and watched the changing tide / Long before the colonies were planted in the sky?" Indeed, the song seems to actually be about a couple who *leaves* Earth on a colony ship, which makes it not only the most lyrically-interesting Fiona song, but one of the most lyrically-interesting rock songs, period. Sue Sheridan and Steve Diamond wrote it, whoever they are.

The album ends with "Let the Good Times Roll", which is *not* the Cars song, and *is* another sizzling Fiona song. I always skip the Dylan and Everett songs when I listen to this, but the good news is that the Fiona songs are good enough that I put those five on repeat and it's like having another full Fiona album. Very cool. Thank goodness for CD-player track-programming.

### ***Heart Like a Gun*, 1989 CD**

I guess it took a while to recover from *Hearts of Fire*, but Fiona's third studio album finally appeared in 1989. I have a good story about this one. For my 25th birthday, Georgia arranged a surprise birthday party for me, the theme of which was "The Worst Possible CD". My friends, sadistic bunch that they are, thought this theme was a great idea, and produced the most revolting array of polka compilations, Wayne Newton and Doris Day records, sound affects discs, Christian heavy metal and an opera based on the life of Charles Manson. There were quite a lot of them, and as I opened them I wondered how long it would be before somebody, thinking they were giving me something too bad to be believed, would give me something I already had and liked. Sure enough, about two-thirds of the way through, Crispin and Yvonne proudly presented me with *Heart Like a Gun*. When I told them I owned a copy, and thought it was great, I think they wanted to leave, and it's taken me quite a long time to earn back some measure of respect. (No doubt reading this chapter will undo all that progress. Hmpf. The Bags' section is longer! Isn't it? Well, almost as long, anyway. Hey, Fiona had more full albums...)

*Heart Like a Gun* is a natural successor to *Fiona* and *Beyond the Pale*. Beau Hill remains the primary musical force, accompanied by the usual cast plus Laura McDonald, Dweezil Zappa and Night Ranger's Brad

Gillis. Kip Winger even steps forward for a vocal duet on "Everything You Do (You're Sexing Me)", which is probably the lowest point in Fiona's recorded career, though it's still better than you'd think. The most interesting detail is Fiona's name somewhere on the writing credits for nine of these ten songs. She gets help all the way through, but it's heartening to see her having a part in the creation. The music on this album leans a little more toward arena metal than *Beyond the Pale's*, and this suits Fiona's voice just fine. My credibility has probably, by this point, been fatally damaged, but I think this is the best Fiona album yet. It has straight-ahead rockers as good as any, like "Little Jeanie (Got the Look of Love)", "Where the Cowboys Go" and "Draw the Line", but it also has some unusual touches like the bouncy horn-stabs on "Bringing in the Beast", and a beautiful acoustic ballad, "Victoria Cross". Well, okay, it *starts* acoustic, and *ends* acoustic, but it also has one of the most spine-tingling moments in all of music when, at the end of the last chorus, Fiona stretches the word "fall" out until her voice cracks, shatters and spreads itself against the hillside like that skier in the "agony of defeat".

This album was generally available on CD, and seems to spend a lot of time in used bins, so you should have an easy time picking up a copy for some small amount of change that you couldn't possibly miss. Do. At the very least you'll be able to dismiss my fanaticism with the proper indignance ("I can't believe I spent good money on the basis of this idiot's tone-deaf opinion"), and the album makes a great birthday gift...

### ***Squeeze*, 1992 CD**

This album must have a story behind it, and I wish I knew what it was. It finds Fiona on a new label, Geffen, and Beau Hill not only isn't producing, he doesn't even play on it. His name, usually surrounded with affectionate effusion, appears in the Special Thanks section without any comment at all. If this album received any promotional attention at all from Geffen, I missed it. I guess Geffen had bigger things to play with, with Nirvana still high on the charts from the year before, but I was really hoping for a single, a tour, *something*. I should be grateful for the album.

This album is a departure in presentation for Fiona in more ways than those. The cover photo for *Squeeze* features *the whole band!* The first three covers contain Fiona, Fiona, Fiona and that cat, whose name may be Fiona too, for all I know. This one has Fiona, but she shares it with drummer Jimmy DeGrasso (fitting this gig in between leaving Y&T and joining Suicidal Tendencies, about as weird a career series as you will find), guitarist Dave Marshall (I don't know where he's from) and bassist Laura McDonald, the only return

participant from previous Fiona albums. The full foursome feature in all five photos on the cover and liner. The sound carries through this emphasis, and this is the first Fiona record that doesn't sound like the producer played most of the instruments. Marc Tanner, who is the producer, does co-write a few songs with Fiona, but otherwise stays out of the way. Keyboardist Kim Bullard (see *Y Kant Tori Read*) keeps the album from getting too natural, but Marshall, McDonald and DeGrasso definitely provide the bulk of the sound.

That's both cool and the reason I find this album a little disappointing. It's cool because, well, bands are cool. The disappointing thing is that Fiona herself isn't nearly as prominent a presence on this album as she was on the other ones. She's there, she sings well, she sounds good, but this album isn't *centered* around her to the same extent that the first three were, and I don't think being a group member suits her musical personality as well as being the star. Or, put another way, I have come to love her as the focal point, and I'm sorry to lose that. I was also sorry to see her having so few writing credits here, after having so many on *Heart Like a Gun*. And yes, I miss Beau Hill. Come back, bring your keyboards and your drum machines, give Fiona's fader a good upward whack, and let's make some more histrionic masterpieces.

That doesn't mean I don't *like* this album. It's very good, about even with *Fiona* in my estimation. "Kiss the Boys Good-bye", "Squeeze" and "Nobody Dies of a Broken Heart" are among Fiona's best, and "Life on the Moon", the last song, was #2 on my 1992 song top ten, edged out of #1 by only Tori Amos' "Silent All These Years". I can, and have, listened to it on constant repeat for quite a happy while. It's not Fiona's most paint-peeling vocal performance, either, it's just a great, melodic, infectious song (written by Jani Lane), and give this band a few more like it and I'll take back all the tepid things I said about them.

Sadly, as of this writing, Geffen and Fiona have parted ways, and I've yet to hear of a new affiliation.

## Pat Benetar

### *Get Nervous*, 1982 LP

Pat Benetar is another woman, like Cyndi Lauper, who seemed decidedly uncool to me at the age of 15 (when this album came out) or less (when her first three albums appeared). First I was into heavy metal, which she wasn't, then I got into New Wave, which she also wasn't, and I think my sister liked her, too, so between all those things it wasn't until several years later that

fond memories surfaced of a few particular Pat Benetar songs, and I began gradually exploring the canon.

The first song I remembered liking was "Shadows of the Night". I have always liked best those of Pat's songs with a soaring grandeur to them, as opposed to the hard, bluesy earlier hits like "Heartbreaker" and "Hell is for Children", and this explains the bias in my selection of her albums. It also may partly explain why I like Fiona better for many of the things that I would otherwise consider Pat's strengths.

Anyway, "Shadows of the Night" is on *Get Nervous*, so that's what I bought first. Although I like the album all right, it still sounds a lot like her first few, and just as I haven't bought *them*, I don't listen to this one much. "Shadows of the Night" is nicely dramatic (by which I mean overblown and over-acted), and I like the synthesizers on "Anxiety (Get Nervous)" and "I'll Do It", and "Little Too Little" has a few great chucka-chucka muted-guitar noises, but the rest of the album is rawer than I like my Benetar. The other way of looking at it, of course, is that this album retains the earlier records' energy and honest rock drive, and is thus preferable to the later, more processed, records. But that's not the way I look at it.

### *Live from Earth*, 1983 LP

This is a mostly-live album combining two tracks from *Get Nervous* ("Looking for a Stranger" and "I Want Out") and six from earlier ("Fire and Ice", "We Live for Love", "Hell Is for Children", "Hit Me with Your Best Shot", "Promises in the Dark" and "Heartbreaker") with two new studio tracks, "Love is a Battlefield" and "Lipstick Lies". It thus serves pretty credibly as a 1979-1983 best-of, if that's something you're looking for, though you should be warned that "class" was never Pat's strong suit, and her between-song banter is nothing to be proud of, not to mention the appalling sleeve photos which make her look like a malnourished zombie with an unfortunate (and futile) Elvira fixation.

I bought it for "Love is a Battlefield", the second song in my vision. (Sic. What do you call an auditory inspiration/hallucination, anyway? "Ausion"?) It is the first song to show the processed studio sheen of the next few Pat Benetar albums. Rigid drum patterns, lots of keyboard noises, and a much more restrained and controlled vocal performance from Pat highlight a sophisticated piece of cool pop craftsmanship, quite different from the ragged rock yowls of the live tracks here. The most unnerving thing about "Love is a Battlefield", though, is how much it resembles Don Henley's "The Boys of Summer", which came out a year later. The drums, the keyboards, the pacing, they all sound *really* similar. Very suspicious, if you ask me. Plus, if Don cribbed it from Pat, and spent the year

before he released his version assiduously polishing “Love is a Battlefield” and carefully touching up the detail work, he *would* probably come up with something as significantly better crafted as “The Boys of Summer”.

### ***Tropico*, 1984 LP**

The third song that began clamoring in my mind was “We Belong”, from *Tropico*. Pretty convenient for Pat that the four songs I decided I wanted were on *different* albums, don’t you think? Almost as if it was *planned* that way. Well, I originally bought all four of them used, cutout or as promos, so she didn’t actually get anything from me for it until I replaced *Seven the Hard Way* with a CD.

“We Belong” is very cool. In fact, “Shadows of the Night” boils down, once I analyze my feelings closely, to “We Belong”’s first draft. The combination of acoustic guitar, bounce-echoed synth chatterings, Pat’s dual vocal parts, and lyrics that felt profound to me when they came out (and I was “in love”, and wanting to invest the state with every kind of passionate glory I could find) made a song that in my mind was nearly immaculate. On record it doesn’t quite live up to the enhanced mental image I had built of it; the big parts aren’t as big as I thought, the quiet parts thus not quite as stark contrasts. It’s still pretty good, mind you, it’s just that it got better in my mind over a period of years, and the original album was never updated to reflect this progress.

The rest of the album means absolutely nothing to me. What *are* these songs? Intellectually I know that this album is closer to the next than to the last, and so I should like it, but I don’t. I don’t hate it, either. I don’t feel anything. Besides “We Belong”, the rest of the album doesn’t seem to exist for me. Also, Fiona’s “Na Na Song” kicks the shit out of Pat’s “Ooh Ooh Song”.

### ***Seven the Hard Way*, 1985 CD**

This is the album that earns Pat a nice chair in my pantheon. On it she and the band completely abandon all their earlier ideas about raw rock, blues, simplicity and that stuff, and instead hole up in a studio with mounds of keyboards, processors, multi-tracks and a legion of backing vocalists for a year or so. When they emerge, they bring the only Pat Benetar album that holds my interest all the way through. The good news is that not only does it keep me hooked from beginning to end, it continues to do so after dozens of circuits.

And you may hate it. I would have no trouble understanding why a fan of Pat’s from the beginning would listen to this album once and then threaten to kill anybody who played it in their presence ever again. Several of Pat’s prior trademarks, for instance, are

nowhere to be found. Where are the bared emotions of “Hell Is for Children” or “Hit Me with Your Best Shot”? Where are Neil’s guitar-hero riffs and solos? Where are the short, pithy rock songs? Where is the kind of music that sounded like an adult Joan Jett? Wherever all that stuff is, the walls around it are thick and well-insulated, and no sounds of them bleed through into *Seven the Hard Way*.

On the other side, this album has plenty of things that no previous Pat Benetar album had been seriously burdened with. Foremost among these are texture and complex arrangements. The band always sounded basically like a band, like a guitarist, a bass player, a drummer and a keyboard player, playing music while a small woman in a spandex jumpsuit sang. The live album doesn’t sound that much different from the studio albums it covers. This one is the first to throw in musical parts without apparent regard for whether the four people nominally in charge of making them could actually produce them all at once. Horns, other singers, sound processing and lots of keyboards all add up to an album sound unrelated to what the “band” would sound like “just playing”.

Actually, this applies from song to song, as well as within each song. The songs differ from each other sonically. Pat’s other records have about one sound, each, but this one has about as many sounds as songs. And while you might expect that this would lead to a chaotic and not very cohesive album, for me it actually reflects the first time Neil and Pat seem to have concentrated on the whole album as a work. The differences between songs make this seem like one big painting, rather than a series of smaller ones that share characteristics but don’t assemble into a larger canvas.

The blistering lead-off track, “Sex as a Weapon”, is the fourth song I wanted, and my favorite of Pat’s. It is as good an example of surging studio-manufactured power-pop as you will find, and the chorus/title is ready-made for contorted shout-alongs. I get a special satisfaction out of it because I used to put it on dance tapes for Harvard Lampoon parties where there was already a fine line being walked between Bacchanalian revelry and surrealistic self-referential parody, and also because in the context of this book and chapter, it seems to cry out against its own genre. Who more than Pat, with her braless spandex outfits and tough-bitch persona, most typified the artist/whore in American musical culture? Certainly there were others who traded more in sex appeal, but nobody who achieved quite Pat’s degree of white-trash aggression/vulnerability became anywhere near as famous for it. By this album, of course, Pat had abandoned that image completely, but it’s hard to forget it ever existed while you’re listening to “Sex as a Weapon”.

The other great hit from this album, which I had forgotten about, was “Invincible”, the theme from the movie *The Legend of Billie Jean*. This is almost as good as “Sex as a Weapon”, though this time the triumph and anguish take a more conventional form: “And with the power of conviction / There is no sacrifice. / It’s a do or die situation; / We will be invincible.” I don’t know what the movie was about, but from this song it seems safe to assume that somebody in it faced great adversity with great courage. This may be the ultimate generic-heroism song.

The best thing about this album, though, isn’t the two standouts, but rather the fact that *all* the *other* songs are terrific, something I wouldn’t say about any of the other albums (and didn’t). “La Bel Age” is sweeping and magnificent. “Walking in the Underground” is slow and moving. “Red Vision” is spooky. “The Art of Letting Go” wraps a great vocal hook around a stiff, unyielding rhythm. My impression is that most people do not give this album very much credit, even within just Pat’s repertoire, but I think it is terminally underrated, and really the one world-class album she has made, which I will admit is one more than I would have thought to expect from her.

#### *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 1993 CD

Pat made another album that I couldn’t bring myself to buy, then a blues album, which I had no qualms about skipping. I didn’t expect to hear from her again, but to my surprise she returned with long hair, a title that Pynchon forgot to nail down, and a completely refreshed sense of musical purpose, and made what is probably the most accomplished rock album of her career. No traces of the blues phase linger, Neil has carted most of his studio toys out to the curb for pickup, Pat is as capable a singer as ever, and the whole band has clearly slipped in a *lot* of practice since the last time they made a straight-ahead rock album. It wasn’t that hard to trivialize Pat in the early days, write off Neil as just her husband and the band as cannon fodder whose job was to stay out of her way. This album is impossible to dismiss in that way. The band have proven their credentials, and even if you don’t like *Gravity’s Rainbow*, you more or less have to take it seriously.

As that implied, though, taking it seriously *doesn’t* mean you have to like it. In fact, I don’t. I bought this and Cyndi Lauper’s *Hat Full of Stars* together, and I would gladly have paid twice the price for *Hat*, so I don’t resent what I spent on this, but it definitely adds nothing to my life. If you liked Pat’s first few albums, you should tune in again, but if you’re one of the three or four other humans (are there that many?) who

understand why I think *Seven the Hard Way* is so great, you really don’t need to bother.

## Scandal

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#### *Warrior*, 1984 CD

Pat Benetar and Patty Smyth make a natural pair, in my mind, so we move next to Patty’s short-lived band, Scandal. Scandal made an EP, which is now firmly out of existence (the first hit, which Crispin and I couldn’t think of, but which Julie Slater came up with after a little thought, was “Goodbye to You”), and this album, and then Patty went solo. Her first solo album is why I like her, and I went back and bought this one because, well, what else *was* there?

It’s a pretty decent album at that, but you have to be prepared for cheesiness. “The Warrior”, the first song and biggest hit, is perhaps the worst offender, and if you can stomach lyrics like “Shooting out the walls of heartache, / Bang, bang, I am the warrior”, then you will probably make it through the rest of the record largely unharmed. Patty is a great singer, and there are some very fine songs here, notably “Only the Young” (yep, the Journey song) and “Talk to Me”, but the band has a certain persistent blandness to it of the same sort that I credit the short lives of the Motels, Quarterflash and Face to Face to. Producer Mike Chapman and engineer William Wittman layer guitars on until the thing is thick enough to hold a groove, but they can’t disguise the fact that Scandal is a thin disguise for “Patty Smyth and some other people” (the album is actually credited to “Scandal Featuring Patty Smyth”), and that the current “other people” at her disposal are hardly the best that money can buy. Most of the best moments on *Warrior* are like good moments on *Never Enough*, only less so.

On the other hand, if you’re a serious Patty Smyth fan, you’ll buy this, and that’s fine.

#### *Scandalous*, 1992 CD

You’ve *really* got to like Patty to be able to go through with purchasing this mysterious posthumous Scandal compilation, issued by Sony’s “Special Products” division. The cover has to be one of the worst in history. It is a picture of Patty that must have been taken when she was about 13, trying to look 17, and only succeeding in looking 12. She is perched awkwardly on a sheet-draped lump of something, in a dress with an odd cutout on the side that serves only to emphasize a figure that I can most kindly describe as “girlish”. There is an atrociously diffused pink light on the backdrop behind her, and she is wearing enough

makeup and hairspray that I would almost guess at the existence of unseen wires holding her head up were it not for the fact that on *this* cover, they would almost certainly have been plainly visible. The “Scandal” logo and other words look like the work of a recently-fired K-Tel layout drone. The only CD I own that is even remotely comparable to this in sheer incompetent smarminess is one credited to “Barbie” that does not appear in this book because it is the worst sounding album I have ever heard in my life.

This one, by contrast, at least *sounds* good. Half of the ten tracks here are from *Warrior*: “Only the Young”, “Talk to Me”, “Beat of a Heart”, “The Warrior” and “Say What You Will”. There are four tracks that I assume are from the first EP: “Goodbye to You”, “She Can’t Say No”, “Another Bad Love” and “Love’s Got a Line On You”. These are pretty good, and “Love’s Got a Line” was particularly nice to hear again after many years. “Never Enough”, from Patty’s first solo album, fills out the selection.

Provided you are willing to be seen carrying this CD to the counter, and provided your enthusiasm for Scandal is not sufficient to justify purchasing *two* CDs (with a 50% overlap), this one is probably the better bet. The selection from *Warrior* is perfectly acceptable, and you won’t get the EP tracks any other way. The inclusion of “Never Enough” should serve to pique your interest in that album, if you don’t know it already, and the contrast between it and the other songs demonstrates both how much better Patty sounded with a stronger supporting cast, and also how much *potential* she shows in the Scandal songs.

Still, I keep expecting to see this CD for sale on late-night TV.

## Patty Smyth

### *Never Enough*, 1987 CD

After ditching the rest of Scandal, Patty Smyth must have phoned up Cyndi Lauper and talked her into a good price for the crew from *She’s So Unusual*, because the whole bunch of them troop over to Patty’s album en masse. Producers Rick Chertoff and Bill Wittman settle comfortably behind the boards, Rob Hyman and Eric Bazilian plug in their Hooter gizmos, Anton Fig puts his hair up in a Late Night cap, Neil Jason uncates his bass, Richard Termini and Peter Wood provide some extra keyboards, and Hyman, Bazilian and Chertoff help out with the writing, and to finish off the similarities Billy Steinberg and Tom Kelly chip in one as well.

With all the personnel overlap, it’s pretty remarkable how *little* this album sounds like *She’s So Unusual*. It’s a tribute to the musicians’ abilities to work *with* a singer rather than overwhelming her. This and *True Colors* have a similarly polished sonic quality, as does the Scandal record, but this is Patty Smyth’s album just as clearly as Cyndi’s were hers.

Patty also has excellent taste. The other songwriters’ material here is superb, and the two actual covers are even better. The first one, Tom Waits’ “Downtown Train”, is almost flawless. Hardcore Waits fans will shudder at the thought of “the singer from Scandal” smoothing out their hero’s deliberately craggy song, but I think Patty’s version just makes it clear that Waits is a talented songwriter, something which isn’t nearly as obvious to me when I hear him perform his own songs. Also, Waits fans who have heard Rod Stewart’s revoltingly sweet pap-pop version of “Downtown Train” should take comfort from the fact that it is awful compared with this version, too.

The other cover is a Magnum song! I only discovered Magnum the summer I lived with my friend Matt, who liked them, and one day I was playing this album and he looked up, shocked, and said “Hey, this is a Magnum cover”. I got the album out and, sure enough, “Call to Heaven” was written by Tony Clarkin. I’m triply impressed by this. First, I’m impressed that Patty Smyth knows and presumably likes Magnum (I guess her agent might have suggested the song, but humor me and pretend she picked it herself). Second, I’m pleased that I know about Magnum, who are wonderful in their own right. And third, I think it’s cool of both of them to do such a beautiful, stylish rock waltz.

The rest of the album is every bit as good. “Never Enough” and “Isn’t It Enough” are the most impassioned and intense (in fact, the thing that prompted me to buy this album in the first place was seeing Patty do “Isn’t It Enough” on Late Night, and I didn’t even know at the time that Anton Fig had played on the album). “Tough Love” feels like a second try at Scandal’s “Talk to Me”. “The River Cried” and “Give It Time” are slower and subtler. “Sue Lee” and “Heartache Heard Round the World” are bouncy and buoyant, showing what a number of Scandal songs might have been with lighter, more confident hands on the controls.

The sound, throughout, is a source of amazement all by itself. Chertoff and Wittman do one of the clearest, most melodic production jobs *ever*, and though I haven’t really given this next claim serious thought, this might be the single album that best embodies an American, mainstream-pop, studio ideal that a huge segment of the music business spends imposing piles of money trying to achieve. Guitars ring, synths twinkle,

drums thwap (sorry about the technical jargon there), bass supports unobtrusively like the unseen subject of those old Maidenform bra ads.

Patty's voice sail over all of it with enviable grace. Hers is a voice with character, but largely without *quirks* (not that there's anything wrong with quirks *per se*). Patty's voice is warm and human, and, I think, easy to like. It's like this mango mousse that they make at this restaurant Georgia and I like, called the Elephant Walk. I can imagine some very conservative person not liking it, but for the most part it is a flavor and texture that requires no specialized palette. I can also imagine a gourmand so uptight that the thought of ordering mango mousse when there was a butternut squash custard also available would seem rather gauche, but for the rest, mango mousse is both unusual and understated enough to please the aspiring sophisticate (unless they overhear the styleless boor at the next table also ordering it). Likewise, I would contend that Patty's voice is accessible enough for relatively common tastes, and still interesting enough for the more jaded (you are intended to think of yourself as being in this latter group, naturally), and the only thing likely to keep the second group away is awareness of the first.

As I write, this album is out of print, but diligent combing of cutout bins yielded me a CD copy, so you might have similar luck.

### **Patty Smyth, 1992 CD**

Patty's second solo album was a *long* time coming, so I had extremely high expectations for it. Then I found out that the first single was a duet with Don Henley, and a feeling of apprehension teleported smack into the middle of my happy anticipatory mood. I would like to report that my last-minute worries turned out to be baseless.

As I say, that's what I would *like*, but in fact the fears were dead on target, and this album is as bland as they come. There's *no* sign of any of the participants from *Never Enough*, and the crew of "veterans" that replaces them, including Kenny Aronoff, Tim Pierce and Roy Bittan (and, interestingly, Sheryl Crow and Graces singer Gia Ciambotti on some backing vocals) don't produce a whole spark between them. Henley's presence is merely the coup de grace that finishes off an album that distinguishes itself only in that it manages to squander one of the easiest voices around. The fact that the "coup de grace" arrives on song four is just another sad commentary on this bitter disappointment. When the history books for this time are written, "Sometimes Love Just Ain't Enough" and "Everything I Do (I Do It For You)" will be merged into one faceless, interminable ballad ("Everything I Sometimes Do Just

Ain't Enough of the Love that I Do It For To You" will be the title, I'm pretty sure) that held the Western world captive during the all-but-forgotten interregnum between Nirvana albums.

## **Shona Laing**

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### **South(US), 1987 CD**

Shona Laing might have gone in another chapter, except that I *always* associate her in my mind with Patty Smyth. Partly this is reinforced by their very similar release patterns (I actually don't remember when *South* came out, exactly, and the CD doesn't say, but it was *around* 1987...), but partly it is because both of Shona's albums remind me of Patty's respective solo records.

Whether you will see the same resemblances, I have no idea. Superficially there are plenty of differences. *South* is heavily synthesizer-driven, and doesn't have nearly the level of American studio-player sheen that *Never Enough* does. Shona's voice is good, but Patty's is better. And the dramatic emotional drive of songs like "Isn't It Enough" is here replaced with a cool collectedness that isn't as viscerally or as immediately appealing to me. On the other hand, Shona writes all her own songs, plays acoustic guitar and keyboards, and even does most of her own bass and drum programming, and these things combine to make *South* a musically much more sophisticated album than *Never Enough*.

The two semi-hits, "Soviet Snow" and "(Glad I'm) Not a Kennedy", are excellent examples of the fare here, careful deliberate constructions of sequenced synth lines, with steady drum-machine rhythms that propel the songs along without siphoning off sole attention. "Not a Kennedy"'s name-dropping gave it some novelty appeal, but realizing that Shona is from New Zealand gives a much more interesting perspective on the lyrics. In fact, Shona's lyrics are intriguing throughout, peppered with poetic fragments that I find myself lingering over, like "as fragile as the hotel flowers" ("Neat and Tidy"), "one eye on the winter" ("Soviet Snow") and "Postcard from a free state / Willed on through the wire" ("Dockyard on a River").

And yet, despite the differences, the net effect of *South* and *Never Enough* I find to be incredibly similar. From very different directions, using very different approaches, they arrive at a marvelous *clean* pop freshness that seems incapable of becoming either stale or cloying. They make me feel good. They are my idea of "easy listening", two albums that I think I could put on in absolutely any mood, confident that they



would fit right in, fitting or fixing my demeanor, depending, but never clashing.

### *New on Earth*, 1992 CD

Shona Laing's second album (leastways, I only know of the two), in turn, makes me think invariably of *Patty Smyth*. They came out at almost the same time, I hoped for great things from each, and they both left me feeling completely let down. Shona's mistake, from my point of view, is in replacing her keyboards, sequencers and drum machines with humans. Perhaps it's just *these* people, but I *liked* the robot-aided grooves on *South*, and the more-standard playing on this album misses much of the essential charm of the first record. It replaces naiveté with mere competence, which I rarely think a good trade.

Again, this album doesn't *sound* like Patty's second solo record, but the effect is the same: I'm bored. The same tradeoffs apply as before. The music here is mildly more interesting, but Shona can't carry a band as effectively as Patty can. These songs, at their best, seem to be straining to break out of their padded cocoons and kick into gear, but they can't quite manage it. "Freeze Frame" and "Just Before It's Too Late" come closest to *South's* appeal, but I wouldn't trade either for even the least remarkable track there. Shona sounds like Sinéad O'Connor's new-age sister, preferring harp-like guitar parts to confrontational vocals, culturally-correct finger-drums to electric guitars, placid jazz languor to religious dub angst. Pleasant, but inconsequential, and thus a serious disappointment to me.

## Grace Pool

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### *Grace Pool*, 1988 CD

Shona Laing in turn leads me to Grace Pool, who are easily the most ethereal entrants so far in this chapter, and who would be a far remove from the ostensible rationale of trashy sexuality if there weren't reached through the series of small steps that lead from Scandal to Patty to Shona to here. When I thought about relocating them, though, I couldn't think of anywhere *more* useful to put them, so here they are, 'cause here's where I like having them, and my personal mental organization, after all, is the book's essential, albeit tenuous, conceit.

In a sense, though, now that I look at it this way, Grace Pool's sound is very much like the first half of this chapter given a long, thorough, cold shower, a careful hair-detangling, a nice soft bathrobe and a quiet, cool, moonlit night to look at from a spacious,

secluded balcony. Singer Elly Brown has a beautiful voice that luxuriates in the caress of bell-like reverb, and the band combines programmed drums and sequenced keyboards with clear acoustic guitars, clear electric guitars, clear pianos, and whatever other clear, wonderful-to-hear sounds they come across, in a way that suggests that they *could've* done the charged dance-pop of Jane Wiedlin or the arena-rock blaze of Fiona if they'd wanted to, but they didn't.

As indicative as anything on this album of the kind of controlled elegance they attempt to impose on this style is their choice to cover, as the second song on the album, the Blue Nile's atmospheric ballad "Stay". They speed and rev it up a little (which you can hardly help doing unless you're the Blue Nile themselves), but it retains a good deal of its essential character. Their own "Still the Spirit" comes out sounding similar, too. I don't think either song shows the band at their best, though, and I definitely prefer the stark grandeur of the original to this partial reworking of "Stay".

The album as a whole does feel somewhat uneven to me. Out of nine songs, I rate two as excellent ("Green Glass House" and "Out of the Blue"), two as superlative, and the rest as unresolved. The two brilliant ones, mind you, are *really* good. "Awake with the Rain", the opening track, was #2 on my song top-ten for 1988, only just edged out by They Might Be Giants' masterpiece "Ana Ng". Its chattering synth-bass line, stuttering drum loop and occasional resonating electric guitar underlie a vocal part of orchestral majesty that turns the line "I lie awake with the rain", which I already quite like the sound of, into one of pop's true Immaculate Hooks. "Radio Religion", my other big favorite, is faster and harder, filled with syncopated synth-percussion noises and more guitars, yet it still builds to an angelic chorus built around another image ("I sleep through the night / without radio religion") that for some reason I find incredibly evocative. As I say, I don't consider this a perfect album, but with two *songs* this close to perfect, who cares?

### *Where We Live*, 1990 CD

Brown and multi-instrumentalist (and here producer) Bob Riley recruit a new pair of companions for the second Grace Pool album, and either they or the two years since *Grace Pool* are enough that *this* time, they get things about as right as you could ask for. For starters, there are two more songs every bit as good as "Awake with the Rain" and "Radio Religion". Oddly, they are again tracks 1 and 4, although this time my personal preference is reversed. "Me Without You", the opener, is really excellent, but it was "Paint the Ending" that made it to #4 on 1990's top ten list (under,

I note, *two* Connells songs and one by the Beautiful South, all of which I consider *quite* credible competition). The chorus, "...and if we / Forget how to breathe, / This is where we live; / We'll paint the ending in / Ourselves" never fails to stir me. It's beautiful, it's fragile and vulnerable, it's sad and lonely and triumphant and final and hopeful and quiet and fierce and numb and open and, of course, life and death, but that's almost irrelevant after all the smaller, more important things it evokes for me. I don't expect you'll get all that from reading it. Perhaps you won't get any of it from hearing it, either. Perhaps you will. I hope you get this kind of chill from *something*, because it's one of my favorite feelings in the world.

What makes this *album* more satisfying than the first one, though (it made #8 this time as a whole), is not the best songs but the ones in between, which here don't flag once. Well, okay, in some moods I find that the snare-on-every-quarter-note drum part in "Wedding in the Lawn" can get on my nerves, but other than that the album is close to perfect. There are more guitars, both electric and acoustic, than on the previous album, the slow songs (like "Dream and Distance") are more hypnotizing, the fast songs (like "I Can't See You") fit more energy into the band's tight control. Everybody involved sounds terrific. Moreover, this is the kind of album that I just can't believe everybody doesn't adore. There are albums I like better, that I understand if some people simply don't click with them, but this seems so undeniably gorgeous that it seems as if listeners shouldn't be able to do anything but swoon. Yet, somehow, they don't, and while Grace Pool languishes in relative obscurity, bands like 10,000 Maniacs and the B-52's, who by comparison seem plainly incompetent, get rich and famous. At moments I think this is sad but inevitable, and at other moments I'm just baffled and wonder if this was the right world to get off on. Which is probably a good question to re-ask yourself every once in a while.

## T'Pau

### *Heart and Soul, 1987 12"*

We now reach the band that I feel best *synthesizes* the elements of the preceding ones while staying true to the chapter's spirit. I will admit right off that I initially *hated* T'Pau. When their first single, "Heart and Soul" came out, with its long, spoken rap and unvarying beat, I thought it was not only awful in practice, but awful in principle, as well, a terrible example of some useless dance-mix generator mindlessly mixing

together "hip" elements for a song whose sole *raison d'être* was to make me remember, if I ever set foot inside a dance club, why I didn't do that more often. The woman singing had a decent voice, but that only made more annoying the dead DJ setting in which she was placed. God I hated it.

But, I kept hearing it. I kept hating it, but the "The woman singing had a decent voice" concession turned steadily into a pained "but that woman has *such* a great voice, why don't they let her sing *all* the time?" I weakened, weakened, weakened, and then one day came across this 12" of the song, which contains no less than four different versions of the song. "Perhaps", I said to myself, "one of these mixes *will* let her sing the whole time!" I bought it.

The bad news was that, in fact, none of them do. "Beats and Rap", "Heart and Soulful Dub" and "The '4 Twelve' Mix" all have *more* rap rather than less. The even worse news, though, was that I started kind of liking that part. The song completed its fifteen minutes of fame in the world, but my mind kept it on the playlist, and so eventually I bought a used copy of their album, *T'Pau*, fearing as I did so that I was making a big mistake.

### *Bridge of Spies (or T'Pau), 1987 CD*

I've since replaced that album with the CD (acquired in Amsterdam, as copies here were not forthcoming at the time I decided that my vinyl copy *had* to be replaced), by which you should be able to guess that what I was afraid of didn't happen at all. Quite the opposite: the album is great! Not only do "they" let Carol Decker sing virtually all the time, but though you might not guess it from just "Heart and Soul", the rest of *T'Pau* is not some producer with a star-making complex and a talented girlfriend, but a real, honest band, who make quite wonderful noise.

Decker's voice has a slight country twang, a little of the chirpy charm of Tracey Ullman, some of Fiona's firepower, and a lot of strength all its own. She makes ballads like "I Will Be with You" and "China in Your Hand" seethe, and limber, crunchy romps like "Friends Like These" positively sizzle. The band surrounds her with thick guitars, smashing drums and stabbing keyboards. It all comes together best, perhaps, on the least auspicious title, "Sex Talk". The buildup to the chorus (and the chorus itself, for that matter) hits the same high energy level as Pat Benetar's "Sex as a Weapon", and the two were often paired on my college dance tapes (frequently accompanied by "Good Girls Don't" and then, to give both sides equal time, Vigil's "Celiba Sea"). On one hand the song is "clearly" dance pop, but it manages to bring a rock drive and arena

pomp into the room with it, which is a remarkable combination.

Don't wear yourself out completely on "Sex Talk", though, because a couple slower songs later "Monkey House" slams on, and does it again. I haven't got around to double-checking this, but I think the song is alluding to Vonnegut's short-story "Welcome to the Monkey House". Actually, is that even a story, or is it just the title of a collection? I don't know why I think the two are related, since I obviously can't remember a thing about the story, if indeed I've ever read it, which I probably haven't, but the song *feels* like it is referring to something less literal than a zoo subdivision. Maybe I'm just trying to make the lyrics reflect the quality of the rousing music. Then again, why shouldn't I?

And before closing out the album with a short refrain of "China in Your Hand", T'Pau turn out for one more blast, "You Give Up", a shuddering monster of a song that somehow turns a keyboard part that I swear sounds like a square dance into a positive propulsive force. This song forms a nice end-piece to complement "Heart and Soul", as it, too, features a section of nothing but voice and beat, only this time the beat is huge and Decker is in top form, and the wailing guitar solo that leads the song out will make you forget any misguided thoughts the languid dance beat of the opening track inspired.

And yet, to be honest, I don't even think that the big rock numbers are T'Pau's strongest suit here. "China in Your Hand" and "Valentine", which I believe were the other singles from this album, are slow, swaying ballads, and as such I think they are stunning. They take longer to appreciate than the ones that bodily lift you onto your feet and shake you in inexorable sync, but if you can get into the right mode for them, they're quite impressive.

### *Rage*, 1988 CD

I had, I'll warn you, a hell of a time finding a copy of this album. I didn't know T'Pau was still around until 1991, when *The Promise* came out, and it wasn't until some time later that I discovered reference to the existence of a second album in between the two. As best I can discern, *Rage* came out in the UK (where it went to #4 (and where *Bridge of Spies* hit #1 and stayed on the charts for over a year!)) and then went no further. Why this should be I can't imagine, but it appeared to have gone out of print by the time I started looking for a way to get it. Fortunately, a well-timed business trip to Amsterdam (and some industrious used-CD-store browsing) turned up a copy, and so now I have it.

It was worth the effort. The unkindest thing you can say about *Rage* is that it doesn't break any

particularly new ground after its predecessor. It has slow songs and fast ones, of the same basic form as the earlier ones, and perhaps in a sense there is nothing as striking here on a first listen as "Sex Talk" or "China in Your Hand". If you find *Bridge of Spies* doesn't leave you with a physical hunger for more T'Pau, then you probably can forgo the arduous search for a copy of *Rage*, and be content in the knowledge that you aren't missing some surprising stylistic career turn.

A variant reaction is that *Rage* is a refinement of the band's original style, an album that finds them doing what they do even better than they did it already. "Road to Our Dream" and "Secret Garden", for a couple examples, are sweeping and kinetic songs, respectively, that at times I prefer to "China in Your Hand" and "Sex Talk", partially because they are newer to me, but also partially because I think the band is both writing and performing here more assuredly and interestingly than on their debut.

Of course, if you had told me that *Rage* was first and *Bridge of Spies* second, and then I wrote these reviews, I bet I'd end up saying the very same things about *whichever* album came second. If you're into it, it's more of it, and that's unspeakably cool. If you aren't, it's more of it, and that's not quite as cool as it was the first time. Either way, you can't have mine.

### *The Promise*, 1991 CD

This was an impulse buy. I'd liked T'Pau well enough, but it seemed like an isolated incident, and it was nowhere near the top of my mind years later when I ran across this in a used-CD store while working on replacing my Talk Talk LPs. It was some absurdly low price (which I have peeled off, or I'd tell you), and it's only money anyway. I brought it home, I listened to it. I liked it okay. I listened to it a few more times. I liked it more. Listen more, like more. A lot of listening later, the year came to a close and I was sorting through 1991's releases, preparing my year-end best-of lists, struggling to quantify my esteem for *No Place Like Home*, *Holidays in Eden*, *Laughing Stock* and *Nevermind*, when I realized with some surprise (I know that sounds coy, but it's also true), that although in most ways I would contend that all of those are "better" records than this, *The Promise* was the one I felt like I'd most *enjoyed*. Delighted at having a clear rationale for selection, I prompted awarded it #1 on the album list, and the title track a respectable #7 on the song list. As impulsive as this was, originally, I've lived with it for a few years, and haven't once been tempted to change my mind. It makes odd company, I'll admit, with fellow #1s *Lincoln* and *Little Earthquakes*, but as I'm sure I've said at least once before, this is my book and these are my records, and I can love whatever I want to.

What I said about *Rage* could almost go for this album, too. T'Pau have their style, and that's how they play. Four years on there's no sign that this is at all dissatisfying to them, or that any fundamental change in operating principles is due. If you didn't like T'Pau from the first two, I wouldn't bet much on this one changing your mind.

I said "almost", though, and that was deliberate. The difference between this and *Rage*, in my opinion, is that this time around I'm not going to be the least bit accommodating of anybody who doesn't think *The Promise* kicks the other two albums' asses. Everything the first two do, this one does better. "The Promise" and "Made of Money" are awesome rock songs, "Only a Heartbeat" is T'Pau's best ballad by far, and "Man and Woman" and "Purity" are close behind. "Walk on Air" is perhaps the first T'Pau song to successfully locate "mid-tempo", and lest you think it a fluke, "One Direction" comes along and hits the target right beside it. When I was trying to make a short list for the top ten songs of 1991, I kept finding that it had at least five T'Pau songs on it, and thus was born my arbitrary resolution to allow only one song off any album, just to keep some variety in my lists. (This turned out to be a very good decision, as the next year Tori Amos would have had the *whole* top ten otherwise...)

Anyway, if you're actually reading this and listening to my recommendations, whomever you are, here's one I can't say enough about, and so I'll try no further.

### *Heart and Soul, The Very Best of, 1993 CD*

This UK compilation album is completely superfluous to me now, as it contains nothing that doesn't appear on the three albums, but at the time I got it I didn't have the first one on CD, or the second at all, so this seemed like a good thing.

As is pretty predictable for these sorts of opportunistic repackagings of bands whose first album was huge and subsequent albums not, the selection here is heavily weighted toward *Bridge of Spies*. Of the twelve songs here, the first album contributes half of them: "Heart and Soul", "Valentine", "Sex Talk", "Bridge of Spies", "I Will Be With You" and "China in Your Hand". "Heart and Soul" is first and "China in Your Hand" is last, just like on the original album, which tells you something. *Rage* is good for "Secret Garden", "Road to Our Dream", "This Girl" and "Only the Lonely", and *The Promise* gets slighted, with only "Only a Heartbeat" and "Whenever You Need Me".

It's a fair selection, I guess, especially if you buy *The Promise* and can't find the other two. I'd have included "Monkey House" instead of "I Will Be With You", and "The Promise" instead of "Whenever You

Need Me", but otherwise the list seems largely unassailable. My own feelings on the relative merits of *Rage* and *Bridge of Spies* aside, the first one is doubtlessly more significant for being first, and thus merits its preferential treatment. *The Promise* gets only a token representation, but since I would have you buy it, whole, the two tracks here serve only to give the compilation some facsimile of completeness, and act as a spur to you to get out and find their album, if you haven't already.

The only bad news is that since this, too, has not seen a domestic release as I write, you'll have to work for the record that should be a *substitute* for working for the originals. Then again, if you've waded through enough of this book to get here, your hardiness is already well-proven.

## Kate Bush

We now change gears abruptly, moving into the second half of Earth, the part where the music chucks most of rock's stereotypes into the back of a Suburban and rolls it off a cliff somewhere where it hopefully won't land on anybody. I realized, in thinking about this, that the clear distinction in my mind between, for example, *She's So Unusual* and *The Kick Inside*, may not be all that clear to the rest of the world. And, in puzzling that out, I decided that perhaps it *shouldn't* be as clear for *me*. In early drafts, Earth was *two* chapters, and Kate was the start of the second one. In the end, though, the two smaller sets were entirely *too* cohesive. Cyndi Lauper fans already know Madonna, Jane Siberry fans already know Kate Bush. The point of dividing the book into chapters at all is to point you in related directions you may *not* already be familiar with; the point of using *my* categories, not the industry's, is that the industry already bombards you with *their* versions constantly. Rolling the two smaller chapters together not only gave the amalgam critical mass, but it helped me better understand this music's context in my own mind.

Kate Bush is, as I've remarked many times elsewhere in the book, one of my four favorite artists, the third you've reached if you're reading the book in order (after Big Country and Game Theory/The Loud Family, and before Marillion). I'd love to be able to say I was into *The Kick Inside* from the beginning, but let's face it, Kate's first two albums were not written for eleven-year-old boys. I was only vaguely aware of Kate, at best, before her commercial breakthrough, *Hounds of Love*, in 1985. Even that, when it came around, drew me in slowly, and I think I bought a copy as a present for Stacie, my then girlfriend, before I bought a copy for myself. Once I got into it, though, I

got into it with a vengeance, and Kate quickly attained high status in my musical pantheon. I gradually worked my way back through the first four albums, but at the time liked each one less as I went backwards. I'd listen to them, occasionally, just to avoid wearing out my copy of *Hounds of Love* too quickly, but only *The Dreaming* really did much for me.

Then, at some point much later, some aesthetic barrier in my brain snapped and, in a sudden wave of realization, I *understood*. The essence of Kate Bush—not just that of *Hounds of Love* but the spirit that motivates *all* her work, and runs through it—wafted into the part of my mind that handles art-appreciation on the most basic, sub-verbal level, and my entire attitude toward Kate's albums was completely transformed. All at once I felt like I understood each album on its own terms, like Kate was no longer just a musician whose albums I own, but a *presence*. It no longer makes any sense to ask me which Kate Bush albums I like or don't like, or like *best*, Kate Bush records simply *are*, in my life.

And her influence extends further than just her records. In a sense I regard the trail of artists who follow her here as extensions of her, as avatars. *Little Earthquakes* holds a place in my heart as much for itself as for helping me understand *The Kick Inside*. *When I Was a Boy* and *Fumbling Towards Ecstasy* are part of understanding *The Red Shoes*. Happy Rhodes is a mottled mirror for seeing Kate in. I don't mean by these comments to take *anything* away from these other artists. Perhaps in time I will come to grok *them*, too (with Jane and Tori I'm awfully close). In the meantime, they are part of a composite angel, and I credit their contributions as much as Kate's own.

Now, let's see whether these emotions translate into anything comprehensible on paper.

### *The Kick Inside*, 1978 CD

It took me a long time to accept *The Kick Inside* into my world wholeheartedly. There are several hurdles that must be overcome, particularly coming to it more than ten years after its release. The hardest detail is that Kate's voice here is *very* high and piercing. Her singing has mellowed significantly since 1978, and against the lower voice of *Hounds of Love* this higher one can easily seem shrill. There is little mystery as to why she chose to redo the vocals of "Wuthering Heights" for *The Whole Story*.

Secondly, Kate does not begin her career as an all-controlling auteur, she begins simply as a pianist and singer. The band around her is, compared to her later work, quite normal, and in place of complicated Fairlight orchestrations this album features a backing band in the most ordinary sense. They're a *good*

backing band, but this still sounds like Kate and a band, not just Kate.

Lastly, it's easy to overlook the fact that this was made in the *Seventies*, but it's hard to over-listen it. Actually, it's not that easy to overlook, either. Kate, on the front cover, is wearing these big red socks pulled up over the calves of her jeans, in a style suspiciously close to leg-warmers. The pose, clothes and photograph are all distinctly dated, and I found them drastically at odds with the airbrushed elegance of *Hounds of Love*. The music, too, has clear period overtones. The drumming, in particular, sounds very much of the period to me, and the whole band has that feel to a degree. Kate herself is timeless, but this record is not contextless.

Yet, all these things turned into positive traits once I got used to them. Kate's voice at these pitches is phenomenal, and hearing it this way give you a different perspective on her later, lower tones, and lets you hear things in that singing that you might not notice if you hadn't heard them more strongly here. "Wuthering Heights" is one of the most extreme examples, and while I both understand the motivation for redoing it and like the redone version, the original is a great thing in itself. Kate's voice flutters fairie-like around the violins, taunting them, goading them upward, swooping dramatically but delicately around it's airy demesne, playing off the high piano notes and the celeste. In a way I think the second version *depends* on this one; having the second without the first would be a much thinner experience.

Similarly, hearing Kate *not* in complete control is critical for fully understanding and appreciating what she has done on her own. It works both ways, actually. You can hear in these songs hints of the things she would do later on, and you can hear in the later songs things she has done in reaction to the parts of these that she couldn't control as directly. And the Seventies-ish flair of the band is just another facet of this. It is another setting to place Kate in, another angle to view her from, and the more angles you get the better composite image you can construct.

*The Kick Inside* is also perhaps her most open, personal and sexual album. I think her lyric-writing gets steadily better as she goes, but it also gets more involved, more conceptual, often more distanced. I don't consider this a problem, mind you; nobody is obliged to write about themselves. But there is a youthfully-innocent directness about songs like "Feel It" and "The Kick Inside" that is quite different from the more literary "The Sensual World" or the exotic "Eat the Music", for example. People do wonderful things when they are too young to "know better", and while I'm not sure Kate would do these songs at all the same

way if she had them to redo today, I am sure that I'm glad they are the way they are.

"Moving" opens the album with some strange howling noises. I don't know what they are, nor how they connect to anything else. They sound, actually, like the baying of the Hounds of Love, but that seems pre-chronistic (what is the opposite of anachronistic, anyway?). The song itself, which shows up presently, is representative of the album as a whole. Kate plays piano, the band plays some other things, strings sweep in at appropriate moments. The chorus has the most distinctive moment, when Kate manages to make nine syllables out of "how you move me", and slides unselfconsciously through the eloquent explanatory clause "with your beauty's potency" (15 syllables).

"The Saxophone Song" is clearly from a different session. The band is different, the vocal mix drier, the sound simply *different*. While this is very apparent as the song begins, especially as "Moving" blends into it, after a verse or so it becomes the new normal. Andrew Powell's arpeggiated computer-like keyboards are a kind of strange touch, and I'm not sure that Alan Skidmore's sax playing really does justice to the vivid portrayal of Berlin blues-bar musicians in the song, but that's okay. Kate acts out her singer description herself, "The stars that climb from her bowels, / Those stars make towers on vowels".

"Strange Phenomena" returns the usual cast to the stage, and covers the seam by turning suddenly spooky. A strange gurgling synthesizer and some jarring minor-key modulations complement Kate's odd homage to coincidence. The squeaky "Om mani padme hum"s in the second half of the chorus are quite strange, but the *first* half of the chorus is one of the first unadulterated moments of pure melody on the album.

If you thought "Strange Phenomena" was eerie, though, "Kite" leaps into another realm entirely, from the opening lines "Beelzebub is aching in my belly-o. / My feet are heavy and I'm rooted in my wellios" to the striking evocative detail "I've got no limbs" in the final verse. The tension built between imagining being a kite (the imaginary nature of which is emphasized by the real-world details like the wellios) and then actually becoming one at the end, and not knowing how to get down, is part of a recurring fascination with the border between dreams and reality that runs straight to "stepping out of the page" in "The Sensual World". The jerky, half-reggae music fits the mood perfectly, and foreshadows the more adventurous arrangements that begin to appear in force on *Never for Ever*.

The band then takes a break, and Kate and the orchestra soar through one of the world's most beautiful songs, "The Man with the Child in His Eyes" (the man, in fact, is another dream figure). Everything about this song is amazing to me, but the best part is when, at the

end of the chorus, as she sings the "eyes" in "the man with the child in his eyes", she hits probably the greatest *note* in the history of recorded music. It's not that high, it's not even that remarkable a note on its own, but in context it is unexpected in the most wonderful possible way. My sheet-music book claims it's a D sung against a Cadd9(no 3), but I'm telling you, I can produce that combination on guitar or keyboard, and it doesn't do what Kate does. I think there's an extra dimension involved in it, a few harmonics not native to this universe whom Kate has summoned for just this one note. Well, I half wish they'd come back, and I half think that if they did it would be like Monty Python's killer joke (or Kate's own "Experiment IV") and it would just be too much for mortal ears to take.

Not squandering the momentum, the album then eases into its second most beautiful song, "Wuthering Heights". This one is a true classic. There aren't that many words in it, and it's not much more than four minutes, but it manages to completely capture the emotional intensity and drama of the novel. I can think of few translations of works of art from one medium to another that work any more perfectly than this one. I could listen to Kate sing "Heathcliff, it's me, Cathy come home. / I'm so cold, let me in-a-your window" over and over and over again, and it's just as moving every time. My tear ducts are huge fans of this song.

As if realizing that following up "The Man with the Child in His Eyes" and "Wuthering Heights" with anything similar would be futile, Kate and the band then switch gears abruptly and slam into Kate's first killer *rock* song, "James and the Cold Gun". If it weren't for the fact that the lyrics are clearly written from a female perspective, I'd say that this song *begs* for a heavy metal or hard rock band to cover it. I actually taught myself to play guitar largely on Kate songs, and this was one of my favorites to burn through with the distortion pedal cranked up high and my pick forging ahead heedless of whether my chord hand could actually keep up or not.

"Feel It", next, is a mixture of sorts. It's just Kate and her piano, but where "The Man with the Child in His Eyes" was a quiet song that would have sounded slow and beautiful no matter what you did to it, "Feel It" doesn't seem quiet *by nature* to me. I'm actually somewhat puzzled as to why the band *doesn't* play on it. To put it another way, it feels like Kate could have taken "Moving", "Kite", "Feel It", "L'Amour Looks Something Like You" and perhaps "Room for the Life", and just picked one at random to do without the band. Maybe she did. And, if so, so what?

"Oh to Be in Love" gets the album back to familiar ground, and reminds me of "Strange Phenomena". "L'Amour Looks Something Like You" is more melodic, somewhere between "Strange Phenomena" and

"Wuthering Heights". It might not even be a bad song to introduce someone to this album with.

"Them Heavy People", on the other hand, is the silliest song here by far, and the one that it took me the longest to grow to love. Part of this is that I didn't really pay enough attention to the lyrics for the longest time, and thought this was about fat people. Part of it is the music's polka-esque oompah hop. I've grown into it, though. It helped when I realized that despite the music's good-natured corniness, the "heavy" people in the song are actually thinkers, people who read philosophy, contemplaters. The song rejoices in these things with a lighthearted exuberance that could have been mocking but which comes out as sincere, charming and buoyant.

"Room for the Life" is another one I didn't warm to initially. I guess the chorus, "There's room for a life in your womb, woman", didn't quite *speak* to me. Since the operation, though, this one has gotten *much* better. I've even got to where the absurd "Mama woman-aha" whooping and jug-band percussion makes me smile.

The album then closes in impeccable style with "The Kick Inside" itself. Another Kate/piano/strings ballad, this one is not only gorgeous, it's also the only song I know of that portrays the sadness of a woman leaving her brother, despite loving him desperately, because they have conceived a child. Incest, for anybody who is reading this thousands of years from now and doesn't know, violates an *extremely* rigid taboo in twentieth century Western culture, and attempting to cut through instinctive reactions to describe the legitimate tragedy of the situation from the devoted sister's point of view, without any hint of violence or her having been unwilling, is courageous and striking, and a real artistic accomplishment.

Not that the rest of the album wasn't already, mind you.

### *Lionheart*, 1978 CD

Within a year of *The Kick Inside*, Kate was back with her second album, a turnaround that is all the more remarkable when you consider the slow pace of her output later on. The tradeoff in getting another album so quickly is that this one isn't all that different from the first one, and I definitely think of the two as a pair, this as *The Kick Inside, Part Two*. It isn't a *sequel*, but it's definitely a second act in the same drama.

Most of the musicians are the same here, but the lyrics and music begin to fan out from *The Kick Inside's* base. Kate's brother Paddy provides mandolin, slide guitar, strumento da porco, madocello and panpipes, and elsewhere the band works in recorders, harpsichorde (that's what it says), joanna strumentum and harmonium. Kate herself still only plays piano,

but it is clear that her compositional repertoire is at least considering expanding.

Lyrically, this is an extremely scattered album. Peter Pan, acting, England, seduction, foreigners and poison are just some of the topics these songs jump among. I'm sure I've just grown too used to the two albums to judge, but it seems to me that *none* of the songs on *Lionheart* would have made sense on *The Kick Inside*. *The Kick Inside* was heavily first person; every song on the album is filled with "I"s or "we"s. In fact, of the thirteen songs on *The Kick Inside*, seven are explicit "I"/"you" dialogs, two are "we"/"you" dialogs, one is just "we", one is "I"/"him", and only two ("Kite" and "Them Heavy People") are only "I". On *Lionheart*, by contrast, there are only three "I"/"you" songs, one "we"/"you", and four "I"s. "In the Warm Room" is entirely "you"; the narrator never mentions "I" or "me" at all. And "Don't Push Your Foot on the Heartbrake" is actually *third* person! There are no direct love songs here like "Moving", "Feel It" and "The Kick Inside", or even indirect ones like "The Saxophone Song" or "L'Amour Looks Something Like You". Instead we get a color-abstraction ("Symphony in Blue"), a love song to a *country* ("Oh England My Lionheart") and what I guess is a vitriolic post-breakup song, a tribute to old horror-movies, or both ("Hammer Horror"). Kate is beginning, I think, to separate herself from her material, to separate the character of the singer from the character of the composer. She is becoming a real artist.

*Lionheart* opens with the slow, moody "Symphony in Blue". The poetic structure of this song is rather remarkable. The first verse describes the "blue" parts of the singer's life, not sad exactly, but poignant ("the sort of blue in those eyes you get hung up about"). The second verse jumps directly from there to a bizarrely whimsical portrait of God ("the light in the dark with the neon arms", "the head of the good soul Department"). The chorus, in the middle, finds the singer realizing that in music she is transformed and given meaning. I think this makes music an *escape* from God. Interesting.

The third verse moves to the associations that red brings. "Love" is one of these, but the others are much less comforting ("the colour of my heart when she's dead"-who is "she"?). From the "danger signs" of red the song moves to a verse about sex, depicted in much the same light-hearted way as God was in the second verse. The parallelism between sex and God is intriguing in its own right, but even more so when the chorus repeats, offering music as an escape from sex! Sex and religion is an old tension, to be sure, but this impressionistic pass at the subject fascinates me.

Kate then switches from vague to concrete, for "In Search of Peter Pan". This song is first person, but the narrator is a little boy, not Kate herself (and this is not

the last such song, see “Cloudbusting” later). It isn’t clear what bad things have happened in the boy’s “long week”, but he is being forced to grow up, and doesn’t want to feel so old. His brother has adult heroes, but he clings to Peter Pan. This is an *informed* choice, though, and the chorus is the boy’s pledge “When I am a man, / I will be an astronaut, / And find Peter Pan”. He is determined to make the impossible real. This is the fragile stage between the infant credibility necessary to believe in Peter Pan and the adult understanding that the boy shows about the existence of astronauts and the effects of his grandmother’s childish ministrations. The boy is just young enough to remember that impossible things aren’t any less desirable for their impossibility. How sad that most people lose this state so irretrievably before they are old enough to do much about it.

“Wow”, next, is another song I have only slowly grown to like. The chorus, “Wow, wow, wow, wow, wow, wow, / Unbelievable”, bothered me a lot. Even now that I’ve studied the song and understand the relationship between the relentless futility of the chorus and the pitying wisdom that the actor will never be anything but hopelessly minor, I still wish she’d come up with something cleverer. It’s a very pretty song, but the chorus derails it.

Though the quiet verses might lead you to expect otherwise, “Don’t Push Your Foot on the Heartbrake” is Kate’s second rock song. When the chorus kicks in, this song starts accelerating dramatically. “Her heart is there, / But they’ve greased the road. / Her heart is out there, / But she’s no control.” The second half of the chorus, beginning with the time-honored “Oh come on”, connects the engine to the wheels, and the band leaps screechingly forward. The second repeat of the second chorus’ second half (the last stanza of the song, I mean) finds Kate cutting completely loose vocally for what I think is the first time. It rocks.

It is only appropriate, then, that “Oh England My Lionheart” follows, this album’s slowest, gentlest ballad. The regular band gives way to recorder and harpsichord (and Kate’s piano and the orchestra, naturally), and she delivers what, so far as I can tell, is an entirely sincere ode to her home country. The modern war references (“air-raid shelters”, “my Black Spitfire”) merge strangely with the antiquated feel of the harpsichord, but this won’t be the last instance of Kate undercutting military imagery with decidedly unmartial music (see “Army Dreaming” and “Experiment IV”).

I don’t really understand “Fullhouse”, and can’t think what else to say about it. Musically, it comes as close to *The Kick Inside* as anything here.

“In the Warm Room” is a piano/voice solo, and it makes me think of “Feel It” from *The Kick Inside*, which

used the same arrangement. “In the Warm Room” reads perfectly to me as a *response* to “Feel It”, the same scene told from the point of view of a second woman, watching the man that “Feel It” is seducing. The new perspective is bitterly critical: “She’ll tell you that she’ll stay, / So you’d better barricade the way out”. The music supports the contrast, too. Where “Feel It” could easily have been a full band arrangement, “In the Warm Room” is carefully and deliberately understated, quiet and slow. Whether the two songs were *intended* to have anything to do with each other, I don’t know, but they make a fascinating combination regardless.

“Kashka From Baghdad” is *Lionheart*’s oddest moment. The lyrics are an observer’s half-voyeuristic tale of a mysterious foreigner’s lifestyle, but they don’t seem to go anywhere to me. The music is even stranger, dark and oddly meandering minor-key piano, exotic percussion and odd noises. I take this song as a very early hint at *Never for Ever*, but I don’t think Kate really knows how to pull this sort of thing off yet. “Coffee Homeground”, actually, tries again, and is a little more successful. The weird percussion and spasmodic carnival-brass seem better directed and less arbitrary. Both songs are still jarring in this context, though.

“Hammer Horror” returns to character. It is a rock song, very much like “Don’t Push Your Foot on the Heartbrake”. Quiet, delicate verses surround loud, driving choruses. This was another guitar-practice favorite of mine, not that my version bore even the slightest resemblance to the original. It also makes a marvelous conclusion for what is, really, a pretty short album. The band gets to cut loose, the orchestra gets to orchestrate, the gong player gets to hit a *really* big gong at the end, twice, and Kate gets to go from high whisper to throaty howls, all in the space of four minutes. “Hammer Horror” looks backwards, not forwards, I think, but as it marks the close of the first era in Kate’s career, that’s perfect.

### *Never for Ever*, 1980 CD

Kate’s third album is *very* different, and you can tell just from looking at the cover. The covers of *The Kick Inside* and *Lionheart* have just photos of Kate. There is a little concept involved in the front of *Lionheart*, Kate in a lion costume in the light from an attic window, but nothing elaborate. Neither record looks much like it belongs to a woman who gets to decide what her album covers look like, for instance. *Never for Ever*’s cover is much more elaborate and, well, striking. Take a look. No, take a *closer* look. What at first looks like an abstract design, then a strange crowded menagerie, is actually a torrent of mostly-mythical beasts and insects and birds and fish and sinister-looking goblin-people,



all emanating from *underneath Kate's dress*. This literal rendition of the artistic process, Kate giving birth to her creations, is definitely *not* the kind of thing a record-label executive would think of. The back cover, with four gossamer bat-Kates flitting about with hideous expressions on their faces, is similarly inspired and just as obviously a product of Kate's own imagination (or, actually, John Carder Bush's, according to the credits). The CD actually ruins the LP's back cover almost completely. The topmost Kate is cropped out entirely, as is the tiny moon above and behind the Kate in the top left. The bar-code and copyright info are bold and white, and the track list is centered, taking up almost a quarter of the area. The photograph is reproduced too darkly, as well, so the two lower Kates are lost in the dark background. My US version (as opposed to the one from my Canadian *This Woman's Work*) does a better job with the exposure of the photo, and doesn't clutter the picture quite as severely with fine print (they make it *finer*), and doesn't crop out quite as much of it, but still doesn't do the vinyl version's jacket justice. Also, neither of my CDs reproduce the elegant gatefold from my vinyl copy, which includes a continuation of the front cover artwork as well as the lyrics, credits, and all the other interesting information that the CDs omit.

What the cover tells me, and the reason I'm lingering on it, is that this album is the first one that Kate is firmly in control of. The music quickly confirms this guess. Kate arranged this album herself, and co-produced it, and the difference in sound is immediately apparent. Gone are the Seventies backing-band-isms, the ever-present strings, and most of the other trappings of the first two albums' industry-machine origins. Kate plays a Yamaha CS80 on a couple of tracks, and there is a drum machine on another. The production is *conscious*, effects and noises and aural interjections carefully inserted with an omnipresent attention to detail that is a quantum level beyond the competent but straightforward and relatively uninspired sound of the first two albums.

The music follows suit. Where the first two albums sounded like a piano-playing singer's songs getting translated into a rock band setting without the inherent artistic merits of doing so being the prime motivation, this album sounds like the work of a musical artist, not translated through anything. Kate's work here isn't just the piano core, but the sonic totality. She still relies on a number of musicians to help her produce all the requisite noises, but there is no doubt here who had to be satisfied with every note and sound before the album could be finished.

*Never for Ever* opens with the fretless bass, balalaika and deep-voiced intonations of "Babooshka". The new Kate begins here. "Babooshka" is at once her best rock song yet, and a song in a genre entirely to

itself. A charming story of a woman who set out to test her husband by courting him in disguise, "Babooshka"'s verses have the feel both lyrically and musically of a Russian legend. The chorus throws in electric guitars that lift Kate into a quiet frenzy, punctuated by strange percussive background noises. John Griblin's fretless bass offers a constant counterpoint to Kate's voice, which has mellowed distinctly (already) since *The Kick Inside*. You can't dance to most of this, and the verses mostly defy sing-along, so you'll just have to sit and listen to it.

"Babooshka" blends seamlessly into the textural "Delius (Song of Summer)", which isn't technically an instrumental, due to the presence of Kate's, Paddy's and Ian Bairnson's voices at various times, but there are very few words, and the use of voices is very instrument-like, so I count it an honorary instrumental. A steady drum-machine rhythm runs through it, with other percussion, piano, guitar, sitar, and "delius" itself (at least, I *think* it's an instrument).

"Blow Away", next, is a bizarrely cheerful song about an engineer rescuing from the void the music of a host of dead rock stars. The text of the song is almost impossible to follow without the written lyrics, but following it doesn't seem like the point. More fretless bass, this time from Del Palmer, escorts Kate through this shadowy, enigmatic interlude.

"All We Ever Look For" is one of the most interesting of the new songs. The arrangement here involves Koto, Fairlight, two acoustic guitarists, orchestral timpani, and Kate on CS80, and the production is immaculate, not a spare sound anywhere. Rarely are there more than two or three instruments playing at once, as the song passes around the players in a meticulously choreographed dance. This song also has Kate's first serious incorporation of studio sound-manipulations, toward the end when footsteps are heard moving from door to door, and different music and noises are heard briefly from each room as its door is opened and then closed, the walker not finding what they are looking for.

For the longest time I got "Egypt" confused with "Kashka from Baghdad". This is stupid, and just goes to show how oblivious even nominally-well-educated Americans tend to be about the rest of the world unless they really concentrate, which they mostly don't. Anyway, "Egypt" is not only geographically unrelated to Iraq, but this song doesn't sound a bit like "Kashka". It sounds much more like "Blow Away" and "All We Ever Look For", and those three songs make a trilogy of sorts, a set of restrained and careful, but very confident, songs that cruise along at a slowish tempo without many obvious barbs or hooks, but which can lure me in and enfold me quite effectively without my being particularly aware of the process. It feels wrong to call

them “innovative”, especially juxtaposed with the more obvious flair of “Babooshka”, “The Wedding List” or “Violin”, but in a way these songs, not the better known ones, are the soul of *Never for Ever*. The others show that Kate is capable of moments of dramatic inspiration; these show that she isn’t reliant on those moments, and that, to me, is even more impressive.

“The Wedding List” is next. It reverses the form of “Hammer Horror” or “Don’t Push Your Foot on the Heartbrake”, and here it is the verses that are energized, the chorus that gets suddenly quiet and slow. The narrative, about a vengeful bride out to kill the man who killed her husband, is another of Kate’s growing repertoire of songs built around genuine stories.

“The Wedding List” leads into her most powerful song yet, the surging “Violin”, the first of her songs, in my opinion, to qualify as rock all the way through. Pounding drums and bass, churning guitar and blistering violin from Kevin Burke all are eclipsed by Kate’s voice throwing off sparks as it skids violently from octave to octave, smashing straight through some notes and just grazing others with the driver’s side door as she speeds past them. She sings in the idiom of the instrument the song is about, but I don’t think any violin or violinist on earth could match the physics-defying leaps and turns that she makes. This song is as physical and propulsive as any heavy metal.

The intensity takes an apparent drop for “The Infant Kiss”, which opens with just Kate and her piano. The quaver in her voice, though, belies the apparent calm, and as the song goes along it becomes clear that “Violin”’s intensity hasn’t gone away anywhere, it has been harnessed to a higher gear (or lower, I forget which way the analogy works). This one is a taboo-examining follow-up of sorts to “The Kick Inside”, the pained confession of a woman sexually attracted to a young boy. How young isn’t entirely clear. He’s young enough to be “tucked in”, but old enough to whisper things to a friend. A societally-unacceptable age for an adult woman to be lusting for him, anyway. Her vivid awareness of this fact is what leads the title to overstate the age difference. It also has the side-effect of making the song seem more innocent than it really is if you don’t listen to it carefully. I can’t help thinking that if the PMRC really *read* lyrics without preconceptions about which genres are the “dangerous” ones, Kate’s albums would get Parental Warning stickers all over them. “Kill a cop” or “worship Satan” are *much* less seditious than Kate’s knack for sympathetic treatment of some incredibly volatile subjects (see Hitler in “Heads We’re Dancing”). There’s no doubt what “kill a cop” or “worship Satan” means, and most rap or heavy metal makes no attempt to lure the listener into anything, they whack you over the

head with it and then stand around to see if you get up, kicking you occasionally for good measure. Kate draws you in with innocent-seeming things like dancing, children, chaste kisses and devotion, and by the time you realize what it all *means* you’re already under her spell. It is, of course, just another sign of her artistic genius. At least, *I* think so. I mean, Van Gogh couldn’t sing like this. Come to think of it, he couldn’t *hear* that well after that ear thing, either.

After the short instrumental “Night Scented Stock” comes “Army Dreamers”, which is my all-time favorite Kate song to play on guitar. I got so far as sequencing the rest of a cover of it the summer I was finishing college, but I never recorded it and my sequencer crashed, so it no longer exists.

My version couldn’t have been more different than Kate’s. Kate’s is crisp and brittle, precise acoustic guitar and mandolin combining with careful Fairlight playing. It is hard for me to imagine a less warlike song musically than “Army Dreamers”, and this lattice-like structure is absolutely perfect for a song about a war-wasted life. The glorious seductiveness of combat is precisely what this song is lamenting, and it deliberately eschews any impulses deriving from the same hormones. My version, on the other hand, was all heavily distorted bar-chords, pounding drum machines and syncopated background airplane and explosion noises, a thick, muddy (production is a skill that has so far completely eluded me) wash of blurred chords. Hers sounds like music from a world that has never known war, and mine sounded like music being made in the *middle* of a war (and possibly the cause of it, especially when I was singing). At the time I thought my version was a thoroughly inspired idea; I’ve come to think it completely missed an important point. Whichever, though, it made this song a part of my life with an extremely rich and complicated set of associations. I can’t hear it without finding myself standing at my keyboard stand in Nora and my sublet apartment on Irving Street, looking out the window at the building across the alley from ours, hearing the sounds of people carrying on their summer as I laboriously tweaked the exact time-coordinates of each explosion thirty times before getting frustrated and simply redoing the track by hand.

You, of course, may have a slightly different experience.

The album ends, then, with the masterful and moving “Breathing”, a song sung from the point of view of, I’m pretty sure, a child inside a womb. This cozy-seeming premise is quickly perverted by voice-overs about atomic-bomb explosions, the chorus line “breathing her nicotine”, and the crazed choral build up at the end of the song. By the end the image I get is of a fetus holding desperately to its home, frantic to

remain in the one place where all it has to concentrate on is breathing, *living*. This, too, can be seen as a response to *The Kick Inside*, as the other perspective of "The Kick Inside"'s warm glow, the hideousness of the world that the siblings' child will be born into, over its strident objections.

It also concludes a thoroughly impressive album. *Never for Ever* tends to get forgotten at times, I think, because in some senses what it is trying to do, *The Dreaming* does even better. Between the time of *Never for Ever* and *The Dreaming*, Kate managed to get ahold of a Fairlight *herself*, and this event radically transforms her music in very clear ways, making it easier to focus on *The Dreaming* as the turning point in her career. I think, though, that though *The Dreaming* is the turning point in instrumentation, in *means*, *Never for Ever* is the turning point in *ends*, the album where Kate decided to insist that her albums come out the way *she* wanted to. Or, whether this is where she *decided* to or not, where she *managed* to.

### *The Dreaming*, 1982 CD

*The Dreaming* is where *all* the elements come together for the first time. Kate wrote, arranged and produced everything on this album, and, courtesy of the Fairlight, actually *performed* an enormous amount of it herself. She gets help from drummers Stuart Elliott and Preston Heyman, bassists Del Palmer, Jimmy Bain, Eberhard Weber and Danny Thompson, and guitarists Brian Bath, Alan Murphy and Ian Bairnson, as well as Paddy's usual assortment of odd instruments and a number of other guests, but this is definitely the album where Kate becomes the primary force in all aspects of the production.

And, where *Never for Ever* was quite different from *The Kick Inside* and *Lionheart*, *The Dreaming* is even more different from all three. The spare, restrained composure of *Never for Ever* gives way here to a crashing, roaring, chaotic (well, *apparently* chaotic), rattling fury. Almost every song here has more energy than the hardest-rocking songs on the first three albums. Such is Kate's control over things now, though, that there is nothing here that falls as clearly into the conventional rock mold as "James and the Cold Gun", "Don't Push Your Foot on the Heartbrake" or "Violin". Perhaps her reluctance to give her songs' energy full reign on the prior albums was precisely her inability, at the time, to *prevent* them from turning out like normal rock songs. Ironically, the thing that *most* keeps these songs from going the same way is the brilliant drumming, which is done by the same drummers who played on all the other albums. I can only imagine that the Fairlight inspired Kate so much

that she had better ideas about even the parts she didn't play.

This is both the hardest and easiest Kate Bush album to approach. It is the hardest, I think, because it is the most innovative, the most bristlingly unique. There are no safe places to stand in *The Dreaming*, no oases of calm or familiarity. This album undeniably has the capacity to scare people away, to disconcert you at the outset and never make the slightest concession to your discomfort. On the other hand, this is the album where, I think, Kate's musical personality is clearest. This is the album where the world opened up to her and she burst forth, unselfconsciously reveling in her newfound power. The albums before submerge her personality (to one degree or another), and the albums after find her pursuing an ideal that, I think, only she fully understands, and this can make the twists of her journey seem occasionally mysterious. Here she is drawing, in both the broadest, clearest strokes and surprising detail, a grand sketch of her musical world, and it is a breathtaking place.

"Sat in Your Lap"'s rumbling drums get the album off to a sprinting start. It was released as a single in 1981, and that, I imagine, is as much of a reason to begin with it as anything, taking away the closest thing to a familiar reference point as soon as possible.

And calling "Sat in Your Lap" a familiar reference point is historical only. Preston Heyman's drumming is more like orchestral kettle drums than rock's usual kick/hi-hat/snare. Geoff Downes' synthetic trumpets are nearly percussion themselves. The backing vocals, from Ian Bairnson, Gary Hurst, Stewart Arnold and Paddy, sound like monks, on speed, on the rack. Kate's own vocals fly through on at least three different aural levels, every one of them flat out. The berserk energy with which she careens through "some say that knowledge is something sat in your lap" is matched by the uncanny way she fits "my cup she never overfloweth and 'tis I that moan and groaneth" into a line that I swear has three too few beats for it. This song leaves me dizzy, short of breath, excited, happy, anxious.

"There Goes a Tenner", the second song, is one of my very favorites, and one of Kate's best story songs. This one is narrated (complete with accent) by a bank robber planning, then executing, a classic heist. The robbers miscalculate the amount of explosives necessary, and end up blowing the vault, themselves, and most of the bank clear out into the street where the money rains on passersby and the robbers, digging themselves out of the rubble, are surrounded as quickly by TV cameras as police. The music is a jumpy cross between ska and Celtic stomp, the crisp snap of Stuart Elliott's drums keeping Kate's bouncing piano and

Fairlight on course. My favorite touch, at the very end of the song, is when, looking at the money all around, she says "There's a ten shilling note, / Remember them? / That's when we used to vote for him." This moment, a total non sequitur, validates the story for me single-handedly, gives it a characteristic I would wish on all art, an *internal* logic.

"Pull Out the Pin" switches to another unexpected point of view, that of a Vietnamese soldier stalking an American target in the Vietnam War. The detail is chilling ("I'll track him 'til he drops / Then I'll pop him one he won't see. / He's big and pink and not like me"), but the desperation in the chorus' "Just one thing in it, / Me or him / And I love life" is undeniable, and humanizes the side of the story that, at least here in the US, is almost always *dehumanized*. Kate's mentor Dave Gilmour pokes his head in to sing backing vocals. The most dramatic touch, which only occurs to me long after the song ends, is that if the narrator is only feet away and is planning on killing the American by pulling a pin out of something, then he's using a grenade and is going to die himself. This gives the howled "I love life" a very different spin, the killer crying his love for life even as he does something he obviously values more. Or, maybe he plans to run away *really* quickly.

"Suspended in Gaffa" is in the same musical spirit as "There Goes a Tenner", with piano on the off beats. It's in, I *think*, something of the same lyrical vein as well. The subject is very vague, but as best as I can make out it involves prisoners who haven't been trying to escape, but have to prove that they *have*, in order to get "it all", whatever that is. I don't pretend to understand this. The song quickly spirals away into some sort of personal crisis on the part of the narrator, who feels paralyzed and "suspended in Gaffa". The precise definition of "Gaffa" is a perennially popular question among Kate fans. The prevailing wisdom on rec.music.gaffa, the Usenet newsgroup dedicated to Kate Bush, is that the term originates as an accented form of "gaffer", as in gaffer's tape, and thus that "suspended in Gaffa" means trapped in a lot of sticky tape. The capitalization of Gaffa, however, argues that it is a *place*, not a substance, whatever the word's origin (and rec.music.gaffa is itself a place, albeit a virtual one). I prefer to interpret it as a form of Limbo, some extra-dimensional space derived from the narrator's personal cosmology. I also prefer to stay out of it.

"Leave It Open" is a sinister song, as if the others aren't. The lead vocal part is heavily flanged, as are the drums, and they clash with a riot of other voices, including an incredibly shrill and echoey "But now I've started learning how" from Kate. There is some piano and some strings, but this song is mostly a voice showcase over a simple drum groove. Towards the end

the drums get cranked up about ninety notches and Kate begins singing horrible primal noises and then, terrifyingly, something backwards. I believe she is trying to say "We're gonna let it in" forward, while actually singing backwards. The effect is blood-curdling.

"The Dreaming", next, is Kate's bizarre ode to Australia. If ever there was a song with internal musical logic, this is it. The drum part is like a marching song for kangaroos in low gravity. Kate and Paddy's vocal parts bounce crazily off each other. Rolf Harris' digeridu (pronounced, because it took me years to figure this out, "diggery-doo") and Paddy's bullroarer provide drones over which animal chatter, a "crowd" and whatever strange sounds Kate dredges out of her Fairlight skitter. The chorus is a single word, "dreamtime", but it is broken into "dre", "a", "m", "t", "i" and "me", and each of these is stuttered and chanted as if the singers haven't the slightest idea that the parts are supposed to combine to form a word. The song isn't likely to run Midnight Oil out the aboriginal-rights-activist business, especially not beginning with the lines "Bang' goes another kanga / On the bonnet of the van", but for someone who rarely ventures into anything you could call topical, I think Kate acquits herself admirably.

"Night of the Swallow" is a dirge that turns into a Celtic reel around chorus time, with Uilleann pipes, penny whistle, fiddle and bouzouki. It's another song fascinated with criminals, a dialog between a pilot hired for a secret journey of some undoubtably illegal sort (smuggling? jailbreak?) and, I believe, his lover. She doesn't want him to go (for relatively obvious reasons, I think), but he has built the job into a symbol for his whole life, flying as his release and his purpose, and in trying to insist on his safety she is suffocating him. I guess his day to day life isn't very satisfying, but she can't seem to grasp the significance he has come to place in the flight, or if she does, she can't detach herself from the situation enough to prevent it, and all she can do is plead, which drives him all the more surely to do it.

"All the Love" slows down even further, a haunting song that dips close to silence several times. A choirboy takes the part of the dead narrator's friends, who show up themselves later on via telephone to say some casual, cheery good-byes. I'm not sure what to make of this song.

"Houdini", on the other hand, is one of Kate's most detailed and affecting stories. Sung from the point of view of Houdini's assistant, it spins out the story of the escape Houdini failed to make. I can't quite figure out the characters in this song. The singer is clearly the assistant (she passes Houdini the key in a kiss—as shown on the album cover, in fact), and the song is sung to

Houdini. There's another man involved, presumably a moderator of sorts, there to assure that no tricks are involved. And then there's Rosabel, who believes. I don't know *who* she is. Is she somebody in the audience, an admirer of Houdini, the narrator's alter ego? I don't know. Whoever is involved, Houdini can't get out of this one, and they are forced to pull him out of the tank. Whether he is still alive at the time isn't clear, but the point of the story isn't that he dies, *per se*, but that he fails to make the escape. Like the pilot in "Night of the Swallow", danger is what makes his life worthwhile, and at the same time it is what tortures his companion. She can't keep him from trying these escapes (in fact, she has to *help*), but they are the setting of her worst nightmares, and one day she finds out that she was right all along, and the worst happens. If he lives, what will happen to him, to them, to their relationship? The question is left fascinatingly unanswered. (There's an alternate explanation of this song that claims Rosabel is Houdini's mother, and that she and the narrator are trying to contact Houdini after his death, through a medium. This is probably correct, but I like mine better.)

The album then ends on a very strange note, with "Get Out of My House", a ranting epic overflowing with personalities I don't fully understand. Why is the chorus spoken in that bizarre accent? What does Eeyore have to do with this? Why does the singer turn into a mule at the end and start croaking "hee haw"? I'm very confused. The best interpretation I can manage is that the narrator is, in overreacting to the departure of whoever it is that leaves in the first verse, going completely crazy in her isolation. The Pooh connection seems intentional, since she troubles to point out "Eeyore" and there's the part about "They come with their weather hanging around them / But can't knock my door down", which seems like a clear allusion to when Eeyore's house got blown away in a storm. Try as I might, though, I can't connect the two in any way that seems to stick.

It's appropriate, though, that *The Dreaming* ends this way. The song is fast enough and impassioned enough to balance the three slower ones before it, to recall the fury of "Sat in Your Lap" and "Pull Out the Pin", forceful enough to act as a reprise of most of the album's moods, and it's complicated enough to make sure you don't leave thinking for a moment that you understand it all yet. And as the song ends Kate is singing "hee haw", laughing at all the people like me trying to mine such significance out of it. Or, given how hard it is to figure out without the lyrics that "hee haw" is actually what she's saying, is she laughing *with* me at everyone who hasn't made the effort to figure out what she's saying? Or, in mule language, does "hee

haw" mean something else entirely? I wish I had a mule to ask.

### *Hounds of Love*, 1985 CD

Kate's fifth album is yet another huge stylistic leap. A far remove from the angular and unfriendly *The Dreaming*, *Hounds of Love* is lush, graceful, steady, appealing, brilliant, soft, warm and prickly. It was her commercial breakthrough in the US, and it was *my* first concentrated introduction to Kate, though I'd heard "Babooshka" and "Wuthering Heights" before, at least. It is a constant entry on my Desert Island Disk lists, and a clear candidate for the dubious honor of my favorite album ever.

In a way, *Hounds of Love* is *The Dreaming* minus *Never for Ever*, though this is unlikely to be that helpful an equation unless you already know all three albums. *Never for Ever* is spare and strange, music almost without antecedent, songs in a style that Kate appears for the most part to have invented out of nothing, in which rhythm, melody, lyrics, energy, beauty and balance all are present yet none are stressed. *The Dreaming*, in discovering new instrumentation, takes *Never for Ever*'s aesthetic to an even further extreme. *Hounds of Love*, in contrast, throws out most of the underlying style of *The Dreaming*, the parts it took from *Never for Ever*, and, keeping the instruments, makes something new out of them.

What it makes out of them is definitely the most accessible Kate album so far, and possibly the most musically focused. Where *The Dreaming* was harsh and clanging, *Hounds of Love* is gentle and seductive, proceeding with a comforting lope instead of a rousing march. These songs' narratives have some moments as sinister as any on *The Dreaming*, but they are clothed in the smooth poise of "Mother Stands for Comfort", the steady string pulse of "Cloudbusting", the quiet beauty of "And Dream of Sheep". Only "Waking the Witch" and "Jig of Life" approach the anxious energy of "Sat in Your Lap", "There Goes a Tenner", "The Dreaming" or "Get Out of My House", and even those are presented in careful context, not opening or closing either the album or either subsection.

Kate has, I think, begun to tame the beasts that *The Dreaming* released. To lovers of raw potential, hardcore fans of *The Dreaming* for precisely its untamedness, this album may be something of a disappointment. The fact that several of these songs not only are likable on a first listen, but actually became popular, has the potential to inspire a jealous backlash on the part of longtime fans, driving them back behind the walls of silver Buddhas and dented vans to where the casual fans won't follow. Even I have, at times, started to reconsider whether this album is *as* great as I thought it was. Listening to it

again doesn't necessarily reverse this folly, either, as I've listened to this album so many millions of times that the experience of hearing it is mostly one of familiarity. Listen to it twice again, or three times, though, and the world begins to realign properly. Four or five times, moving from remembering the album (and resenting hearing it almost, for the intimation that my memory was lacking in some way) to letting it envelop me and *experiencing* it again, letting "Running Up That Hill" carry me along at its own perfect pace, rather than wanting to spur it onward to "Sat in Your Lap" speed, letting the current of "The Ninth Wave" carry me into the swirling maelstrom of "Jig of Life", letting the last notes of "The Morning Fog" die away with no disc in the next changer slot, the echoes of the album fading away into a space much bigger than the room I am sitting in—letting all this simply happen, and reabsorbing it anew, there is no room for doubt. This album, perhaps most of all, simply *is*.

*Hounds of Love* is split ostensibly into two parts, matching the sides of the original LP. The front is "Hounds of Love", the back is "The Ninth Wave". Between them, these two halves provide everything you could possibly want from an album. Of the first five songs, four are bona fide standalone masterpieces. Any one of "Running Up That Hill (A Deal with God)", "Hounds of Love", "The Big Sky" or "Cloudbusting" could have carried an album and probably a career. Together they are so mesmerizing that you could fail to flip the LP and still think you'd just heard about the greatest thing ever. The "The Ninth Wave" side, on the other hand, constructs a tightly linked seven-song cycle that provides a similarly impressive *macro*-experience, as brilliant in its overall structure as the first five songs each are individually.

"Hounds of Love" (and, for that matter, *Hounds of Love*) opens with "Running Up That Hill (A Deal with God)", a song that instantly dispels any expectation you might have that this will be another *Never for Ever* or *The Dreaming*. Where both "Babooshka" and "Sat in Your Lap" were brash and frantic, "Running Up That Hill" is the apotheosis of calm. The implacable drum track pauses for nothing, not even other drum fills, setting down a firm, square mid-tempo groove using muted electronic kick and snare drums. Kate's synthesizers fill the spaces evenly, like thickly gelled floodlights, a cushioned backdrop against which her web of voices intertwine and cross, the lulling repetition of verse and chorus absolutely in character with the musical underpinning. It is as if, by seeming to retrace two or three lines in barely-differing ways, Kate is somehow magically able to imply an image that no three lines could ever have described. Perhaps, like with fractals, each pass reveals finer and finer detail

lurking within what seemed like a simple pattern, whole worlds emerging from the tiniest dots and lines.

"Hounds of Love", the song, is second. For a moment or two at its outset, as a tense voice cries "It's in the trees, it's coming!" over rumbling drums, it appears as if *The Dreaming* may make a surprise return after all. Quickly, though, the drums settle into a steady rhythm of hitting on the first, fourth, seventh and eighth eighth-notes. This pattern is tricky once, but with repetition it becomes a hypnotizing groove that feels all the more sensual for *not* settling squarely into 4/4. Jonathan Williams' staccato cello and Kate's legato synthetic strings take stirring advantage of the song's swaying drive, and Kate's production manages to give her voice an incredible amount of detail without having to push it too far to the front of the mix.

"The Big Sky" snaps back into firm one-three, but complements the fundamentally simple rhythmic base with a phenomenal array of churning, pounding, cathartic percussion. The song begins small, with drums, Kate, piano and some faint keyboard pads. The low, grumbling bass, provided by Killing Joke bassist Youth, becomes more evident as the song develops, and every verse or chorus turn seems to unobtrusively introduce another voice or percussion line, until by the time the song is about two-and-a-half minutes in, Alan Murphy's guitar is wailing and what seems like a solid mass of Kates and percussionists are in a state of near-religious transport, utterly caught up in and dedicated to the song's insistent drive, never speeding up or slowing down, but pouring more and more energy-*life*-into the unfaltering tempo.

After the three opening songs, "Mother Stands for Comfort" is a sudden retreat, a clean, thin song with no more than two or three Kates and at most three percussionists. The most prominent musical element, in fact, is Eberhard Weber's lithe fretless bass, which the piano and reedy synthesizer follow around supportively. Stuart Elliott's dry, spare drumming is complemented by a precise occasional racket of heavily processed crashes and shatterings. Kate's lead voice is quiet but close to the aural surface, her backing parts hanging back with the piano and synths while her lead dances slow, intricate figures with the bass. The lyrics, you will probably be surprised to find if you examine them, explain that more than just being a reassuring presence, Mother is actually concealing a murderer. Whether the narrator is referring to an actual crime or a potential crime isn't entirely clear, but I just didn't want you to think that the emotions in this song were simple.

The story behind "Cloudbusting", which ends the "Hounds of Love" side, is actually very involved, the text based on a book by Peter Reich (who gets a "big thank you" in the credits) about his father, who was either a persecuted genius or a demented crackpot (or

perhaps both), but who was convinced he had found some mystical form of energy in the world that could be used to control the weather. I've never read the book myself, and you *definitely* wouldn't deduce the connection from the song alone, but the video tells the story in decent detail. Just listening to "Cloudbusting" you will get little more than that the narrator is a young boy whose father was up to something dangerous and was eventually carted away by closed-minded government agents, and that the boy remembers and is inspired by his vanished father. I, actually, kind of liked the song this way, its sketchy details hinting at a much larger story but not actually telling it, and while the video and the comprehensive exegesis that somebody in [rec.music.gaffa](http://rec.music.gaffa) undertook were interesting in their own right, I don't think either actually enhanced my appreciation of the song itself.

Musically, "Cloudbusting" pulls together all four previous songs, with steady drums, building percussion, precise strings and lush backing-vocal choruses behind Kate's unadorned lead. Although "Mother Stands for Comfort" stands out on its own, the other four songs form an incredibly cohesive set (like the opening trios of *The Joshua Tree* or *Lament*), each related to the other three but none of them expendable. You could take them as four slightly different perspectives on a single aesthetic, or as four interlocking components of it, but either way they are real treasures both apart and together.

The CD then moves without a pause into "The Ninth Wave". This song-cycle, other music guides have helpfully informed me, is an "extended meditation on drowning". Actually, you don't have to take it as having anything literally to do with drowning, and it certainly isn't an "extended meditation" no matter how you take it. Interpreting it as a story that *begins* with a drowning, though, seems to work really well, and so I'll buy it. Also, once I read that, I noticed that in the picture of Kate on the back of the album she *is* actually under water. In the slightly different version on the liner of the LP a few bubbles can actually be spied escaping from her, indicating that, in fact, she's not *quite* dead.

You've got to know the story ahead of time to make any sense of it, though, because "And Dream of Sheep" starts well into the action, the drowning woman's monologue as she tires, longs to give up the struggle, drowns, her self leaving her body even as the body perishes. Aside from a little bouzouki and some whistles, and the occasional sound effect, this is a plain Kate piano-and-one-voice song, the first in a while, and a dramatic pause in the flow of the album as a whole.

"Under Ice" is another Kate solo piece, Fairlight this time, that begins to reconstruct another part of the musical composite of the first side. Where "And Dream

of Sheep" was the piano and musical structure, this one is the insistent synth strings, and "Waking the Witch", next, has the percussion, voice collages and studio and sampler tricks. Plotwise, "Under Ice" is about an ice-skater who discovers the drowned woman trapped under the ice. I think.

"Waking the Witch" is, plotwise, very confusing. The townspeople seem to have pulled the drowned woman out of the water, but it's hard for me to tell whether she is the witch, and they are trying to wake her, or the witch is somebody else who they are trying to wake to have her come and try to revive the drowned girl. At any rate, this whole plot thing is strictly optional, and "Waking the Witch" is one of Kate's coolest songs even without it. It begins with slow, echoing piano playing, almost randomly, under snippets of conversation and pleading from many different voices. Somewhere just past the one-minute mark the drums suddenly burst to life, and the song takes shape with Kate's foreground vocal playing against a deep, flanged male voice-under and a clamorous church-bell din. Bass and guitar join in presently, the male voice turning more and more sinister, until by the time it gets to say "What say you good people?" (to which they obligingly answer "guilty, guilty, guilty") it sounds like Lucifer incarnate, like the judge is the one that should be condemned, not the accused, which would probably be a pretty good rule for witch trials in general. The pounding drums and squalling guitar eventually give way to the sound of a helicopter, followed by a voice, through a megaphone, saying "Get out of the water!" in a remonstrating manner. This last bit seems to relate more to "Hello Earth", later, than to the part of the supposed narrative that should be happening at this stage, but I won't dwell on that.

"Watching You Without Me" is, stylistically, closest to "Mother Stands for Comfort", and so it brings the energy level down again after the controlled hysteria of "Waking the Witch", like we have reached the trough of the first wave (or the eighth, assuming we joined the process well underway, which we seem to have). In the plot it finds the drowning victim, released from her body, etherealizing over to check on some loved one, seeing how they are coping with life without her. It is a rather pleasant song, its reverie interrupted only by the drowned woman's voice trying to break through whatever extra-dimensional barrier prevents dead people from communicating with us as, no doubt, they would like to.

Things slam back into gear immediately, though, with "Jig of Life", a combination of crashing Kate-style drumming with an authentic Irish dance rave. The fiddle/Uilleann pipes/whistles/bouzouki crew is out in force, and this is definitely the crest of another wave of

intensity. What it has to do with the drowning isn't that clear. I keep trying to make it into a dialog between the witch and the girl she is trying to revive, a sort of *pre-death* wake, a forced celebratory frenzy intended to bring the dead back to life. The pronouns seem wrong for that, though, and that's as far as I get. The minute of spoken narration at the end of it doesn't help explain much of anything, though it does *sound* cool.

"Jig of Life" blends into "Hello Earth", a haunting song that combines the thoughts of an astronaut watching the planet with people on earth watching the craft the astronaut is on, adds in a lyrically-unmotivated choir that makes good musical sense nonetheless, and ends up making me wonder whether the astronaut is actually a god, or perhaps the soul of the drowned woman, adrift above the earth. At any rate, the song is quite nice. The choral bits are stirring, and the rest of it is somewhere in between "And Dream of Sheep" and "Watching You Without Me", which is perfect as the trough of the *second* (or ninth) wave, of which "Jig of Life" was the crest. The German narration at the end of "Hello Earth" I'm sorry to say makes no more sense to me than the English at the end of "Jig of Life".

"The Morning Fog", the conclusion of this odd story, finds the narrator, presumably the drowned woman from earlier, returning to Earth, brought back to life and wrenched out of her heavenly reverie by the ministrations of the witch or, if she *is* the witch, the sheer love of her friends and relatives. As I stressed earlier, this whole drowning thing is simply an interesting filter to view these songs through, so don't let it bother you if my description sounds completely haphazard.

"The Morning Fog" is an excellent musical conclusion, as well. A ticking drum-machine provides hi-hat and rim-click sounds, reminiscent of "Delius", Del Palmer adds fretless bass, John Williams some gorgeous acoustic guitar, Paddy violin, and Kate stitches it together like "Cloudbusting" filtered through "The Ninth Wave", echoing the latter's half-stop but modifying it to draw both parts of the album together as the whole thing closes. In terms of the waves that the cycle goes through, this song is a tiny final wave all in itself, a last surge and final dissipation, which makes sense when you consider that the first one carried through two songs ("Under Ice" and "Waking the Witch") and the second through one ("Jig of Life"), so that this one should be less than one. Beautiful, exciting, sad, hopeful, final and somehow unfinished, the only thing bad I can find to say about "The Morning Fog" is that it is only two and a half minutes long, and I could easily have listened to it for several minutes more. In fact, I could easily listen to "The Ninth Wave" for *many* more minutes, even though it is

essentially a seven-part, twenty-six minute song already.

And as for how long I could listen to the whole album, well, it's forty-seven and a half minutes long and I've listened to it several million times, so multiply those and I'm not sick of it yet. A pretty good record, I'd say.

### *The Big Sky, 1985 12"*

The 12" single for "The Big Sky" provides two alternate versions of that song, a "Special Single Mix" and the "Meteorological Mix", and the non-album b-side "Not This Time". The "Special Single Mix" I'm not that crazy about. It seems to mix the bass higher and the drums lower than on the album, and the crazed percussion crescendo loses a lot in this re-leveling. The "Meteorological Mix", on the other hand, is *very* intense, and does *exactly* the right thing with "The Big Sky", extending it to 7:44 by layering in *lots* more percussion, digeridu, bass, sound bites and acoustic guitar. The album version makes better sense in the album's context, but for standing on its own, this version takes everything good about the original and crams in twice as much of it, varietal aesthetics at its finest. Easily one of the best remixes I've ever heard, and a must-hear for anyone who wonders what the song could have been if the band *really* cut loose.

"Not This Time", the b-side, is a surprisingly normal rock song, so normal it almost sounds like Kate doing a cover. Mind you, it's a *great* normal rock song, and worth hearing both on its own and for the novelty of hearing Kate doing something so basically conventional, but you won't wonder why it didn't make the album.

### *Experiment IV, 1986 12"*

"Experiment IV" was the new song to force long-time fans to buy *The Whole Story*, Kate's 1986 best-of collection. Excessively frugal at the time, I opted for the single instead, which contains the long version of the song, as well as the "new vocal" version of "Wuthering Heights" and the 1980 non-album single "December Will Be Magic Again".

"Experiment IV" is a musical version of Monty Python's killer-joke skit (i.e., a *sound* that could kill people, not a joke). Although the song is *about* researchers developing such a sound, the song itself is far from fatal. Violin from Nigel Kennedy, some great Alan Murphy guitar and the usual steady drums from Stuart Elliott fill out this measured meditative piece so smoothly that the first several times I heard it it seemed extremely mild. Paying closer attention to it made a big difference, and the subtle articulations of all the performers reward, in my opinion, inspection. It



foreshadows the musical developments on *The Sensual World*, and makes me wonder why that album took three more years to make if Kate was this close to its feel already. Also, “Experiment IV” was my *second* favorite song to play on guitar, after “Army Dreamers”.

The new version of “Wuthering Heights” is exactly what you’d expect, combining Kate’s most popular song (in the UK, at least) with her most popular vocal timbre (*not* hypersonic). If you are a true fan, you will say “She didn’t need to do that, the first version was wonderful”. On the other hand, why shouldn’t she? She is carefully honest about why she’s doing it, the motivation is understandable, and the result does absolutely no shame to the original. Sure, she didn’t *need* to do this, but I’m not going to complain about it.

“December Will Be Magic Again” is pretty odd in this context. It *hasn’t* been redone at all, and here with “Experiment IV” and the new “Wuthering Heights” vocal Kate’s voice on it sounds incredibly high, when at the time it was actually already significantly mellowed. The song is clearly *Never for Ever* era, with a Christmasy flavor that would have made it at least slightly incongruous had it actually appeared on that album.

### *The Sensual World*, 1989 CD

*The Sensual World* may be Kate’s first *mature* album, the first one where she *isn’t* adjusting to some newfound power or figuring out what to do with some dramatic new style. In fact, she appears to have spent the four years between *Hounds of Love* and this working almost exclusively on details, diligently closing in on the exact sound she has been after all along, which is only now actually drawing into view. Compared to *Hounds of Love* this album is densely textural, moody, introspective and close. It has neither the nucleus of related songs that *Hounds of Love* opens with, nor a song-cycle like it ended with. In structure it is more like *The Dreaming*, simply a collection of songs, sequenced for best effect, but unconcerned with telling an overall story or even with selling that many copies.

It took me, as have all of Kate’s albums for that matter, a while to get into. I admit it, I wanted it to be another *Hounds of Love*. Making a mere sequel wouldn’t have been very satisfying for Kate, I imagine, but that’s what I thought I wanted, and probably what a lot of Kate’s other newfound fans thought they wanted, too. Kate, however, knew better. I’m willing to bet that I would have grown bored with *Hounds of Love II*, while *The Sensual World* has grown on me steadily to the point where although it hasn’t displaced *Hounds of Love* from my top-ten list, I can consider the possibility without breaking into instant derisive laughter. Years after its release, I’m *still* learning the

ways of this album, gradually coming to know it better and better, and coming to appreciate it more the better I know it. The time Kate puts into these albums isn’t wasted, by any stretch of the imagination.

The first thing you will notice, musically, is the Trio Bulgarka, whose unearthly harmonies (that isn’t the right word, but it’s the closest thing in English to what they do) grace (and that isn’t the right word, either) three of these songs and feel like a stronger presence on the album than that. I wasn’t that crazy about *Mystère des Voix Bulgares*, but as backing vocalists the Trio subset is awesome. The second thing you will notice is that this album is full of exotic acoustic instruments, Kate by no means relying on her keyboards or herself to make all the requisite music. Between valiha, cello, Celtic harp, whistles, mandolin, viola, tupan and, of course, Uilleann pipes, bouzouki and fiddle, not one of the first eight songs goes by without some exotic element. Count the Trio as exotic (reasonable), and only “This Woman’s Work” and the CD bonus track “Walk Straight Down the Middle” are unornamented. *Hounds of Love* had several of these, too, but here it seems like Kate is more sure than ever what she needs to do herself, what she needs help for, and how to get from her helpers *exactly* what she wants for the music. It’s also worth noting that these are the *same* musicians! Stuart Elliott, Charlie Morgan, Del Palmer, John Giblin, Eberhard Weber, Alan Murphy, Jonathan Williams, Nigel Kennedy, Alan Stivel, Davey Spillane, Paddy, Dave Gilmour, Michael Kamen, almost everybody involved with this album (with the notable exceptions of first-time guests Mick Karn and Michael Nyman, and the Trio Bulgarka) has been involved with previous Kate albums, and several of them go all the way back to *The Kick Inside*. Everybody has grown along with Kate, revising their roles as they go. In a business where the normal method for stylistic evolution *relies* on changing casts, Kate’s dedication both to and from her supporting players is just another remarkable detail about her career.

The title track, “The Sensual World”, begins the album. Its instrumentation is Celtic, but it refuses to break into the reel it flirts with, instead holding tightly to a deliberately slow pace that maximizes the tantalizing sensuality of Kate’s breathy “Mmh, yes”. The physicality of the narrator, just released from the printed page into the real world, is palpable. The way she pronounces “sensual” (without the “h” in “senshual”), the way she says “slipped between my breasts”, the shiver-inducing quaver at the end of “mmh”, these things combine for a disconcertingly erotic song that makes an unsettling beginning to the album.

“Love and Anger”, next, does an about face and delivers the soul of a killer rock song in the garb of a

performance that seems utterly unconscious of an audience outside its players. Not a single rock cliché is to be found, Dave Gilmour's guitar included, and the song isn't mixed right for rock at all. It's mixed for *itself*. John Gribbin's brilliant bass, Gilmour's guitar, Stuart's steady drums, Kate and Paddy's multi-tracked backing vocals, Kate's lead, all these elements play to each other, not to some stadium of air-guitarists. Rock's arena potential has been so overwhelmingly the quality stressed, for so many years, that it takes a while to decide that this song *is*, in fact, rock, that the balanced, personal intensity of it is part of the same tradition as Chuck Berry's duckwalk, Hendrix's burning guitar, Townshend's windmill, Tommy Lee's rotating drum kit. Once you get it, though, you begin to wonder if all those other people are fully aware that what *they* are (or were) doing is only part of the form's potential.

Following that, "The Fog" is a dark, keening, threatening song, driven by an orchestra that surges in and out in ocean-like swells, sounding as if between the members they are playing every note below middle C at once. Nigel Kennedy's solo violin and Jonathan Williams' cello duel like the soundtrack to a horror movie directed by Plato.

"Reaching Out" starts off even quieter, just piano and then drums and Kate singing. The other parts join in as the song progresses (including strings arranged by the great Michael Nyman), and both in the building song structure and the spirit and form of the lyrics, this reminds me a lot of "The Big Sky", both songs of raw potential. This one, though, stays in control of itself, realizing perhaps that seeming to achieve that potential within the course of the song gives the mistaken impression that there isn't *more* potential outside of it. "Reaching Out" isn't intended to be its own object.

The jerky "Heads We're Dancing", in some ways reviving the feel of "The Dreaming", is one of my favorite Kate texts, an account of discovering, after the fact, that a charming man the narrator danced with one night in 1939 was, in fact, Hitler. She casts him as charming, a good dancer, and very confident (his pickup line: "Hey, heads we dance" while holding out a coin to flip). Discovering, later, who he was, she is horrified, partly reluctant to believe that the man she danced with was really Hitler, partly frightened to realize that in person he really was appealing. I haven't done an exhaustive study, by any means, but this is the only sympathetic portrayal of Hitler as a person that I can remember ever seeing in post-WWII popular culture. I mentally file it, along with "The Kick Inside", "The Infant Kiss", "The Wedding List", "Pull Out the Pin", "Night of the Swallow" and "Mother Stands for Comfort", on the track listing for the compilation *Queen of Empathy* that I imagine one day making of Kate's music.

The next song, "Deeper Understanding", is actually another one for that collection. It is, I think, the first love song ever written to a computer, an inspiredly claustrophobic story of a human-computer relationship become more real to the human than her human-human relationships. The computer is loyal, attentive, patient, accommodating, never forgets and never complains, and it doesn't seem at all unreasonable that these qualities wouldn't lead eventually to it being a more perfect companion in some ways than most people. This song sounds implausible in 1993, but check back in ten years, or twenty, and I don't think it will seem so absurd any more. Already, if you interpret the singer's computer use as online time, communicating not *with* the computer, but *via* the computer with other people, the scenario suddenly becomes plainly realistic. The step from a human on the other end to a computer is merely one of perception. Does the voice on the other end pass the Turing Test? Clearly the one in the song does.

Could it be accidental that the next song is "Between a Man and a Woman", an explicit tale of *human* interaction? I don't think so. "Between a Man and a Woman" is a seriously deconstructed song, almost structureless, a song that seems to simply trail after Kate's words, with no preconceived ideas about where the music should go. The song lasts for three-plus minutes, for no other reason than that it takes Kate that long to get through all the words, which she does with virtually no significant pauses. Each line has a melody, and some lines have the same melodies, but the lines don't seem to *combine* into any overall melodic form. It's actually quite remarkable. More than a couple of these might quickly become unbearable, but one is fascinating. I like to think of this song as the reply that the singer of "Feel It" gives to the singer of "In the Warm Room".

"Never Be Mine" is like a combination of "All the Love" (from *The Dreaming*), and "Between a Man and a Woman". It has a strong structure, but it also has some decidedly linear elements, the Trio Bulgarka's backing vocals in particular. My favorite thought from it is "They're setting fire to the cornfields / As you're taking me home. / The smell of burning fields / Will now mean you and here."

The album proper now reaches its penultimate song, and "Rocket's Tail" responds with a blazing release of built up emotional energy. The first third of the song is a cappella, just Kate and the Trio, though saying "just" Kate and the Trio is like saying that it's "just" the Four Horsemen at the door. The band, including Gilmour, kicks in at about the 1:30 point, and thrashes through the album's loudest, most unrestrained minutes. Most of the story, a woman trying to understand the appeal her companion sees in

a burning rocket, is spun out in the first minute and a half, and the instrumented portion goes beyond words, trying to *feel* the appeal, to *be* it. Like “Love and Anger”, this is a little-practiced version of rock intensity, though this one is *slightly* more common.

Following the album’s loudest moment, “This Woman’s Work” ends it with a beautiful piano and orchestra ballad. A desperately frustrated song, despite its elegant exterior, its ending line “Just make it go away now” is the cry of a woman who no longer believes that she can make her relationship work, who thinks that she must cut it off completely in order to fix her own life, to do her own work. It makes a useful box-set title, like “My Brilliant Career”, but the song itself is angry, ambivalent, resigned, bitter and self-absorbed. Some people, probably, would say that Kate’s music, too, is angry, ambivalent, resigned, bitter and self-absorbed, but I don’t think so. I like the song, though.

The CD doesn’t quite end there, as it adds the bonus cut “Walk Straight Down the Middle”, which, I thought I remembered, originally appeared on the soundtrack to the movie “She’s Having a Baby”. What part this dark, abstract song had in what looked to be a painfully sappy Molly Ringwald movie, I had no idea. On further consideration, though, I believe it was “This Woman’s Work” that was on that soundtrack, and “Walk Straight Down the Middle” is simply extra. It makes the album end very differently, on a small upswing rather than the convincing fadeout of “This Woman’s Work”, but on the whole I think that’s a good thing.

#### *Love and Anger*, 1990 CD5

The CD single for “Love and Anger” backs up the “Single Mix” of the title song, whose differences from the original elude me on casual inspection, and don’t seem to merit more than that, with Kate’s bouncy contribution to a film called *GLC*, “Ken”, the similarly-flavored instrumental “The Confrontation”, and the inconsequential minute-long piano snippet “One Last Look Around the House Before We Go...”. “Ken” is an exhilarating bit of dance stomp, replete with the kind of cheesy over-directness that characterizes all the best low-budget soundtracks. I always assumed that *GLC* stood for Gay and Lesbian Coalition, or something like that, but someone on rec.music.gaffa explained that it stood for Greater London Council, and that the film was actually made about the dissolution of this body, and somebody named Ken was actually the leader of it at the time. I have no way of verifying this information, but it has an amusing ring to it, so I offer it here without other comment.

On the whole, though, I wouldn’t call this single “value-packed”.

#### *Aspects of the Sensual World*, 1990 CD5

Evidently either Kate doesn’t believe that fans in the US manage to get ahold of her UK singles, or her record companies just don’t care, as this American CD5 reprises “Ken” from the previous single. In a more convincing attempt at justifying its existence, though, it includes two new non-album tracks, “Be Kind to My Mistakes” and “I’m Still Waiting”, as well as the album version of “The Sensual World” and an instrumental version of it, which in my opinion basically misses the point of the song entirely.

“I’m Still Waiting” is worth the price of a whole stack of CD5s. I’m guessing that it was an outtake from *The Sensual World*, and I don’t know why it wasn’t included, but it isn’t for lack of quality. I’d have slipped it right between “Reaching Out” and “Heads We’re Dancing”, or perhaps after “Heads”, before “Deeper Understanding”, or better yet, at the end, instead of “Walk Straight Down the Middle”. The way it writhes and arches inside the cage of its rigid drum track is awesome, a 1990 updating of “Hounds of Love” or “Running Up That Hill”.

“Be Kind to My Mistakes” is denser, murkier, closer in feel to “Walk Straight Down the Middle”. It has its moments, especially the roller-coaster way Kate sings “It is this that brings us together”, and some nice contrapuntal guitar, but unlike “I’m Still Waiting” this one sounds like a reject to me, unfinished and at least partly unloved, a song that hasn’t quite discovered itself yet.

#### *This Woman’s Work*, 1990 box

For years this imposing box-set was the most coveted musical item I didn’t own. I lusted after it painfully, but just couldn’t justify paying \$185 for two CDs of b-sides and alternate versions, most of which I already had on a crappy bootleg which I hated having because I detest bootlegs. Several times I almost buckled and bought it, mostly right after raises. Each time, though, some other use for the money occurred to me, and I signed and didn’t get it. Around the time of the release of *The Red Shoes*, though, somebody on the net tossed in the tip that a place in Vancouver had the box on sale for \$89 *Canadian* (at the time, 1.3 of those to \$1 US), and would ship to the US. This seemed pretty unlikely, but I called them up and *they* believed it, so I ordered one, not really expecting it to come, or expecting it to come but be missing stuff, or something like that. My cynicism turned out to be unjustified: it arrived within the week, complete and intact.

So, now I have it. Eight CDs, it is essentially Kate's complete work as of 1990. The six original albums are included, unaltered, along with a booklet of pictures and, and this is the important part, two CDs containing the 29 tracks of note that the six albums don't contain. I already had the six albums on CD (and vinyl, too, meaning that I've now purchased them all three times each, a personal record), but the completist who knaws at the base of my brain when I'm asleep wouldn't be placated until I had the b-sides in glorious digital form.

Vol. 1, which contains the bulk of the b-sides, has these (with comments where I haven't mentioned the tracks previously):

"The Empty Bullring", the b-side of "Breathing", from 1980. This is one of the best tracks here, a surprisingly melodic piano and voice piece.

"Ran Tan Waltz", the b-side of 1980's "Babooshka" single. A *Never for Ever* outtake, clearly. A little goofy for my tastes.

"Passing Through Air", b-side to "Army Dreamers", also 1980. Sounds like a Lennon cover, and definitely sounds pre-*Never for Ever*, possibly pre-*The Kick Inside*.

"December Will Be Magic Again", released as a non-album single in late 1980.

"Warm and Soothing", the b-side to "December Will Be Magic Again". Smoky hotel-lobby piano-bar torch song.

"Lord of the Reedy River", a Donovan cover, from the "Sat in Your Lap" single, 1981. This is Kate's only released cover prior to "Rocket Man" and "Candle in the Wind" in 1991. I don't know what the original sounded like, but Kate's version sounds like she is storing her Fairlight in a large underground cave and hasn't yet figured out to get anything other than detuned flute noises out of it. I like it, but it is very strange and disconnected.

"Ne T'en Fui Pas", b-side to "There Goes a Tenner", 1982. In English, "Don't Fly Away", a carefully constructed request from cat-like hunter to prey. Sounds like an early *Never for Ever* outtake. I have no idea why Kate sings it in French.

"Un Baiser D'Enfant", French language version of "The Infant Kiss", appropriately enough the b-side to "Ne T'en Fui Pas", which was released as a single in its own right in France (and Canada, though there it was backed with an instrumental version of "The Dreaming"). A novelty.

"Under the Ivy", b-side to "Running Up That Hill", 1985. A brilliant, passionate piano song. Out of character for *Hounds of Love*, but every bit as good as the best songs on it. If "The Ninth Wave" had been about being buried, not drowned, this could have

replaced "Under Ice", though the mood would have been wrong.

"Burning Bridge", b-side to "Cloudbusting", 1985. Another great song good enough to have been on *Hounds of Love*. If the side hadn't already been full, it could have fit in quite nicely before or after "Hounds of Love", or perhaps right before "Cloudbusting".

"My Lagan Love", second b-side to the 12" single of "Cloudbusting". A traditional lullaby, sung by Kate with no accompaniment save the reverberation of her own voice. Hauntingly, achingly beautiful. Getting this track on CD, instead of the hissy bootleg vinyl copy I had before, made me *extremely* happy.

"The Handsome Cabin Boy", b-side to "Hounds of Love", 1986. Another traditional folk tune, sung almost unaccompanied (a breathy drone runs throughout the song). A little less overwhelming to me than "My Lagan Love", but only a little.

"Not This Time", b-side to "The Big Sky", 1986.

"Walk Straight Down the Middle", CD-only bonus track from *The Sensual World*, 1989. The inclusion of this song twice in the set is slightly less perplexing when you remember that the box *was* released in cassette and LP editions, and this song wouldn't have been on the cassette or LP versions of that album.

"Be Kind to My Mistakes", from the CD5 *Aspects of the Sensual World*, 1990.

Vol. 2 finishes out the b-sides and then moves on to alternate versions:

"I'm Still Waiting", from *Aspects of the Sensual World*.

"Ken", from *Aspects of the Sensual World* and the CD5 of "Love and Anger", both 1990.

"One Last Look Around the House Before We Go...", also from the CD5 of "Love and Anger". Why this was included and the other instrumental, "The Confrontation", wasn't, I'm not quite sure. They're both expendable, in my opinion, though.

"Wuthering Heights (New Vocal)", b-side of "Experiment IV", 1986, and included on the compilation *The Whole Story*.

"Experiment IV", 1986 single, included on *The Whole Story*. Having only the 12" version prior to getting this set, this "normal" version was actually new to me. Most of the difference between the two is that this one omits the extended version's two-minute instrumental intro. And, to be honest, I miss it a lot. Perhaps I'm just reacting to having become used to the long version, but jumping straight into "We were working secretly for the military", without the intro's long violin lead-in, feels wrong in a dramatic sense. You should come upon the research site gradually, and have time to start to draw your own mistaken conclusions about it before the tour begins. This way

the door just opens and there you are, and I don't feel the same degree of horror that I get the other way.

"Them Heavy People", live, from the EP *Kate Bush Live On Stage*, 1979. A charming live version, though not that different from the album version on *The Kick Inside*. Kind of strangely mixed, with very dry, boxy drums. Gets disco-ey toward the end, which is amusing.

"Don't Push Your Foot on the Heartbrake", also from *Kate Bush Live On Stage*. This one is *amazing*. Hearing the band kick into the chorus with full '79 stage-band splash is simply priceless. Hearing Kate rip into the final chorus is sublime. Oh, how I wish I'd seen this show.

"James and the Cold Gun", same source. As with the previous track, this is a rock song that here gets a rousing rock-concert treatment, which suits it immensely. No wonder Pat Benetar wanted to do a Kate Bush cover. Check out the groovy guitar solo and band jam at the end, complete with Kate playing her piano like it was a harp. D'you suppose they had lasers for this part? I hope so.

"L'Amour Looks Something Like You", the last of the four live EP tracks. Nice, but this song doesn't lend itself as well to the live setting, and so ends up sounding almost exactly the same as on the album. I wish they'd done "Hammer Horror" instead.

"Running Up That Hill", the 12" version, 1985. A pretty restrained extended version, compared to the others. Some extra noises, percussion, and vocal cut-and-paste editing, but nothing that makes an enormous difference to the song. I do like it a little better than the album version, but mostly just because it's longer.

"Cloudbusting (The Organon Mix)", from the 12", 1985. Deliciously extended to around six-and-a-half minutes, heavily edited and augmented with additional vocal effects and lots of looping. There isn't as much added percussion on this as these remixes usually have, but "Cloudbusting" already had a pretty unshakable drum track, so I guess they decided (and rightly, I think) that running it for a few more minutes as is was just fine.

"Hounds of Love (Alternative)", from the 12", 1986. Not a remix, but a completely different version of this song, with a vocal melody, in particular, that bears only occasional resemblance to the original. Hearing this so-familiar song turned unfamiliar again is very cool, and I adore this version. It wouldn't have fit in on the album nearly as well as the album version did, but then, nobody is asking it to.

"The Big Sky (Meteorological Mix)", from the 12", 1986.

"Experiment IV (12" Mix)", 1986.

For the non-fanatical Kate Bush fan, buying this set will probably never be an option. The good news, I

guess, is that the bulk of the important b-sides here are available on singles from 1985-86, which you might still be able to track down at a used vinyl store, if your city still has such things, so if you do get the urge to hear "Burning Bridge" or "Under the Ivy" (which you should), there may be an economically viable way to do so, though it will require some work on your part.

For the serious fan, however, your life will remain incomplete until you have this box in your very own hands, and you might as well get used to that. Even if you have followed Kate from the beginning, and have all the original 45s already, the thought that people somewhere (like me, for example), are listening to "Lord of the Reedy River" in digital, and proceeding directly on to "Ne T'En Fui Pas" without having to take the first single off the turntable, put it carefully back in its protective sleeve, extract the other one, put it on, clean it, make sure the turntable is still on 45, etc., this knowledge will eat at you. Sure, you feel a little better now that *The Red Shoes* has come out, and *This Woman's Work* is no longer complete, but you better believe that, now that I have it, I'll be buying every damn CD5 Kate puts out for the rest of her natural life, and if you, too, don't buy the box, I'll be forever ahead.

There's hope, though. The Japanese edition has an extra booklet and some stickers that weren't in the UK/Canadian version I bought. Stickers! Boy, would I be jealous if you had those...

### ***Rocket Man*, 1991 CD5**

For the 1991 Elton John/Bernie Taupin tribute album *Two Rooms*, Kate did a cover of their song "Rocket Man". Mercury had the sense to release it, along with her otherwise unavailable version of "Candle in the Wind", as a single, which saved me from having to sit through a lot of Elton John covers I really didn't want to hear.

I'm actually not that crazy about "Rocket Man", either. Kate's version is nice, but I don't like the song itself that much, and Kate's version isn't quite Kately enough for me. "Candle in the Wind", though, is awe-inspiring. Opinions seem to be sharply divided among Kate fans on this song, with many people firmly of the opinion that it is about the worst thing she's ever done, and others, like me, coming close to the opposite opinion. It's just Kate and her keyboards, no band, and it sounds like she didn't spend that much time laboring over it, but that's part of what makes it so special for me. She doesn't attempt to overwhelm the song with her studio expertise or meticulous craftsmanship, she just sits down and *plays* the song, and completely appropriates it by sheer sincerity. She turns it from a pretty song about Marilyn Monroe sung by a would-be male admirer, to a deeply emotional, empathic, (yes,

this is another one for *Queen of Empathy*) confessional message from one woman to another. The instrumentation is simple, but powerful (the single includes an instrumental version of “Candle” as well, which for me acts as a perfect extended coda), as is the singing. I pity the people who don’t love this song. This isn’t just the work of a great musician, this is the work of an even greater *person*. Anyone who can make me cry about Marilyn Monroe could probably make me do just about anything. It’s a good thing Kate hates airplanes.

## Happy Rhodes

I bought the first five Happy Rhodes albums all at once, having heard not a single moment of her music previously, on the strength of the notation “Loves: Kate Bush, Jane Siberry, Happy Rhodes, Sarah McLachlan” on an email I got on the Tori Amos Internet mailing list Really Deep Thoughts. It was pretty hard for me to imagine that anyone who a fan of Tori, Kate, Jane and Sarah would place in their company wouldn’t be wonderful, and since, at the time, I had to mail-order the albums, and I knew that if I got one I’d have to get the others whether I liked the first one or not, the most efficient solution was simply to order them all (there were, at the time, only five). It didn’t hurt that I consider Aural Gratification one of the greatest label names of all time (and Happy’s publishing name, Hovering Slab Music, is pretty good, too).

Turns out I picked a good time to get into Happy Rhodes. The relative success of *Warpaint*, her fifth album, in 1991, marshaled enough support for reissuing her first four albums (available only on cassette at that point) on CD, allowing me to obtain the whole catalog that way. I then had a few months to absorb the backlog before *Equipoise*, Happy’s sixth album, appeared. If I’d have waited a few more months I would have seen her albums show up in stores here in Boston, and her get enough airplay that when I started to explain to my mother about this marvelous unknown singer I’d discovered, she’d say “Oh, Happy Rhodes, I’ve heard of *her*.” As it was, I had at least a short period of self-satisfied Internet-insider knowledge. Also, an autographed *HR*<sup>5</sup>, but we’ll get to that.

### *Rhodes I*, 1992 CD

The first thing people will tell you about Happy Rhodes (and why should I be an exception?) is that she sounds like Kate Bush. There is both more and less to this than you might expect. First of all, there are moments in Happy’s singing when she sounds so much

like Kate that Kate fans will get alarming shivers running up their spine, spreading out across the base of their skull, and flickering threateningly around the tips of their teeth. Saying she sounds “like” Kate at these moments shows a glaring weakness in the English language. For a few seconds, here and there, Kate’s voice comes out of Happy’s mouth, there is no other way to describe it.

Once you get over those moments, though, you quickly realize that there are many more ways that Happy and Kate are different than there are ways that they are alike. Happy’s voice covers a wide range of tones and timbres, and only one of them sounds anything like Kate. Kate’s basic acoustic instrument was the piano; Happy’s is the acoustic guitar. Happy has synthesizers to play with right from the beginning of her career, and performs *everything* on this album. Her music tends to be colder than Kate’s, sparer, more introspective, ethereal, *druidic* (if that means anything to you), much more thoroughly disconnected from rock tradition than Kate’s. Don’t let either Happy’s name or the howling monster on the cover fool you: this is music fueled neither by whimsy nor rage. It is somewhere in between: this is the music that a person who *wishes* to be happy, but isn’t, finds inside themselves when they go looking for the monsters they know *must* be inside. “I have my pain, I have my love and my hate / And I’ll not live without one of them”, Happy sings on “Given In”. These songs are compassionate, desperate, unbalanced, ambiguous, misguided, depressed and sometimes depressing, but never boring.

The defining moment on *Rhodes I*, and one of the best Happy has ever produced, in my opinion, is the last pre-bonus-track song, “The Wretches Gone Awry”. A short, gentle song with only a single picked acoustic guitar for accompaniment, it weaves an intricate pattern of Happy’s various voices around a theme that reminds me of Big Country’s “Beautiful People”, rejoicing in human frailty rather than despairing because of it. “I cannot change what is, and I cannot make it die, / But I can love with all my heart the wretches gone awry.” The guitar part is simple, providing some useful musical structure, but doesn’t distract you from the interplay of the voices, which is like the aerial mating rituals of angels (and sure, they mate). On a strict vocal ability level, I think Happy is largely peerless. That’s not necessarily a *musical* compliment coming from me, but in Happy’s case she has a remarkable instinct for what multi-tracking herself can accomplish, and produces some mesmerizing results.

There are basically two sorts of songs on *Rhodes I*. The bulk are acoustic near-lullabies like “The Wretches Gone Awry”. Of these my favorites are “Rainkeeper”, “Given In”, “Number One”, “Moonbeam Friends” and the two CD bonus tracks, “The Flaming Threshold” and

"Suicide Song", all of which capture the essential charm of "The Wretches Gone Awry", folksongs drifting into our universe from the borders of some dimly, but fondly, remembered dream. The second sort, interwoven with the first, are dark, reverberating and synthesized, songs as the dream begins to turn frightening, but you are unable to change its course and not quite entirely able to understand where the good parts went wrong. "He's Alive" and "I'm Not Awake, I'm Not Asleep" are my favorites of this sort, songs that make it clear that the monsters from the cover aren't the mindlessly direct slashers of horror films, but sophisticated creatures as much imprisoned by their fearsome demeanors as empowered by it. In fact, if you look closely at the figure on the cover, you'll note that it seems to have no lower teeth, which turns its sharp, oversized upper fangs from predatory assets to painful liabilities rather quickly. As I listen to this album, the monster's cry turns from killing fury to gut-wrenching sorrow.

### *Rhodes II*, 1992 CD

*Rhodes II* continues the saga begun on *Rhodes I*. On the whole, I think that Happy might have been better served by making a single album out of the best dozen songs from these two volumes, rather than publishing all thirty tracks, but the thing about releasing albums on your companion-in-life's own record label, and distributing them out of your kitchen, is that you can do whatever the hell you want. The downside is that the natural feedback mechanisms that the industry provides for major-label artists, like reviews and chart fate and meddling label executives and producers and the like, largely don't exist for independents like Happy, which makes it difficult to edit towards any particular end, even if Happy had wanted to, which it's quite possible she didn't.

At any rate, there is enough great material on both discs that either are enviable accomplishments as is. My favorite here is "Under and Over the Brink", which is included in two versions (the older, rougher one "barely salvaged from the vault" as a CD bonus). The vocal counterpoint between Happy's lyrical lead and the chirpy trans-vocal backing track on the rough version is intense, but the leads on the sparer new version are even more chilling, the octave jumps in the single part even more awesome as they accomplish in one pass what the older version needed two passes to achieve. Other first-rate primarily-acoustic numbers include "The Revelation", "No one Here", "To the Funnyfarm" and "The Chase".

The synthetic songs begin to predominate here, though. There are more of them, and they sound more accomplished. The stiff 12/8 "Many Nights" has only

eighteen words, but cycles through them with a startling methodical grace. The bizarre "Not For Me" shows an new inventiveness at the keyboard that reminds me a bit of Kate's *Never for Ever*. The ominous, metallic "Beat It Out", which stretches the low end of both Happy's keyboard and her voice, uses vocal repetition like "Many Nights", but strips away essentially all rhythm for a disturbing funereal pace that either genuinely affects me emotionally, or is using subsonics to get straight to my reactions without going through my conscious mind.

For the most part, though, I have to admit that the synthesized songs here are less satisfying to me than the acoustic ones. Partly this is a technical artifact; Happy's keyboards have a dullish, old-analog sound to them that sounds like she couldn't afford better ones, not like they're *supposed* to sound this way. Partly, though, it's musical. "Take Me With You" sounds like a merry-go-round on valium to me, and I can't quite reconcile the slow, moody pace and feel of the song with the sort-of toy-train music. Happy also has a tendency, in these slower songs, of letting up on the delicate multi-voiced melodies that make songs like "Under and Over the Brink" so magical to me, and I miss them.

### *Rearmament*, 1992 CD

For *Rearmament*, Happy expands her sonic palette considerably. She is still playing everything herself, but on the first track she immediately introduces programmed drums and percussion, and what sounds like electric guitar, for the first time, as well as some synthesizers that sound like a significantly more recent vintage. Other songs bring in thunder and a low whooping sound that might actually be a big piece of metal being flexed, not a synthesizer. "Perfect Irony", "I Am a Legend", "Til the Dawn Breaks", "The Issue Is", "Friend You'll Be" and "Baby Don't Go" all show a striking maturation compared with the restrained material on *Rhodes II* even at its most adventuresome. "Perfect Irony", the opener, is as good an example of these as any. The drum track consists of a deep, heavy bass drum, some precise high-hats, various stick hits and hand-claps, and a tom or two tossed in every once in a while. The rhythm gets passed around this kit gradually, unhurriedly, with each drum taking its own, clearly defined, turn in the cycle. The overall pattern, in addition, doesn't change much throughout the song. You're not going to dance to it, I don't think, but it seems to center the song very well, giving the other keyboard parts and Happy's vocals a foundation to weave around.

"Baby Don't Go" shows that maturation and drums aren't synonymous. Drumless, it plays two or

three voices against a couple accompanying keyboard parts. The main keyboard is warm, fuzzy and somewhat indistinct, and its blurring effects underscore the choppy back-and-forth of the vocal parts nicely (like a nice cream sauce, perhaps). I think this song shows Happy for the first time being able to carry a song on keyboards the same way her earliest songs are carried on guitar, reaching parity on the two instruments.

My clear favorite, though, is the CD bonus track, "Be Careful What You Say", which comes as close as Happy has to this point to making a true pop song. The percussion actually breaks down and plays a few recognizable kick-snare combinations in the chorus, and a cool elastic-y bass-synth line duels with an honest-to-god hook hiding in the upper ranges. I suppose some fans who were particularly satisfied with the most austere instrumentation of Happy's earlier synthetic compositions may be distressed to find this capitulation to commercialization, but I think it is very nice indeed, a merging of styles that were dying to merge, giving Happy's songcraft a strong direction that much of the rest of this album hinted at but stopped short of. And besides, it's only the CD bonus-track.

This album's weaknesses, and it does have some, are a string of three out of four songs that seem to me to rely on a too-similar waltz cadence ("Crystal Orbs", "Because I Learn" and "Rhodes Waltz", with only "Baby Don't Go" to break them up), a squeaky keyboard part on "Box H.A.P." that goes through me like rubbing on balloons does to some people, and the meandering "Ally Ally Oxenfree", which crosses over the fine line between lullaby and nursery rhyme for me. As I said about *Rhodes I* and *Rhodes II*, though, there is a killer album on this disc—it just has some company. Cut the five songs I don't like out of this hour-plus album and you have a very impressive record at an eminently respectable length. Pity she didn't, but there's a button on your CD player clearly labeled "Skip".

#### ***Ecto*, 1992 CD**

The Happy Rhodes Internet mailing list is called *Ecto*, and there are people on it who claim this is their favorite Happy album. Sadly, I don't get it. *Ecto* is clearly the low point in Happy's career to me. The burgeoning potential on *Rearmament* is almost entirely squandered here. Instead of picking up where "Be Careful What You Say" left off, and launching into an inspired melding of pop invitingness with Happy's own unique style and gifts, this album slouches into a dispirited, energyless stasis that I find mostly devoid of any of the appealing characteristics of the previous three albums. The songs vary basically from dull-but-agreeable to just dull. The accompaniments seem

uninspired, the vocals undersung, the melodies simply missing. The addition of bass on "Ecto" and "Poetic Justice" has potential, but the actual bass parts on both songs seem painfully stiff to me, their repetitiveness not welcome.

On the other hand, the two songs I *do* like in the body of the album both rely on *heavy* repetition, the synth-bell arpeggio in "Off From Out From Under Me", and the oscillating synth-marimba (or -kalimba, or *one* of those woody, mallety -things) on "Don't Want to Hear It", which has some of the *really* mind-blowing Kate-like moments (check out "You know I'm no doctor"). The two songs I *really* like here are the two CD bonuses "Look for the Child" and "When the Rain Came Down", which appear to have dropped in from another record entirely (*Rearmament*, would be my guess, judging from the drums). I think I must just be missing some crucial aesthetic circuit in my Happy cortex that would enable me to enjoy this record. Pay me no heed.

#### ***Warpaint*, 1991 CD**

Happy's breakthrough album (a major one, artistically, I think, and a minor one commercially) is this one, her fifth. Three notable factors distinguish it from its predecessors immediately. First, the picture on the cover is Happy herself, not a monster. Second, it has only twelve songs (the first four have fifteen each). Editing, do you think? Third, for the first time Happy did *not* produce and play this album entirely herself. Aural Gratification magistrate Kevin Bartlett co-produces it, and plays several instruments. Other players contribute bass, additional vocals, keyboards and violin to individual songs.

Now, none of these changes are *inherently* advances. I *like* the monsters on the early covers, and at least half of one returns for *Equipoise*, later. The missing three songs could easily be attributed to time pressure, not editing. And I don't mean that there was anything *wrong* with Happy's production or solo playing on the other albums. Put together, though, these things add up to *change*, and change can be dynamic, and in this case I think it's exactly what Happy needed. From *Ecto*, which I could almost discard, the jump to *Warpaint* is, at least personally, thrilling. If you like *Ecto* better than I did, the transition may not seem as sharp as it does to me, but you'll notice the stylistic advance whether you thought she *needed* one or not.

"Waking Up", the first track, still isn't dance-club fare, but it has several qualities in that direction that Happy's music previously lacked. Foremost among these, or among the ones I notice, at any rate, is *soulfulness*. The drum pattern on this song could almost



be called a groove, though it's still pretty slow for dancing. Happy's deep voice here doesn't sound nearly as much like monks chanting as it usually does, and there's a bit of high singing, toward the ends of the choruses, which has an almost sensual sway to it. These are new aspects, and exciting ones.

"Feed the Fire" is a partial stylistic retreat, colder and stiffer than much of the rest of the album. The retreat is *conscious*, though ("I want to go back to the trees / Where my art was born"), which makes a big difference. "Murder" compensates with a *huge* jump in the other direction, slow and deliberate yet powerfully kinetic, not entirely unlike *The Dreaming*, but its less-obviously frantic moments. "To Live in Your World" backs off the drums again, but with "Murder" for contrast this quiet song seems haunting and beautiful, not lethargic and unfocused.

The album hits a short skid for me at that point, with "Phobos" and "Wrong Century", which strike me as kind of painful (though the latter has some nice moments when Happy and Mitch Elrod duet), and "Lay Me Down", which doesn't ever seem to get going. The rumbling bass and clattering drums of "Terra Incognita" get the album back on track, though, and the bounce back and forth between lead and backing vocals on the verses of this song is as captivating as anything since "Wretches". The bass nears funkiness, and the dialog fragments in the latter half are a nice (and, for Happy, new) touch.

"All Things (Mia ia io)" drifts in from the musical neighborhood of Ecto, but Happy's close, direct vocals rescue it for me, though it still isn't my favorite. The "Mia ia io" is just nonsense syllables, not Italian or anything. Things don't get any time to unravel, though, as close on "All Things"' heels comes "Words Weren't Made for Cowards". This is probably the most extended bit of Kate-likeness, as the whole *verses* of this song (and there are three long ones) are rife with vocal tricks borrowed from the *Never for Ever* era. The interjections of Happy's distinctive lower registers in the chorus makes this song an excellent one-song demonstration of her range.

Bob van Detta's fretless bass introduces the title track. The music on "Warpaint" doesn't impress me that much on its own, but the lyrics, and Happy's obvious commitment to them, especially the chorus' tagline "Those years are lines of color on my face, the past is warpaint", make this song transfixing. Combined with the cover photo, which has a none-too-happy looking Happy drawing the lines on her face with her fingers, lines that *we* can't see but that you can *tell* she feels, this song tells a powerful story that I'm assuming is autobiographical, not that it matters if it isn't.

The album eases out with the beautiful "In Hiding", a "Bridge Over Troubled Water"-like ballad with classic potential, moving piano by Martha Waterman and Happy finding a heretofore undiscovered soft spot in her range hiding just above her low voice. This is the first Happy Rhodes album that feels like an *album*, not just a song collection (probably it *is* the first album constructed as an album), and it feels like an *impressive* album.

### *Equipoise*, 1993 CD

Happy's sixth album, and the first new one in my association with her music, continues the development shown on *Warpaint*. Kevin again co-produces and plays, and guests this time around contribute guitar, bagpipe, snare, bass, vocals, and piano. The most interesting new detail before you actually start *listening* to the album is that a liner photo (inside, mind you, not visible without purchasing the CD and opening it) actually has Happy *smiling*, and Kevin gets a thank you for "making me laugh". These are the first two pieces of evidence that Happy ever embodies her name, and I'm glad to see them.

The record opens with Happy's closest approach to date to a song with "hit single" drive. "Runners" actually has some kick-snare action (you know, kick on the downbeats, snare on the backbeats—the "rock" way) and a little casual vocal whimsy ("coming around 'e gonna take my heartbeat", and that's about the first time I can think of when Happy has done anything "casual"), and while it doesn't move fast enough to pogo to, you can easily imagine it playing over the credits of a poignant-but-uplifting movie that has the triumphant characters not, perhaps, riding into the sunset, but walking off in the rain, or sitting comfortably at home while the camera pulls slowly away. Of course, the lyrics are a bit on the apocalyptic side, but you have to pay pretty close attention to pick up on that, and people watching credits rarely do. Then again, people watching credits are usually actually exiting the theater as quickly as possible, and so they'll miss most of the song. Let that be a lesson to them.

On the one hand, "He Will Come" is something of a throwback to earlier Happy days. On the other, such is her maturation that *everything* is better, even the stiff sort of song that she used to make, and this one only *aspires* to that old awkwardness. Chuck D'Aloia's nylon-string guitar is a humanizing element, but Happy's voice really didn't need the help. "The Flight" has its slow, dark verses, too, but other than being the story of a world-weary vampire submitting himself to his killer, it's downright bouncy, Happy's

keyboards jumping around Kevin's bass and percussion.

The sinister lyrics continue with "Out Like a Lamb", which I'm convinced is a love song from a devoted lunatic to a scarily methodical mass-murderer who she regards as an artist, killing as his art. "I can feel no shame in his discretion", she sings. "He'll call me when he's back in town", she repeats. Whether she thinks herself immune to him, or his certain next victim, is unclear to me. And admittedly, my interpretation hinges on the phrases "He quietly slipped out of town / When the doctor was turned around" and "For seventeen hours he moved Vern out / Piece by piece", the former for the deranged part, the latter for the killing. Otherwise he could just be a painter, though what would be interesting about a painter coming to see the narrator I don't immediately see.

"Save Our Souls" is even prettier sounding, and lyrically more alarming. The song sounds almost like Clannad, lilting and gentle, and the reassuring sway of the chorus' "Save our souls" seems religious in some unthreateningly vague way. The lyrics are actually a mocking imitation of the way humans hope for divine/alien intervention to beautify them when, patently, they don't deserve it. "We are the number one offender of specieism and yet / Here we are reaching out for aliens, / Looking for our salvation. / Pity our emptiness." Finding life elsewhere in the universe would *profoundly* change life here on Earth; simply considering the possibility *should* change our perspective on a host of existing ethical issues, but it doesn't seem to have. Yet.

"Closer" is, if I were making a single of "Runners", the b-side I'd use. It's a little slower, a little less immediate, so as not to detract from the a-side, but it's definitely in the same stylistic family. Kelly Bird's additional vocals are delicious, and the dynamics between the legato chorus and the clipped verses give the song a strong overall structure. "Temporary and Eternal" takes the soaring spirit from the way "Closer" sings "I'm closer" in the chorus, and recasts it as the verse motif, pairing it with a chorus more like "In Hiding", from *Warpaint*.

"Cohabitants", next, contains the most startling departure from her known stylistic ground, a distorted, processed-voice spoken part that alternates with elfin patter and both ethereal and smoky voices that drop in for couplets at a time. The music through much of the song is mostly percussion, though the sing-song pixie-rap runs over both the percussion clatter and the smoother keyboard fills that usually accompany the smoky voice. I'm not sure I really *like* this song, but it's intriguing, and I definitely don't resent its presence.

"Play the Game", on the other hand, is the one I'd do without. The music isn't terrible, but it isn't stunning, either, and the battle-of-the-sexes lyrics really bother me. "Boys, can I play your game by my rules? / Yours don't apply to me" is just too superficially PC for me to take, and tacking "and be who I want to be" on doesn't help at *all*. The sentiments are correct, undeniably, and sincere, but the way they are expressed here reminds me of all the awful sincere poetry I wrote in high school, much of which was just this bad.

All is forgiven for the last two songs, though, which are masterful. "Mother Sea" is another Martha Waterman piano appearance, like "In Hiding", and this one is even more beautiful than "In Hiding" was, which I consider to be a sizable compliment. Unwilling to end two albums in a row on such songs, though, Happy instead closes *Equipoise* with "I Say", a slow, pretty song of her own devising and style. An apparently effortless song that nonetheless moves through quite a number of discrete sections, "I Say" makes an excellent summary of the album, as well as a counterbalance for the faster, more-straightforward "Runners" at the other end. And balance, after all, is what "equipoise" is about.

Actually, there's an anecdote connected to the name. When I first heard the title, I thought "equipoise" was a word Happy had made up. I'd never heard it before, that I knew of, and it seemed like the kind of word she would invent because she needed it. Somebody on Ecto pointed out that it was a real word, and a dictionary check here confirmed that (and why would they lie about such a thing, anyway?). When my copy of *Equipoise* arrived in the mail, the book I had just started reading was *Titus Groan*, the first book in Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* trilogy (actually, though there are three books, the third one is largely a separate thing, and the first two are the real story). A few hundred pages into the book, I encountered the word "equipoise" in the text, not once but several times! A truly remarkable coincidence, you might say. Or, you might point out all the other records I've acquired only to *not* have their titles appear in whatever book I was reading at the time, and say that I'm just making a disproportionately big deal out of the *one* coincidence I *noticed*. Figure out the odds somehow, and I'm sure it comes out that you'd *expect* this sort of thing to happen every 1000 records or so. Check back with me next edition and we'll see how that hypothesis is coming.

At any rate, *Equipoise* and *Gormenghast* make a fitting pair to me. The monsters in both are mostly just people, and *Gormenghast* has this ancient, ingrained sinister cast that Happy's dark, mystical music resonates

with nicely. In many ways I like *Warpaint* better as an album, but *Equipoise* has richer associations.

### **HR<sup>5</sup>, 1993 CD5**

Some time after *Equipoise* came out, Kevin and Happy got bored and decided to send out this promotional 5-song sampler in an attempt to drum up some radio airplay, reviews and the like. By special request of Ecto, they reserved a small pile for Ectophiles who wanted to buy a copy (*signed!*), a number among which I did not hesitate to count myself. Besides "Feed the Fire", from *Warpaint*, and "I Say", from *Equipoise*, this single includes an "acoustic tribute version" of "Feed the Fire", an acoustic cover of David Bowie's "Ashes to Ashes", and an acoustic version of *Equipoise*'s "Save Our Souls".

All three acoustic tracks are wonderful. As much as I liked *Warpaint* and *Equipoise*, part of me also misses the pure acoustic beauty of "The Wretches Gone Awry" and "Over and Under the Brink". Hearing "Save Our Souls" and "Feed the Fire" done acoustically, new songs (with all the songwriting maturity that brought) in the old, charmingly simple, style, is an unexpected treat. The excerpts from Yes' "Long Distance Runaround", Kate's "Running Up That Hill" and Bowie's "Starman" are cool touches, Happy paying literal, unambiguous tribute to what she means when she sings "my ears are lucky to hear these glorious songs". Hearing her sing an actual Kate part turns out not to be nearly as affecting as hearing what sounds like Kate's voice singing songs you know aren't Kate's.

The "Ashes to Ashes" cover is decent, too, but not being a big Bowie fan, it doesn't seem like that big a deal to me.

### **RhodeSongs, 1993 CD**

The good news is that the release, a few months later, of *RhodeSongs*, meant that you don't have to have been on Ecto to get the songs from HR<sup>5</sup>. The even better news is that this is a compilation, and a very thoughtfully constructed one, and provides an ideal place to begin your life with Happy. Rather than trying to make a plain "best-of", Happy and Kevin instead decided to pick a selection that made sense together, a set of songs that all showed the softer side of Happy's canon.

They did a great job. *RhodeSongs* coheres better than *any* of the studio albums. Even songs that I wasn't that crazy about the first time, like "Ode" and "If So" from *Ecto*, sound great in this context. Showing a little fan-consciousness, they also include a few *more* treats for the collector, acoustic versions of "Given In" (a 1991 recording for "The World Cafe") and "In Hiding" (with

acoustic guitar and bass in place of piano; I actually prefer the original), and a previously unreleased song called "Summer" (a cappella, sort of like two or three "My Lagan Love"s at once).

Going through by album, then, *RhodeSongs* contains: "The Wretches Gone Awry" from *Rhodes I* (ignore the *Rhodes II* typo in the credits), and "Given In" originally from there; "The Revelation" and "Let Me Know, Love" from *Rhodes II*; "Because I Learn" and "I Have a Heart" from *Rearmament*; "If So" and "Ode" from *Ecto*; "Feed the Fire" (twice) from *Warpaint*, and "In Hiding" originally from there; "I Say" and "Temporary and Eternal" from *Equipoise*, and "Save Our Souls" originally from there; and "Ashes to Ashes" and "Summer" from no album. As a *replacement* for the individual albums, it's useless. Every album, even *Ecto*, has essential songs not covered here. As an introduction to Happy, though, it's perfect, and precisely because it *can't* replace any of the albums, you won't resent having it even after you've bought them all.

## **Jane Siberry**

I place Jane Siberry, stylistically, somewhere between Kate Bush and Laurie Anderson, combining Kate's musicality with Laurie's conceptual artiness. It is a fascinating mixture. She spins many moments of pure pop songcraft, but juxtaposes them with flights of cheerful whimsy and the occasional stretch of stark minimalism or awesome quietness. She's had no big hits to compare with Kate's commercial successes, but at the same time every album has been packed with songs whose sonic appeal seems wholly undeniable to me. In the end she seems marooned, commercially speaking, between not being obtuse enough to garner performance-art counter-culture credibility, and not being straightforward enough for mainstream marketability. Artistically, however, this is *not* a liability.

### **Jane Siberry, 1980 CD**

*Jane Siberry* is essentially a prequel, an album on which it seems fair to say that Jane's true musical development more or less hasn't gotten underway. In the liner notes to the 1991 CD reissue, she herself describes it as "not the beginning of what I was trying to do but only a punch of the clock", and while this is ungenerous, this album just isn't in the same league as the output that begins with *No Borders Here*. You can hear clear early signs of Jane's fascination with multi-part harmonies, along with some nascent arrangement ideas, and the lyrics are very much in character, but

compared with even *Bound by the Beauty*, this album is very conventionally folky. Acoustic guitars, bass, clarinet and piano dominate the album, and Jane's singing stays pretty closely under control the whole way through.

The song closest to her eventual appeal, to me, is "Above the Treeline", a story about a dog named Wolf that reminds me in many ways of "Wuthering Heights". The chorus, when the drums kick in and two dueling voices slide slowly through a tight harmony, begins to show an early precursor of the simple rock drive of *Bound by the Beauty*. Overall, though, the album is largely a prisoner of folk conventions, much like *The Kick Inside* was a prisoner of rock conventions. If you love the other albums, you'll want to get this one for historical purposes, at least, and you won't regret buying it (be sure and get the East Side Digital version, as it has liner notes by both Jane and John Switzer that are almost as much fun to read as the album is to listen to). This is definitely the *last* Jane Siberry album to buy, though, and starting here would make almost no sense, history notwithstanding.

#### *No Borders Here*, 1984 CD

Four years later, Jane's career proper gets underway with the scintillating album *No Borders Here*. Her folk days are firmly behind her, and the band she has assembled during the intervening years, with John Switzer on bass, Ken Myhr on guitar, and Al Cross on drums, plays along with her meticulous attention to detail and quirky sense of rhythmic development. This is Jane's most cheerful album by far, bouncy and irrepressibly cute, especially when compared with its denser, more spiritual, successors. "The Waitress", "Dancing Class", "Extra Executives" and "Mimi On the Beach" all have a chirpy novelty exuberance that isn't quite on par with "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun", but isn't totally dissimilar in spirit.

The album's musical depth, and even *those* songs' depths, are far beyond novelty level, though. Jane has no particular interest in writing dance-pop (with the partial exception of "Extra Executives"), and the degree of control she exercises over this album is much more akin to Kate Bush's on *The Dreaming* or perhaps *Hounds of Love* than it is to Cyndi Lauper's *She's So Unusual*. She and John Switzer co-produce it with Jon Goldsmith and Kerry Crawford, a four-way pairing that makes me wonder if an actual three-legged race was involved at any stage in the process. Jane herself plays guitar and keyboards, and of course her voices account for a *number* of additional instruments at any given time.

Since *Jane Siberry* her voice has finished maturing, and it alone makes a considerable difference. By itself it is a little frail but utterly compelling, with a perfect

ethereal vibrato. In combinations it becomes as versatile as any synthesizer. The most perfect way I've ever heard it, I think, was standing in the tiny lobby of the Charles Playhouse before the second of her two shows there in November, 1993, listening with a dozen or two others as the sound of her singing "At the Beginning of Time" to close the evening's first show drifted down the stairwells into our awestruck silence. As the song drew towards a close, a woman near me leaned her head against her companion's and whispered "She's an angel". People around her, not turning their heads away from the stairwell, nodded. There are more *striking* singers, certainly, and some more technically adept ones (though not many, frankly), but I'm not sure Jane's voice isn't the most heavenly.

*No Borders Here* opens at a gallop with "The Waitress", the jerky autobiography of a waitress so consumed by her job that she finds herself compelled to clean up at other people's parties, possessed by dreams of overflowing ashtrays and being unable to find her station, obsessed with knowing the regulars' names and preferences. "I'd probably be famous now / if I wasn't such a good waitress", she sings, capturing a profound, if hilarious, insight into the way "true talents" don't always map into anything epic. The tempo shifts constantly, and Myhr's guitar (or something that sounds like it) flutters through dizzyingly noodly solos while several Janes intone "Waitress, waitress, waitress" like a car alarm designed by a restaurateur.

"I Muse Aloud" is a little more restrained, with punchy bass and shimmering keyboards enfolding Jane's voice a little more gently than on "The Waitress". The rhythms are even more complicated, however, with almost no measures of simple 4/4 time-keeping. "I Muse Aloud" also lasts quite a bit longer than the short first song.

"Dancing Class", the third track, is even longer, and is the first of Jane's many mini-epics. This one concerns the sadness of a woman too old for dancing lessons any more, and the sadness she sees in her young German dancing partner. The first three minutes or so drift on an undulating cloud of picked guitar harmonics, setting up the story. For the next minute and a little, edgy drums come in and buffet the confused, but resolute, thoughts of the narrator. This anxious music then gives way again to harmonics, overlaid with various voice-overs (including the one from which the album title comes, "I have a map of the world and there's no border here"), and the voice-overs blend slowly back into narrative as the singer tells of her final ejection from the class ("This is the last dancing class I'll have. / The announcement came tonight after the class. / She said 'you're two hundred years old now, / There's no one left to hold you. / This is the last

dancing class you'll have.'"). It's hard to tell whether this is sad or joyous, and I suspect it is some of both. At least, listening to the song I always feel both sad and happy.

Silliness skips back in for "Extra Executives", a giddily upbeat portrait of a pointless salesman who wants to think of himself as an "executive". The middle of it is a marvelous monologue about asking the man if he likes grouper fish and him not knowing whether she means does he like to eat them, or does he just admire them for some reason. Clapping shut with the line "He took a course in sales - / He's never been the same", it's a quite danceable song with a seditious anti-business agenda that I quite enjoy.

As is the pattern, that silliness is followed by the achingly beautiful "You Don't Need", on which Jane's pure voice stretches out luxuriously over a thickly reverbed keyboard wash punctuated by harp-like pizzicato string sounds. After a litany of things the "you" doesn't need, he seems to disappear for Jane, until all she can say is "I know you must be there because / People stop to talk to you". It is as if the other person has become invisible to the singer by absorbing *nothing*. This is backwards for light, but probably just right for personalities.

"Symmetry (The Way Things Have to Be)" starts to pick the pace up again, a soft, fast, drum patter alternating with an airy resonating guitar howl. This song is sort of the general case of "The Waitress", how certain things just seem *right* to you, and you *have* to do them that way. The waitress' case was one example, but the principle is more universal. This song gets silly right at the end, with the exit line "You can't chop down a symmetry". "Follow Me"'s *music* picks up where "Symmetry"'s *lyrics* leave off, and though the text of "Follow Me" isn't particularly quirky, the music hops and skips from point to point in clipped spurts (how do you clip a spurt?).

Jane then puts all this together for one of her greatest epics, probably her closest brush with a "hit", and the song I discovered her through, "Mimi On the Beach". This track, over the course of its seven-plus minutes, has almost everything that characterizes *No Borders Here*. There are slow parts, overlaid with an ominous sadness. There are fast, happy parts, drums snapping smartly. There are long sections through which a single note repeats, insistently, like Laurie Anderson's "hah hah hah hah"s on 45 (though this is probably not a reference to Laurie, but rather to Philip Glass' *Einstein on the Beach*, from which Laurie's work also could be said to descend). Mimi's story is filled with wonderfully observed details, sardonic commentary, reluctant empathy and concern. I particularly like the way the singer's exhortations to Mimi to stand up for herself merge with the surf

narrative so that by the time Mimi does stand up she's on her surf board, far out at sea both literally and figuratively. Although this is left intentionally somewhat unclear, I think Mimi actually *dies* at the end of the song, but perhaps it isn't that the girl herself has died, but rather that the *other* girl the narrator *wanted* Mimi to be dies, that Mimi can't be anybody but herself, no matter what great things the singer wishes for her.

The album then ends on its softest, most gentle song, the pulsing "Map of the World (Part I)". The drums on this song are very cool, a quiet but steady churning pattern like cars going by over a bridge, or a train passing. I wouldn't have thought that this many drums could be soothing, but the repetition is so steady, so carefully regular, that it turns into something like a massage, and the atmospheric keyboards and vocals end up making perfect sense.

As does the whole album.

### *The Speckless Sky*, 1985 CD

As charming as *No Borders Here* was, the follow-up, *The Speckless Sky*, dwarfs it. Until *When I Was a Boy*, this was *definitely* my favorite Jane Siberry album, and a regular Desert Island Disk selection. The silly forms that Jane's quirky sensibilities took on *No Borders Here* are channeled into more focused expression here, and the resulting album is breathtakingly melodic, a smooth yet barbed masterpiece of pop invention and precise control, soaring vocals and vigorous, razor-sharp playing, flights of lyricism and chokingly personal emotions. It came out the same year as Kate's "The Big Sky", and the two titles map into the two albums' musical personalities surprisingly well. Where *Hounds of Love* was expansive, pounding, insistent, *vast*, an album to make you feel small with awe beneath it, Jane's gives up the power for purity, a sky that overwhelms you with its clear, deep blue, rather than its size. Which of them you prefer, if in fact you *do* prefer one, is your own concern.

The band, this time around, adds keyboardist Anne Bourne and signs up *No Borders Here* accomplice Rob Yale as a full-credit member. Jane and John Switzer produce this one entirely themselves, and all songs are, of course, Jane's. In addition, Jane herself takes the bulk of the Fairlight arrangements here, and this is an album *very* much driven by its incidental noises and effects. *No Borders Here* was detailed, but this is the first Jane Siberry album that leaves me stupefied by the amount of work and care that has obviously gone into it in a brilliantly successful attempt to get every single note and sound absolutely perfect. For all I know, of course, these songs came out *nothing*

like Jane intended them, but they *sound* like thoughts somehow transmitted directly from her mind to mine.

The album begins, strongly, calmly and clearly, with "One More Colour", a song that takes the slow grace of "You Don't Need" or "I Muse Aloud" and marries it to a steady beat, John's popping bass, Ken's wailing synth-augmented guitar, and stacks of keyboards, voices and sundry percussion, for a flawless force not unlike the wave that swallowed Mimi at the end of "Mimi on the Beach". I can't *tell* you what the chorus means ("Here—all we have here is sky, / All the sky is is blue, / All that blue is is one more colour now"), but I *feel* it. The album title comes from here.

"Seven Steps to the Wall", the second song, is much less abstract, but no less compelling. I probably listened to it a hundred times, immersed in its dramatic ebb and flow, its angular percussion and aching pain, before I actually paid close enough attention to the words to realize that it's about a man in a prison cell, and that seven steps is the size of his room, of his world. Inside this cell, with nothing, he is searching for a mental release where there is no physical release. He wants to create something, but he plainly doesn't know how to even begin. The paper is just another blank surface like his walls, his table, the outside, his mind. He wants so badly to say something, anything, but there is nothing. Finally, he writes just that, nothing. In the only way he can really express his feelings, *without* a word, he writes. "It is thin / But it's clear", he concludes, finding his escape in his very imprisonment, disappearing triumphantly inside himself. The music follows the surge of his desires and the barrenness of his thoughts, crashing and rising and then falling away again to little more than Jane's quiet voice. Perhaps he is Mimi's father.

"The Very Large Hat" cheers up a little, a long, limber song a little like a culture-neutral version of "Eat the Music", with a rattling kaleida-drum, dueling pianos, brassy keyboards, crashing drums, slithering guitar and a rambling, almost stream-of-consciousness meditation from Jane on the subject of, well, *contentment*. I'm most struck by the verse that goes "It takes two days to get there by train, / Two days! Two days to get there by boat. / It takes forever if you go by inertia, / No time if you don't believe in time." I love the idea that physical laws might be subject to belief, that science could be really just another religion, that human will creates its own worlds and their laws after all. "Summer in the Yukon", a phrase here, would end up as the title of Jane's first compilation.

Next, in a retreat from the musical physicality of "The Very Large Hat", is the extended three-part dreamscape "Vladimir Vladimir". My impression of this song, and I consider this is a *very* arbitrary interpretation on my part, is that it revolves around a

plane crash. There is very little to support the plane crash part directly, except for some alarmed shouting toward the beginning, but if you just *assume* the plane crash part, the rest of it starts to make interesting sense. Section one, which is a weave of dialog (or multiple monologues, actually) is the thoughts of the dying passengers, trivial, disconnected things like "After the meeting they asked me if I would like to become the conductor of their choir I couldn't believe it isn't it fantastic?". Section two introduces Vladimir, for reasons which are unclear now, but will shortly become obvious. Vladimir is a simple man, free of the cluttered lives that the plane's passengers lead (shortly, *led*), but not necessarily any better off for this simplicity. The third section introduces the characters to each other, as Vladimir Vladimir witnesses the crash. He thinks, I believe, that the plane is going to crash into him, and transfixed, given life by this onrushing death, he is taken outside of himself like the prisoner in "Seven Steps to the Wall" was taken outside of his cell by going inside himself. However, from clues at the end of section one, we know that the plane will actually crash into the water. Knowing that Vladimir Vladimir's death-verge epiphany is not, in fact, his final thought, it is possible to imagine momentarily that he will emerge from this trauma *changed*. This in turns makes us wonder whether, in fact, the plane is really going to crash after all. Perhaps the passengers' fears are unjustified, nothing more than the usual flying-inspired flashes of paranoia. Perhaps, in fact, Vladimir's farm simply lies on an airport approach-path! Vladimir will *not* be changed by the passing plane any more than the people on it will be changed by their flight, for the simple reason that they are, already, what scores of previous flights have *made* them. This potentially enlightening experience has, by its repetition, been completely drained of its power, plane flights become just as ordinary and uninspiring as the hoe in Vladimir's hand, the million-year-old dirt he farms.

Actually, come to think of it, maybe Vladimir is *on* the plane. Yes! That's it, this is Vladimir's first flight, his first tentative step outside his closed, archaic life, and just his luck, the first plane he ever gets on crashes. But, even as it goes down, Vladimir is moved. He doesn't know any better, you see, so he assumes that plane flights *always* feel like this. Not knowing what to expect, and discovering something that is *new*, which is all he could really ask for, he is transported in a completely different way from the jaded travelers around him. This interpretation probably works even if the plane *doesn't* crash. Vladimir is leaving behind his old life, while the other travelers are carrying theirs with them. That's why there are two Vladimirs in the title: one is left behind, one flies away on the plane.

Actually, come to think of it, maybe Vladimir is the plane. It's *named* after this old farmer...

"Mein Bitte" actually pursues the complicated life/simple life contrast further, though even I can't wring a plane crash out of this one. It's a back-and-forth juxtaposition of a person whose job means nothing to them but money with a person who actually *cares* about their work. You can guess which one comes out better in the contrast. It's hardly a profound philosophical tract, but the music follows the characters quite nicely, jagged and a little grating on the money-grubbing parts, smoothing out and taking off for the honest-worker sections.

The conclusion of *The Speckless Sky*, the last three songs, is as good as 17:26 of music ever gets. Third to last is "The Empty City", an awesome, drifting, cinematic song that I *won't* attempt to analyze, as it drifts from a literal cityscape to an abstract dreamworld almost seamlessly. The music is positively inspired, warm synthesizers giving way suddenly to a crashing clatter of drums, voices, clicks and other noises, footsteps in the empty city, choruses of Janes appearing as if from around a corner, disappearing just as suddenly, the sound of the *filled* city peeking through during the chorus, a sputtering moment of frantic energy bursting out every once in a while.

"Map of the World (Part II)" pulls back from the city, and finds Jane's fascination for geography, for *places* as poetry, for the structure of the world as poetry, not just science. In a tablecloth that was on a table during a conversation she is lingering on, she finds not only the map of the world, but the world itself, office buildings and Kremlins lurking inside a wrinkled linen cloth where the thing she'd hoped to find was another person's thoughts. "I led my horse along the latitudes, / Across the folds and into white / And somehow along the way / My horse slid off sideways and was gone forever". She has slipped into the dimensions perpendicular to her real-world concerns, found solace in the realness of imagination, and the imaginariness lurking inside everything real.

Musically, "Map of the World (Part II)" is more of a sequel to "Mimi on the Beach" than it is to "Map of the World (Part I)", but I'm hardly inclined to quibble. Besides, any desire you have for a profoundly quiet song in the spirit of part 1 should be more than gratified by the indescribably wonderful "The Taxi Ride", the *ultimate* four-a.m. balcony-overlooking-a-silent-city emotional catharsis song. Jane's nylon-string guitar and hers and Anne's keyboards carry Jane's most plaintive vocal performance through an incredibly emotionally complex song that I can do no better justice to than to simply quote the chorus, one of my favorite passages in all of music:

I've called a taxi  
It's coming at dawn  
I said send the best one  
It's a long, long, lonely ride  
To find the perfect lover  
For your lover  
And the morning light is breaking

Ah, Jane, if there *are* miracles then this album is one of them, and so you *must* be an angel. Or there are none.

### *The Walking*, 1987 CD

The next album is merely even better. The same cast reconvenes to perfect *The Speckless Sky*'s aesthetic further, and though they clearly succeed, and I adore listening to this album, it can't quite supplant its predecessor in my heart. This is an effect I've noted with a number of other follow-ups to albums I became really attached to, like *The Seer* following *Steeltown* and *Steady Diet of Nothing* following *Repeater*. The things which *The Speckless Sky* did, so brilliantly—this album is doing those same *sorts* of things. It's doing them *better*, but not enough better to constitute another *qualitative* jump. Additionally, as great as *all* these songs are, there is no single one that floors me as firmly as "The Taxi Ride". Your impression, particularly if you hear this one *first*, may well be the reverse of mine, and certainly either of these two albums are excellent points at which to begin your life with Jane Siberry.

The thing you shouldn't come to *The Walking* expecting is short, friendly, pop songs. There are three songs around four minutes long, three in the six-to-seven minute range, the nine-minute epic "The White Tent the Raft", and the ten-and-a-half minute mini-opera "The Bird in the Gravel". Even the shorter songs obey no structural logic other than their author's inscrutable (but infallible) sense of progression, and while there are plenty of individual moments in most of the tracks that could have been taken from pop hits, the songs are far too complicated, self-involved and lyrically cryptic to pass for Middle-American radio fare.

On the other hand, if you can get over the expectation that a song will go verse-chorus-verse-chorus-chorus and then slide into a fadeout at 3:26, this is music that you don't have to work very hard to develop a taste for. Jane's voice is more beautiful than ever, and the sounds in these songs are flawlessly melodic and harmonic. *The Walking* is as complete an auteuristic creation as *The Dreaming*, for example, and stands up as well to whatever scrutiny you subject it to, but there's nothing here that should instantly scare people away like "Sat in Your Lap" or "The Dreaming". At worst this album will seem pretty but

boring; at best, mystical. It's not earthy, sweaty blues, it's not pumping gangsta rap, it's not furious hardcore, but if you have *any* place in your musical worldview for quiet, careful, sumptuous music that doesn't let labels get in the way of art, this is worth a try. If you don't, I don't know *what* you're doing reading this part of this chapter.

A note: lest you think it's just you, I'll go ahead and admit that I can't make strict narrative sense of *any* of these eight songs. They are all filled with fascinating images and dramatic turns and lots of words that go together in intriguing ways, but I am at a loss for concrete explanations even of the sort as arbitrary as my reading of "Vladimir Vladimir". I've even seen the video/film for "The Bird in the Gravel", and still can't really tell you precisely what is supposed to be going on. At the same time, it is very clear to me that they are *not* meaningless, at *all*. Just as the music flows according to some logic that only really exists in Jane's head, the stories she tells through it are also products of a muse whose universe we are granted only these brief glimpses of. Tiny moments of wonder, I am inclined to be thankful for them and not complain about my confusion. Perhaps if I listen to this album enough, I will understand. Perhaps I will only be blissfully happy. I can live with that.

#### ***Bound by the Beauty*, 1989 CD**

After *The Walking*, it was hard to imagine where Jane Siberry could go. Perhaps there was yet another level of perfection that I can't even imagine that she could have reached with more dedication. Evidently *she* couldn't imagine it, either, or didn't *want* to, for *Bound the Beauty* arrives as a complete change of course. Abandoning synthesizers, samplers, computers, studio effects and intricate epics (and drummer Al Cross), Jane dusts off her guitar and piano, enlists pianist/accordion player Teddy Borowiecki and new drummer Stich Wynston, and persuades Ken and Switz to put their banks of effects into cold storage for a while. Together, this five-piece band romps (live except for vocal overdubs) through an album that often nearly passes for country, and is very much a mature revisit to *Jane Siberry*, straightforward, fun, lighthearted (and -headed), and yet still identifiably divine.

I didn't take to *Bound by the Beauty* immediately. It made #8 on my top ten list for 1989, but mostly because I *wanted* to like it that much. Eventually, I really came to. Tori Amos' *Little Earthquakes*, actually, deserves a lot of the credit for bringing me to feel like I understand both this and Kate's early albums, as Tori's piano reminded me that this sort of music doesn't *depend* on the technical artifacts often used to produce it.

In fact, this album serves as excellent illustration of the fact that the factor that distinguishes Jane's music from the more mundane things in this life is, as you should probably have expected, Jane herself. Just setting up some pianos and rolling through the honky-tonk glee of "Something About Trains" or "Miss Punta Blanca" can't do anything to her voice, and while she multi-tracks herself a lot less on this album than on the others, it's still her in there, and any song Jane sings is going to sound more like Jane Siberry than anything else. Plus, it's still her writing the songs, and while writing for a mostly-acoustic band is different than writing for a Fairlight collage, the differences are really the smaller things. This album hasn't the minute detail of *The Speckless Sky* or *The Walking*, but its charming simplicity doesn't *lack* that detail, it *defies* it. There's no *reason* to peer into these songs with an aural microscope, decoding background dialog and mapping out layers and flows. They're to be *listened* to.

At least, most of them are. There is one notable exception, "Half Angel Half Eagle", an angry, edgy song that happens to be played with the same instruments as the rest of the album, but which is not very lighthearted at all. The fact that it turns out to be my favorite tells me that I haven't *fully* embraced this record even now.

#### ***Summer in the Yukon*, 1992 CD**

For reasons clear only to somebody in Reprise marketing, the label decided in 1992 to release this best-so-far compilation only in Canada, Britain and Europe. I acquired my copy via mail-order, not really having any idea what the CD consisted of, expecting that it was merely a compilation but half hoping it was a live album.

Alas, it *is* merely a collection of album tracks. The k.d. lang duet, "Calling All Angels", from the soundtrack to that Wim Wenders film about the world ending, is included here, but as it later appeared on *When I Was a Boy* as well, there ends up being nothing unique to this compilation, and no liner notes or particularly special illustrations to justify my purchase.

The least I can do, though, is tell you what's on it, so you'll know better. The selection is biased, predictably, towards *The Speckless Sky* and *The Walking*. "Above the Treeline" and "In the Blue Light" are the only songs from *Jane Siberry*, and "Mimi on the Beach" the only one from *No Borders Here*. *The Speckless Sky* contributes "Seven Steps to the Wall", "The Very Large Hat", "Map of the World (Part II)" and "The Taxi Ride". *The Walking* provides "The Walking (and Constantly)", "The Lobby" and "Red High Heels". "The Life is the Red Wagon" and "Miss Punta Blanca" are *Bound by the*



*Beauty's* share, and "Calling All Angels" rounds out the collection's thirteen songs.

The order is kind of interesting. The *Bound by the Beauty* tracks, "Calling All Angels" and the early pair start the album off, as if it is getting them out of the way. The songs from the other three albums then alternate up until the end, which reproduces the end of *The Speckless Sky* exactly, with "Map of the World (Part II)" and "The Taxi Ride". Given that I thought the end of *The Speckless Sky* was one of the greatest album conclusions ever, this seems eminently sensible to me, and I take it as confirmation that somebody out there agrees with me (possibly Jane herself, though the liner doesn't say who decided on the order).

As an introduction to Jane Siberry's music, this compilation does a pretty good job. It steers away from the two really long tracks on *The Walking*, which is kind of too bad, but it does include "Mimi on the Beach" and "Red High Heels", which aren't short. I'd have been very tempted to include "Half Angel Half Eagle", but the two *Bound by the Beauty* excerpts here give a better impression of what that album really sounds like. I also might have slipped in one more of the sillier *No Borders Here* tracks, like "The Waitress", as "Mimi on the Beach" by itself is a little misleading as a sample of that album. At sixty-seven minutes, this disc isn't *crammed* yet, and "The Waitress" is short. On the whole, though, this is a fine selection, and from here you can decide which full album to move on to first. It really angers me when compilations don't spell out what tracks come from what albums, and this is one that fails that simple test, but fortunately for you, I just provided you with the list you need to make your decisions.

As a replacement for the individual albums, this doesn't cut it. Thrifty non-fanatics might decide that the tastes here are enough of *Bound by the Beauty* and *Jane Siberry*, but there's no way that you shouldn't get *No Borders Here*, *The Speckless Sky* and *The Walking*. Half of *The Speckless Sky* is here, I know, but that's the *most* important album in my view, and so the glass is definitely half empty to me.

The fact that this is only available as an import in the US, and the fact that there's nothing on it you won't get on the albums, pretty much seals its critical fate as far as I'm concerned. Unless this is selling for pocket change in your country, it's a waste of time. One of history's most beautiful wastes of time, mind you, but a waste all the same.

## Tori Amos

### *Little Earthquakes*, 1991 CD

Some time in 1992 I was flipping past MTV and hit something that looked and sounded interesting. I only caught the last minute or so of it, but it was "Crucify", by Tori Amos (one of the best things about MTV is that they *always* say what they play). I remembered, vaguely, reading an article in the Boston Globe several months previously about this pianist who had been in some bad trash-metal band that had gone nowhere, who had come back and made a solo album and did a piano-only cover of "Smells Like Teen Spirit" in concert. The tone of the article had left me figuring that it was almost certainly overrating its subject. This song was pretty decent, though, and it was a slow week for new music, so I put *Little Earthquakes* on my shopping list.

At the record store, a quick perusal of the bins revealed that Tori Amos *was* the one who did the Nirvana cover, and that her album had a very suspicious-looking back cover (you'll have to see it, but at a singing once she was asked about it, and she replied "Well, I love mushrooms, and I love penises..."). Not only that, but she had a *pile* of import singles. The collector in me perked up, and convinced the part of me that signs the credit-card slips to pick up both the album and the *Crucify* EP with the cover on it, even though a minute of one song was still all I'd heard of this woman.

I needn't have been concerned. By two weeks later I had the pile of singles (less the live one, which took quite a while (and a pile of money) to lay hands on), the *Little Earthquakes* video, tickets to see Tori in concert within the month, had joined Really-Deep-Thoughts (the Internet Tori Amos fan mailing list), and was beginning to pester completely unsuspecting passersby to rush to the nearest record store and do likewise.

I am not exaggerating when I say that *Little Earthquakes* made the fastest, deepest initial impression on me of any album I've ever purchased. There are albums I like as much (though not many), but in all cases I've *grown* to like them, over a period of years. In a matter of *months* (*weeks* it felt like, really), Tori went from being a name I didn't even know to a secure spot on my DID list and a matching berth on my Best Albums Ever list (the two lists aren't the same, though Tori isn't the only overlap), and #1 on both my year-end top ten lists (in fact, in order to get anybody *else* on the song list I was forced to devote a special supplementary song top ten entirely to Tori). By the time 1992 was up I found myself thinking, at times, The

Tori/Kate Heresy ("You know, maybe I like Tori even better than Kate...").

Such unnecessary distinctions aside, though, *Little Earthquakes* is an album almost without peer in my experience. There are albums I love that I *don't* necessarily expect any random stranger to think are that impressive (Big Country and Game Theory fall into this category), but *Little Earthquakes* I'm inclined to be completely intolerant about. If you can listen to this whole album, paying attention, without agreeing (whether you *like* it or not) that it is truly remarkable, then something important inside you is dead, and I'm glad I don't have to live the rest of your colorless life.

It begins with "Crucify". This is a song that reaches inside of me, grabs on to something connected to all the other things, and *moves* it. "Just what God needs, one more victim. / Why do we crucify ourselves?" "Got enough guilt to start my own religion". This is a song from a person in pain, who has just spotted a distant light, just begun to realize that there *is* another way to feel. It is a song from a performer who has decided to build no walls between her *self* and her music, a singer willing to draw from deep inside herself and hope for the best. It is a True song.

It's also a great *song*. Tori is a great singer, an impressive pianist, a powerful songwriter and a *phenomenal* performer. She gets help on this track from a drummer, bassist, percussionist and mandolin and ukulele players, but these just flesh out Tori's voice and piano, and you don't need to hear her play "Crucify" with just those two elements to *know* that she can pull it off. You'll want to, though.

"Girl", as a matter of fact, *is* mostly Tori. There's some drum programming, and a little guitar and bass, but Tori plays the piano and string samples, and contributes a harrowing backing vocal, as well. The song is a little lower-key than most of the other ones on the album, and is probably the only album track I'd consider trading for a b-side if I was doing the song selection. It has to be one of the least-significant worst-flaws any album has ever escaped with, though, and the record "recovers" instantly.

"Silent All These Years", the next song, was my pick for 1992's best. No drums, no guitars, no bass, just Tori, her piano, an orchestra, and a few judicious "finger cymbal" tings. It makes me wonder what we ever needed all those other instruments for. The chorus also has of the most remarkable lyrics in my experience: "But what if I'm mermaid in these jeans of his with her name still on it? / Hey but I don't care 'cause sometimes, I said sometimes, I hear my voice and it's been here / Silent all these years." If you don't want to hear this over-analyzed, skip the next paragraph.

Mermaids have no legs, only a tail. They cannot, therefore, *open* their legs. I take the mermaid reference in the chorus to mean that the man's jeans, and the other woman's name on them, which together represent the relationship as a whole, are rendering the singer *sexually* mute, as well as psychologically mute. Sex and self are *very* closely related throughout the album, and so I have no hesitation mixing literal silence with sexual repression and a stifling relationship, and reading "voice" as linked to orgasm. Every once in a while, *despite* the nature of the relationship, she has an orgasm, discovers that her identity is *not* something he controls, and by the end of the song she has started to take back her life, to go on the offensive ("Boy you best pray that I bleed real soon- / How's that thought for you?"). This song is about awakening, and its mixing of physical and psychological release seems wholly intentional. Tori *means* to claim that the two are linked, and if her up-front sensuality bothers you, you better not listen to this album too closely. I try, generally, not to be didactic about my specific interpretations of evocative lyrics, but this is a song where my reading feels *so* true that I can't believe anything else could possibly have been meant by it.

If you'd developed the mistaken impression, from the first three songs, that Tori isn't really interested in rock and roll, "Precious Things" should be ample correction. The driving piano on the verses is of clear rock derivation, and the choruses, when the rest of the band kicks in, *are* rock. The sonic deluge that rolls in at about the point where she works in a Nine-Inch Nail reference, and finishes out the song, is big, mean, powerful, angry, cathartic, and all the good things rock can be.

The mood quickly switches back with "Winter", another emotional piano/orchestra number. Until I really listened to the lyrics of "Silent All These Years", "Winter" had my favorite moment on the album, when the whole world seems to turn on Tori singing "When you gonna make up your mind? / 'Cause things are gonna change so fast...". This couplet doesn't look like much, but the way Tori sings it, it is loaded with every painful or joyful emotion in the spectrum. The song is painful and poignant, but that one moment is worlds more to me.

*Little Earthquakes* takes a surprise upward swing next, with "Happy Phantom", which opens with the not-very-upbeat-sounding words "And if I die today". The song turns out to be quite cheerful, asserting that as long as you're at peace with yourself (so that if you died right now you'd be a happy ghost), nothing else much matters. "Confucius", Tori points out, "does his crossword with a pen". Inner peace and outer confidence are inseparable.

Back to more painful emotions, “China” is a slow, sad song about the distance that develops between two people, seemingly by itself. “Sometimes I think you want me to touch you, / But how can I when you build the Great Wall around you?” I note the interesting detail that the nicely subtle bass playing on this song is courtesy of one-time Thompson Twins member Matthew Seligman, who I know better from his work with Thomas Dolby and *Gardening by Moonlight*.

“Leather” shows yet another surprise side of Tori’s musical personality: a sardonic sense of humor. “I almost ran over an angel. / He had a nice big fat cigar. / ‘In a sense’, he said, ‘you’re alone here, / so if you jump, you best jump far’.” I’m not totally sure what this song is about, but there are hints of strange sexual intrigue (“I can scream as loud as your last one”), and this is one of the only songs on the album where the singer seems completely in control of the situation. Musically, it’s nearly as bouncy as “Happy Phantom”.

Shortly after I got *Little Earthquakes*, Georgia and I took our yearly pilgrimage to Nimrod Hall, Virginia, and since I’d drummed Tori into Georgia’s head, too, I made a cassette copy of the album for us to listen to in the car (it’s a thirteen-hour drive, you see). The album was slightly too long to fit on one side of the 100-minute cassette I had for it, and I left off “Mother”, the song after “Leather”, without much hesitation. It didn’t make the “Tori Amos version” of my 1992 top ten song list, either. Now, having listened to the whole album many more times, I can’t imagine what possessed me. The only possible reason to leave “Mother” off is that it’s seven minutes long, which is more than “Happy Phantom” and “Leather” combined. It is the only song on the album that is literally just Tori and her piano, and this alone makes it worth saving at all costs. Many songs on the album gain a lot from their additional instrumentation, but Tori by herself is a thing you must experience. The best way is to see her perform live. The second-best way is to hear live recordings, but the live CD5 tracks are not easy to come by. The third best way is “Mother”. Other than Billy Bragg, I can’t think of any other performer I like who can carry a song as well with absolutely no help, backing, multi-tracking, effects, or anything.

For another contrast, the next song, “Tear in Your Hand”, is probably the only one on the album that I don’t think Tori *could* pull off live by herself (and in the two concerts I’ve seen, she didn’t try). The band is too integral. The song is all the more wonderful for that, though, a solid mid-tempo rock ballad with dozens of other things to recommend it. It’s grand vastness also serves to make the transition to “Me and a Gun” that much more startling.

“Me and a Gun”, you see, is about the most rivetingly intense songs you are likely to hear, a blunt,

a cappella narration of an attempted (?) rape, and the thoughts that go through the victim’s mind during and after the experience. I defy you to remember the separation between author and narrator while you listen to this song. Tori is singing about Tori’s experiences, and there can be no other explanation. It *is*, according to Tori, a true story, but if it wasn’t I’d have to believe it was anyway, because if something can be conveyed this powerfully without being true, then life is simply too insane to bear consideration.

While you sit, stunned, recovering from “Me and a Gun”, the album closes with the impassioned release of the title track, the chanted refrain “Give me life, give me pain, give me myself again” as appropriate a thesis statement for *Little Earthquakes* as anything else. For despite all the pain and turmoil on this record, it is *not* pessimistic or depressing. It is an album of strength *despite* and *through* pain, an album whose *expressions* of its despairs are the most hopeful possible reaction to them. It is an album that could change your life. It makes me wish I could glue one to the cover of every copy of this book. Albums like this are what made me *write* the book, so if you don’t like it, blame Tori.

### *China*, 1992 CD5

*Little Earthquakes* itself is only half of the era. It produced no less than ten individual CD singles, which together contain twelve more original songs, three covers, a remix and five live versions. The album tracks are, as a whole, more affecting than the b-sides, and I do think Tori’s allocation of songs is virtually faultless (as I said, “Girl” is the only album track I’d consider trading for a b-side, and while that might make sense on a one-for-one basis, the ones I’d want to substitute would probably ruin the album’s flow), but there isn’t a b-side that’s not worth just about any effort to acquire.

The single for “China” has three of them. “Sugar” is a dark, moody song with lots of muted percussion and nighttime cricket sounds. It’s quite different from the album tracks, and I’m not sure there’s actually any acoustic piano on it, even. Spooky, atmospheric, haunting.

“Flying Dutchman” is much more in keeping with the mood of *Little Earthquakes*, and sounds quite a bit like “Winter”. I rather suspect it was left off the album *because* it sounded too much like the other songs there. The chorus is amazing, though, and this was one of the two b-sides to make my 1992 Tori top ten.

“Humpty Dumpty”, this single’s last track, is a slightly demented solo studio improvisation, delightful precisely for the crazed way it wanders from melodic theme to melodic theme, inventing the whole damn thing, words and all, as it goes. This is, I guess, one

step further than hearing Tori live, hearing her live and *unrehearsed*. A few moments in the mind of Tori Amos. If all her song *ideas* start out this well-formed, it's no wonder the finished songs are so unbelievable.

### ***Crucify*, 1992 CD5**

"Crucify" produced *three* singles. The UK version, this one, is the only one to have the *album* version of the song. It has the remix, too. I don't really know the history behind the remix, but what it *sounds* like is that somebody realized, belatedly, that "Crucify" had hit potential, and they decided to give it its best shot by reworking some of the backing tracks, particularly the drums, which are a little strange and awkward on the album version. The remix gives the song a much more conventional rhythm track, which doesn't harm it at all. I think, actually, I *prefer* the remix. Again, though, the album version probably works better *on* the album.

This single adds two more b-sides. "Here, In My Head" is a solo Tori outing not entirely unlike "Mother". Something about the way Tori sings the line "Maybe Thomas Jefferson wasn't born in your backyard as you have said" makes this song sound timeless to me, like if I looked I'd find that Joan Baez and Judy Collins were singing it thirty years ago. Tori must like it, too, as it made it onto the *Little Earthquakes* video. The other b-side, "Mary", is a stand-up rock song in the vein of "Tear in Your Hand", but less grandiose and with a stronger rhythmic crunch. No matter how many times I read that *Y Kant Tori Read* was awful, when I heard Tori do songs like "Mary", sounding like nothing could suit her more than the strong crack of a snare behind her piano, the steady throb of a bass under her voice, I just couldn't believe that I wouldn't love it.

### ***Crucify* (live), 1992 CD5**

The hardest *Little Earthquakes*-era Tori item to find, this limited edition box (complete with four "art prints", which look suspiciously like the other single covers, sans writing) cost me \$35, which seems like a lot to pay for a four-song disc, all of the songs on which are ones I have elsewhere. These versions, though, are *live*, and this is worth a good deal more than I paid for it. Tori is the most compelling live performer I've ever seen or heard, and her renditions here of "Little Earthquakes", "Crucify", "Precious Things" and "Mother" are as good as she gets. Left alone with her piano, Tori has a control of the dynamics and pace of her songs that has to be heard to be understood. Without a band to constrain her to a fixed tempo, she makes every beat last exactly as long as she wants it to, hesitating and slowing and speeding up and jumping and stopping and cornering on no wheels and tricks I couldn't do on paper, let alone singing, let alone singing *and* playing

an instrument. Apparently Warner sent out promo flyers for her tour that had a pin taped to them, and the explanation "Hear this drop at a Tori Amos concert". I've seen her play twice, and when Tori is playing, *you shut up*. At any moment she may go from attacking her microphone to whispering into it just on the edge of inaudibility, and you *don't* want to miss anything. If you put this EP on, don't expect to get anything else accomplished while it's playing.

### ***Crucify* (US), 1992 CD5**

The US version of the single for "Crucify" was actually marketed as an EP, not a single. To justify the extra cost, it contains *five* songs: the remixed "Crucify", the album version of "Winter", and three priceless covers (the covers also appeared on the European version of the "Winter" single). Two of them, the Rolling Stones' "Angie" and Led Zeppelin's "Thank You", are songs I don't otherwise like, but in Tori's hands they suddenly sound a lot better crafted than I'd previously thought. She is paying tribute to her musical roots, and her reverence is obvious.

The third, though, is her much-mentioned version of Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit". This is a song I like a *lot*, and *not* part of Tori's musical "roots" by any stretch of time-machine-less imagination. Nonetheless, I'm convinced Tori's version is one of the greatest covers of anything, ever. It would have been sufficiently amusing just to *have* "Smells Like Teen Spirit" performed by a woman just playing piano and singing. This is much more than that, though. Tori is not, as you might understandably imagine, making fun of the song, like Aztec Camera's version of Van Halen's "Jump". She *likes* it, and she manages to translate it into a completely different musical genre *without* altering its essential nature. The emotions in Tori's and Nirvana's songs are very closely related, and her version proves that they are not tied to any one musical form. If I'd been in Nirvana, I would have insisted that we return the favor and translate one of Tori's songs into Nirvana's musical idiom. "Silent All These Years" would be my instinct, but "Little Earthquakes" might also be good. Nirvana didn't get around to it, and now it's too late. Perhaps when I make an album, I will.

### ***Silent All These Years*, 1992 CD5**

The UK "normal" edition of the single for "Silent All These Years" contains the album version of the title track and "Me and a Gun", and the b-sides "Upside Down" and "Thoughts". This single was actually released as the first single, before the album came out, with "Me and a Gun" as the "title" track. I won't comment on the wisdom of trying to use as a

promotional tool a track that no mainstream radio programmer in the known universe would ever air.

"Upside Down" and "Thoughts" are significant b-sides, as they appear as bonus inclusions in the *Little Earthquakes* sheet music book. "Upside Down", in fact, Tori has described as one of her favorites, and it would probably have fit in well somewhere on *Little Earthquakes*. The little vocal rounds about two-thirds of the way through the song are especially nice. "Thoughts" is another spontaneous studio invention. It's not as chaotic as "Humpty Dumpty", and thus a little less interesting to me.

### ***Silent All These Years (limited), 1992 CD5***

The other version of this single adds the live version of "Happy Phantom", which is delightful, and a second chance for you to get a live song on CD if you missed the *Crucify* box, and the b-sides "Ode to the Banana King (Part One)" and "Song for Eric".

"Ode to the Banana King"'s bizarre, stream-of-consciousness verses make me wonder if this, too, was a studio one-off. The chorus, though, is clearly pre-planned, so maybe not. Although this performance is piano and voice only, this is clearly a big, powerful, dangerous rock song at heart. I'd love to hear it with a full band.

"Song for Eric" is the opposite, a traditional-esque a cappella lullaby, Tori's contribution to the "My Lagan Love"/"Handsome Cabin Boy" b-side oeuvre. This one is on the video, too. It's nice to hear another a cappella song from Tori, other than "Me and a Gun", especially one dedicated to a *good* part of her life with men.

### ***Winter, 1992 CD5***

The UK normal version of "Winter" adds the last three b-sides, "The Pool", "Take to the Sky" and "Sweet Dreams". "The Pool" is more of a sound experiment than a song, a long, pulsing chord made out of just voices. It's interesting, but I could take it or leave it. "Take to the Sky", on the other hand, must have missed the album by inches. It's the same personnel as "Winter", including the pounding "Irish War Drum" which Eric Rosse plays. It has some excellent contrapuntal background singing, and other good features.

"Sweet Dreams", however, is the killer, and was #2 on my Tori top ten. It's a rousing rock stomp with Celtic elements, but it is the soaring harmony on the chorus that propels it to the head of my list save only "Silent All These Years". It also has a moment, when Tori sings "Your house is on fire", when it sounds *strikingly* like this song I wrote for the band I was sort of in in high school, which had an almost identical line. Now, if the *rest* of my song had sounded like the *rest* of

"Sweet Dreams", my life might have taken a very different course.

### ***Winter (US), 1992 CD5***

Perhaps feeling guilty about how poorly we Americans had been treated by the myriad import CD5s we'd been buying (or not getting a chance to buy, as the case may be), Warner finally put out another domestic single. In an attempt to garner favor, they not only included the three b-sides from the UK "Winter" single, but added "Upside Down", from the "Silent All These Years" single, did some nice disc decorating, and included a lyric sheet (hand-written by Tori) for all five tracks, all for about half of what import CD singles go for. If I hadn't already *bought* the imports, I would have been quite impressed by these considerate touches on the label's part. Since I had, though, I viewed the packaging niceties as merely a desperate attempt to get completists like me to shell out another \$5 for songs we already had.

It worked.

## **various**

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Your Tori-completist portfolio is not complete without a couple of key tracks that don't appear on her releases at all.

### ***Toys (soundtrack), 1992 CD***

Tori sings "The Happy Worker", the key original song on this soundtrack to a film I didn't see. She didn't write it (Trevor Horn did, actually), and she doesn't play on it, but she does sing.

The performer list for this album is actually pretty impressive. Besides Tori, Peter Gabriel, Jane Siberry, Steve Howe, Grace Jones, Wendy and Lisa, Pat Metheny, Seal, Enya and Thomas Dolby are all credited. Very few of these contributions are noticeable, though, and the album as a whole is merely pleasant. There's an Enya song ("Ebudae"), which sounds like an Enya song, a remix of the old Frankie Goes to Hollywood song "Welcome to the Pleasuredome" (did we need another of these?), and a strangely mellow Grace Jones number called "Let Joy and Innocence Prevail", but the rest of it is the sort of undistinguished background ambiance that you'd expect from any soundtrack that also has an Enya song on it. If it weren't for Tori's presence, there'd be no reason to buy this.

*Ruby Trax, 1992 CD*

In the middle of the second disk of this 3 CD set, Tori and some uncredited friends turn in a brilliant rock rendition of Anita Ward's disco hit "Ring My Bell". Tori collectors griped quite a bit about the price of this mammoth import-only compilation. If Tori isn't the only artist in your collection, though, there are plenty of other potential reasons to like this set.

In particular, if you love covers, this collection has *lots* of them. It's a NME production, released to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the British singles chart (what an odd thing to celebrate), and for the occasion they recruited forty of the hippest available sub-Bowie-level UK-resident artists to cover their choice of former #1 chart hits by somebody else. It's a long list to tell you all of it, but what the hell, it's only paper. Here are the coverers, the artists who had the number one, the songs, the years of the hits, and my corresponding snide dismissals.

## Disc One:

The Wonder Stuff: Slade's "Cuz I Love You", from 1971. The Wonder Stuff did a *great* cover of "That's Entertainment". As I say, *that* cover was great.

Billy Bragg: a strangely dancy version of The Three Degrees' "When Will I See You Again", 1974.

The Jesus and Mary Chain: The Rolling Stones' "Little Red Rooster", 1964 (though *they* didn't write it, either). Very noisy, and kind of unpleasant.

The Mission: Blondie's "Atomic", 1980.

The Fatima Mansions: Bryan Adams's execrable "(Everything I Do) I Do It For You", 1991. Still execrable, though in a different way.

St. Etienne: Tony Bennett's "Stranger in Paradise", 1955.

The Wedding Present: Lonnie Donegan's "Cumberland Gap", 1957. Ugh.

Aztec Camera with Andy Fairweather-Low: Amen Corner's "Half as Nice", 1969. Quite pleasant, actually.

Dannii Minogue: The Jackson's "Show You the Way to Go", 1977. I could live without both.

Welfare Heroine: Peter Sarstedt's "Where Do You Go To My Lovely", 1969. Hmm.

Blue Aeroplanes: CCR's "Bad Moon Rising", 1969. Lots of guitars, which this song lends itself to nicely.

Senseless Things: The Shadows' "Apache", 1960. More to my taste than the original, no doubt, but not much more.

Teenage Fanclub: The Byrds "Mr. Tambourine Man", 1965. One of the few examples on this set of a song I know covered by a band I also know. Too bad it's not a band I *like*.

## Disc Two:

Carter USM: Pink Floyd's "Another Brick in the Wall", 1979. I was expecting this to be better than it turns out to be.

Blur: Rod Stewart's "Maggie May", 1971. Another great song to cover that doesn't actually gain anything in translation.

Tears for Fears: Bowie's "Ashes to Ashes", 1980. Ultra-faithful rendition. Should have used Happy's version instead.

The House of Love: George McCrae's "Rock Your Baby", 1974. Another quite good disco-to-rock conversion.

The Frank and Walters: The Monkees' "I'm a Believer", 1967. Too faithful to be interesting to me.

EMF: Joe Dolce's "Shaddup You Face". Easily the most inspired and enthusiastic cover on this set. The song is rendered *completely* unrecognizable. Play it at parties, and nobody will ever guess what it is, even though the title words are about the only ones clearly audible. This raised my opinion of EMF another notch.

Suede: The Pretenders' "Brass in Pocket", 1979. I hate Suede.

## Tori

Kingmaker: The Beatles' "Lady Madonna", 1968.

Marc Almond: Madonna's "Like a Prayer", 1989. Surreal. And not in a good way.

The Farm: The Human League's "Don't You Want Me", 1981. Faithful, but in this case I *like* the song, so that's good. Definitely my favorite thing the Farm has ever done.

Ned's Atomic Dustbin: Charlene's "I've Never Been to Me", 1979. This doesn't actually sound anything like Ned's Atomic Dustbin, but it's kind of cool as over-sequenced dance songs go.

Boy George: George Harrison's "My Sweet Lord", 1971. Bad idea both times.

## Disc Three:

Jesus Jones: Jimi Hendrix's "Voodoo Chile", 1970. A close second to EMF (and who better for it) for adventuresomeness, if Jimi were alive to hear this he'd either get out of music entirely, or buy a synthesizer.

Bob Geldof: The Kinks' "Sunny Afternoon", 1966. I *want* to like Bob...

Johnny Marr and Billy Duffy: Hugo Montenegro's "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly", 1968. Instrumental.

Cud: Status Quo's "Down Down", 1975. This song must be a British thing.

The Fall: "Lengend of Xanadu", by a band whose name is too long to type, 1968. I don't get The Fall, either.

Sinéad O'Connor: Doris Day's "Secret Love", 1954. More of her big-band thing, which turns my stomach.

World Party: Peter and Gordon's "World Without Love", 1964. Groovy. And not in a good way.

Inspirational Carpets: Soft Cell's "Tainted Love", 1981. I don't like *either* of these bands, but the combination is kind of cool.

Elektric Music: The Equals "Baby Come Back", 1968. Robotic. Elektric Music is two guys who used to be in Kraftwerk, and clearly haven't gotten over it.

Ride: Kraftwerk's "The Model", 1981. Doesn't sound like Ride, which is good. *Does* sound like Kraftwerk, though. Six of one...

Vic Reeves: Ultravox's "Vienna". I think he's making fun of it. I resent that.

Tin Machine: The Moody Blues' "Go Now", 1964. I said the artists here were "sub-Bowie", and in fact for this song it is Tony Sales singing. He doesn't, usually. There's a reason for that.

Curve: Donna Summer's "I Feel Love", 1977. This could have been another of the set's good rock versions of disco songs, except that Curve decided to do a disco version of a disco song. I don't get it.

Manic Street Preachers: the MASH theme, "Suicide Is Painless", 1980. Just to keep me a happy CD consumer, they end a crashingly low-yield compilation with its best track, the Manic Street Preachers sounding marvelously, and thankfully, like themselves.

All in all, this set sounded like a lot better of an idea than it seems when I listen to it. Perhaps if there hadn't been so many bands that I hate playing on it, and they hadn't played quite as many songs from my musical pre-history (anything before 1978), I would have liked it more. As it is, my abridgment of this 40-song endurance test would keep only Aztec Camera, EMF, Tori, Jesus Jones and the Manic Street Preachers, and five out of forty is a pretty poor investment return. But then again, what's money for?

## Sarah McLachlan

I came upon Sarah McLachlan almost exactly the same way I discovered Tori Amos, catching by chance the last minute or so of a video on MTV. The song was "Into the Fire", and it was arrestingly catchy, but it wouldn't have surprised me to find that the album (*Solace*) didn't live up to its promise. On the other hand, it didn't surprise me when it did, either.

One way of describing Sarah's style is to say she combines Kate Bush, Happy Rhodes, Jane Siberry and Tori Amos, which is a potent ingredient list, to be sure, and requires some explanation: she has a voice that isn't *like* Tori's, but which has some of the same physical immediacy; she plays guitar, like Happy does (though both also play piano and keyboards); she's Canadian, like Jane; and she writes engaging pop songs, like Kate has come to. Another way of putting it

is that she melds Sinéad O'Connor and Shawn Colvin (the first albums by each are what I have in mind here), mixing some of Sinéad's vocal contortions (without amplifying inhalations quite as loudly) with a bit of Shawn's friendlier songwriting style.

### *Touch*, 1989 CD

Sarah's first album, which I went back and purchased after liking *Solace*, isn't impressive to me as her second. There are several excellent songs, notably "Vox" and "Trust", and none I'd rate less than very good, but the album as a whole, and the *sound*, don't seem as in-sync to me as they would on *Solace*. Sarah's voice and the jittery percussion and drum parts don't quite match up, somehow, and several of the songs sound like they *could* have been a lot better than they turned out. It may simply be that I like the *production* on *Solace* better.

When it works, though, this album can be quite impressive. "Vox", which is included in both normal and extended versions on the CD, is the clear standout, and I can't help but think it's no coincidence that it has the longest participant-list in the credits. Sarah's 12-string and piano, nice pizzicato-string keyboards, bass, guitar, drums and a horde of additional percussionists give it an ensemble flair not entirely unlike the Parachute Club or the early Eurogliders. In fact, if you rank the songs on the album by the number of players, according to the liner notes, you end up with about my preference order. "Strange World", "Trust" and "Steaming", which have five apiece, are clearly my runners-up to "Vox" (which has ten), and "Out of the Shadows" (four) is close.

That's not to say that the songs that involve fewer people are thin or weak. "Touch", for example, which is entirely Sarah on keyboards and multiple wordless voices, is quite beautiful, in an Enya-ish way, and the sad piano/double-bass ode "Ben's Song" has an admirable quiet simplicity to it. Neither of these, however, seems like Sarah's *strength*. She sounds at her best with a full, driving band swirling around her, her bewitching voice grounded on a solid rock beat. In softer, acoustic settings, she seems to lose a lot of her vocal character to me, and becomes merely pleasant.

### *Steaming*, 1989 CD5

Sarah is another artist with a fondness for CD singles (or another artist on a *label* with a fondness for them). She/they isn't/aren't big on b-sides, though, preferring to populate the singles with lots of remixes and the occasional live cover. This one has "Radio" and "Dance" versions of "Steaming", and a live version of Peter Gabriel's "Solsbury Hill". The versions of "Steaming" aren't particularly spectacular, in my

opinion. The "Dance" version pushes the drum toward the front of the mix, and gives the song a stronger, more regular, danceable groove, but the songs on *Solace* tend to have better rhythms to begin with.

The cover of "Solsbury Hill" is worth the single, though. Peter Gabriel is an obvious stylistic reference and influence, and it's nice hearing Sarah acknowledge his inspiration by doing one of his songs, like Kate doing "Rocket Man", Happy doing "Ashes to Ashes" or Tori doing "Thank You" (or, as she does live, "Whole Lotta Love"). This version, with some work, could have been even better, I think. The band basically plays it straight, and lets Sarah's singing be the focal element, and I have a feeling that if she'd done this track in the studio, rather than live, she could have played with the *music* of the song as well, not just the vocals, and come up with an even *more* interesting variant.

#### **Vox, 1992 CD5**

The "Vox" single contains the extended remix and an instrumental dub mix of "Vox" itself, and an extended remix of "Into the Fire" (this CD single actually came out *after* *Solace*, though the "Vox" mixes were originally released on a 12" even before *Touch*). As *Touch*, the CD, already has the extended "Vox", and the extended "Into the Fire" is on its own single, later, you can ignore this one unless you *really* need an instrumental version of "Vox" for some reason.

#### **Solace, 1991 CD**

Sarah McLachlan's second album, *Solace*, is an enormous leap forward for her. The usual stylistic maturation is, I'm sure, responsible for part of the improvement, but the most significant factor is the arrival of producer, multi-instrumentalist and sometimes co-writer ("Into the Fire") Pierre Marchand, who gives Sarah's voice a setting it thrives in. The key word-switch is "acoustic" for "ethereal", as Marchand replaces the folky transparency of some of Greg Reely's productions on *Touch* for a thick, inviting atmosphere which Sarah can either soar in or dive out of. He gives her sound a *depth* that suddenly creates foregrounds and backgrounds, and adds synthetic layers that make the acoustic instruments *notable* components, not just whatever happened to be around. My relative lack of enthusiasm for *Touch* is probably only understandable if you've also heard *Solace*, because all the things I feel it is missing are things I wouldn't even think to ask for if I hadn't heard them here.

"Into the Fire" remains my favorite song here. Daryl Exnicious's frenetic bass, Paul Brennan (not to be confused with Clannad's Pol Brennan)'s supple drumming and Pierre's lush garden of guitar, keyboards and whirring organ are a perfect backdrop

for Sarah's stirring voices, which moan, wail, sigh and slide through her parts like a banshee you happen to be on good terms with. The song is unabashed hit-single material, so listeners with pronounced allergies to commercial appeal may find it worrisome, and may prefer darker moods like "Path of Thorns (Terms)", "Lost", or the reedy "Black".

If "Into the Fire" hits you right, though, there are a number of songs on the album that complement it nicely. "Drawn to the Rhythm", the opener, is a good prequel, slower and sparer at the outset, but building, drawn to its *own* rhythm. "Back Door Man" starts off very softly, and has a title that makes me think of sleazy southern infidelity boogie, but when it kicks in it rocks with a vengeance. "Shelter" and "I Will Not Forget You" have some sharp hooks, as well, and the pop lilt of the Donovan cover "Wear Your Love Like Heaven" is also compelling in its own way.

Even the quiet, slow moments on *Solace* have an unmistakable intensity, though. "Lost" is, for the most part, Bill Dillon's mandolin and Sarah's voice, with shuffling drums, deep, wooden bass and some understated keyboards merely filling in the spaces around them. Rather than softening her own singing, and letting mellowness overcome the song, though, Sarah rips through it at full tilt, so that when she whispers, it is by *controlling* the power of her singing, not singing without it.

Here, in the company of Kate, Jane and Tori, *Solace* doesn't seem as remarkable as it might on its own; I *don't* think Sarah is quite up to their artistic level yet. On its own terms, though, this album is very impressive, and shows Sarah beginning to get a firm grasp on what her style consists of.

#### **Into the Fire, 1992 CD5**

One of the singles for "Into the Fire" contains the album version, the punchy John Fryer Mix, the extended remix that first appeared on the "Vox" single, and the "Violin Mix" of "Shelter". Fryer's remix strikes me like the remix of Tori's "Crucify", better than the album version as a single, but one that wouldn't have made nearly as much sense in the context of the album. The extended version is interesting, but I think it deconstructs the song to the point where it starts to simply fall apart. The drums are too loud, too insistent. I'd rather dance to the original twice.

The alternate mix of "Shelter" sounds too much like they just muted a bunch of tracks from the album version, and I miss them. The violins, and the few other parts they left on this version, don't sound like they were meant to carry a song by themselves.



### ***Into the Fire (CBC Sessions), 1992 CD5***

The other single for “Into the Fire” backs up the album version with radio recordings (for Canada’s CBC radio show “Brave New Waves”) of “Sad Clown” (from *Touch*) and “Black” (from *Solace*). Both these tracks are done with a string ensemble in place of Sarah’s regular band, and as much as I said that the arrangements on *Solace* were ideal for her voice, she sounds damn fine in this context, too. Both songs come out sounding like Michael Nyman-esque new-Classical compositions that happen to have chilling vocals (in English, no less). I avoided buying this single for quite a while because for some reason I expected that “CBC Sessions” would be Sarah with her acoustic guitar, sitting in the booth next to a DJ, and that didn’t sound overly exciting. Don’t make my mistake. This is the one of her CD singles that I consider your Sarah McLachlan experience incomplete without.

### ***Drawn to the Rhythm, 1992 CD5***

This one has the acoustic versions that I expected the CBC tracks to be. With just her acoustic guitar, Sarah runs through “Drawn to the Rhythm” and a cover called “Gloomy Sunday” whose origin I couldn’t tell you. “Drawn to the Rhythm”, *ripen* of its rhythm, turns out surprisingly well, but I prefer the original. “Gloomy Sunday” doesn’t move me. If I knew the original (I assume there is one), perhaps Sarah’s rendition would make more of an impression.

### ***Live, 1992 CD***

Put Sarah on a stage with a full band behind her, though, and something magical happens. I missed her *Solace* tour, but Nettwerk was nice enough to record a 9/92 performance in Toronto for my edification. *Live* is labeled as an EP, but at nearly forty minutes, it’s longer than some people’s whole albums. It features live versions of “Drawn to the Rhythm”, “Back Door Man”, “Home”, “Lost”, “I Will Not Forget You” and “Black” from *Solace* and “Ben’s Song” from *Touch*.

As it doesn’t actually contain any new songs, this may not seem like an essential item, but I highly recommend it to any *Solace* fan. The touring band is superb, the recording is excellent, and actually even the booklet is beautiful, a lavish tour program with bios of Sarah, the rest of the band, and the whole tour *crew*, as well.

The versions of songs here are not strict reproductions of the album tracks, but they differ *intentionally*, not just because the band couldn’t duplicate the album live. You won’t want to start with this album because, oddly enough, it’s the one Sarah McLachlan disc that *doesn’t* have “Into the Fire” on it,

but it definitely stands with the CBC Sessions single as an essential addendum to the *Solace* era.

## **Tasmin Archer**

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### ***Great Expectations, 1993 CD***

Seeing as Sarah McLachlan is a step closer to the musical mainstream in my mind than Jane Siberry and Tori Amos, it makes sense to go another step in that direction, and find Tasmin Archer. She, come to think of it, is yet another artist I discovered by chance, when I heard “Sleeping Satellite” playing in a record store.

This album has reasonably impressive credentials before I even put it on. Frequent Kate Bush collaborator Charlie Morgan plays drums, sometime Talk Talk guitarist Robbie McIntosh plays guitar on several songs, bassist Danny Thompson (also a Kate player) plays on one, Carol Kenyon sings some backing vocals, and producer Julian Mendelsohn’s name sounds very familiar to me, though I don’t seem to have mentioned it anywhere in the book as of yet. “Sleeping Satellite”, the song I heard in the store, is a smooth, infectious pop gem like Clannad or Enya with pop snap substituted for Celtic atmospherics.

*Great Expectations* doesn’t make a very loud noise about it, but it lives up to its potential. The first couple times through I felt it was somewhat lightweight, albeit agreeable. I kept wanting to hear it, though, and though I *still* kind of *think* it’s lightweight, it’s also largely irresistible. My two favorite songs are “Lords of the New Church” and “Steeltown”, neither of which are related to songs of the same name elsewhere in this book. You won’t find gut-wrenching expressions of inner turmoil here, nor will you find anything of stunningly innovative musical import. The lyrics are nothing special. Tasmin’s voice is versatile and pleasant, and the band is tight and professional, but neither are particularly arresting on their own. Combined under Mendelsohn’s able direction, though, they sound ebullient. If Everything But the Girl or Joan Armatrading decided to drop their jazz and folk fascinations and just write catchy pop songs, they’d find that Tasmin Archer got to eleven of them first.

### ***In Your Care, 1993 CD5***

Tasmin Archer isn’t really important enough in my world for me to be gobbling up import CD singles by her, but this one was on clearance at Virgin in Amsterdam when I was there, so I picked it up. Besides the album version of the title track, it has an unnecessary remix of “Sleeping Satellite”, and two non-album tracks, “Sea of Rest” and “Real Oh So Real”.

"Sea of Rest" is slow and melancholy, a similar mood to the bulk of "In Your Care". "Real Oh So Real" is an acoustic-guitar folk cover, originally written by James Parker. Both songs are quite nice, but the album has enough nicer songs that I wouldn't go out of your way for this single unless you hear a lot more in Tasmin's music than I do.

## Sarah Brightman

### *Dive*, 1993 CD

Going yet another step into the pop danger zone, Sarah Brightman is a serious opera singer who attempts a pop crossover on this album, which leads off with a breathily ethereal Kate Bush/Enya blend called "Captain Nemo". She has a pretty voice, and a *great* cover-art director, but lyric writing is not her forte, and although she didn't write any of this music herself, the associates she entrusts that task to succumb to some pretty cheesy impulses. Too much of this album can't decide whether Sarah wants to be an ethereal diva like Kate, or a sultry dance-queen like Madonna or perhaps Sade. My vote would be that she shows more potential along the former lines, as the assays into the latter territory here, like "Seven Seas", "La Mer" and "The Second Element II", I find to be even more embarrassing than the songs like "Johnny Wanna Live" that merely suffer from awful choruses.

There's a rider on that saying about books and covers, though. If you like the cover enough, you may not *care* what's inside. If only these pictures were larger...

## Loreena McKennitt

Switching gears abruptly, Canadian harp player Loreena McKennitt picks up a Celtic-traditional thread that runs through Kate, Happy and Sarah's work, in particular, and, at least at the outset, plays it relatively straight. Loreena is another artist I discovered purely through Net recommendations by people whose tastes seemed otherwise credible.

### *Elemental*, 1985 CD

Loreena McKennitt's first album is an extremely conservative traditional outing, even compared to her own later releases. Of the nine songs on this record, seven of them are traditional music and lyrics, and the other two are Yeats and Blake poems that Loreena has set to music. She plays harp, accordion and guitar, and some synthesizers for miscellaneous ambiance, and

sings, and a few friends contribute other instruments scattered throughout the album.

These are very pretty, calming songs, but I don't, on the whole, find the album that exciting. The reliance on old Celtic folk aires makes for an overabundance of lyrics like "By the wringing of her milk white hands / And the tearing of her hair. / Saying 'If Johnny he is drowned / No man on earth I'll take'", and there's entirely too little of *The Visit's* energy here for me to really pay attention.

### *To Drive the Cold Winter Away*, 1987 CD

Don't let "Winter" fool you: Loreena's second album is Christmas music, probably the only possible thing more traditional than the age-old ballads on her first album. None of these ten songs are well-known carols, but there's just no mistaking Christmas music.

Now, this *should* thoroughly ruin *To Drive the Cold Winter Away* for me, as I *hate* Christmas music, but it turns out it doesn't, for several reasons. First, the spare, quiet production ("live to two track with over-dubs") makes this aurally a much more interesting album to me than the first one. *Elemental* was a pretty record, but this one is a recording of real humans making pretty music, and that distinction means a lot to me. Second, Loreena starts to adventure gingerly here into composition. True, her two entirely original songs here are both instrumentals (I am amused to note that her little production-credits symbols credit her with "lyrics" on both, even though there aren't any), but it's the thought that counts. Third, several of these songs begin to show what I believe is Loreena's greatest forte as a performer: long narrative verse. She is a good musician, and a good singer, but she is a *great* storyteller. A *storyteller* foremost, not a writer, but don't underrate the importance of telling. Loreena seems to be at her best with a good long poem in front of her, and a quiet, simple, repeating accompaniment behind her, where she is free to walk through the tale at her own pace, never giving in to the temptation to let the music swell up and envelop her, always careful to let the story she is telling be the focus of the performance. The more-minimal arrangements on this album fit this format much better than *Elemental*, which was more an album of *songs* than of *stories*.

Lastly, and the monumental importance of this final point must not be underestimated, this is Christmas music *I can stand*. As Christmas time approaches, this is an album to satisfy Georgia's primal Yuletide yearnings without driving me crazy, and that makes it priceless.

### *Parallel Dreams*, 1989 CD

Two details about Loreena McKennitt's releases that I really like, and want to mention here before I forget (and while they *both* apply): First, all five albums' booklets have extensive annotations, in which she talks about her motivations and thoughts behind the songs. This is not necessary, and on some aesthetic level it's probably even wrong to impose the artists explicit commentary on works that "should stand alone", but I find that I really enjoy it, enjoy knowing that there *were* thoughts behind the albums, enjoy seeing what they were. I'm an inveterate liner-note reader, right down to the hundred cryptic thank-yous that records are often festooned with, and it's nice for once to have some actual prose to read.

The other fascinating detail is these little credit icons that the first three albums all use. They're little four-piece pie-slice circles, with the slices labeled M, A, P and L, for music, arrangements, production and lyrics. A colored-in slice means Loreena did it, and a hollow slice means somebody else did. She then simply prints the symbols that represent each unique combination of factors, and places the appropriate song numbers by each. There are sufficiently few permutations actually used (two on *Elemental*, four on *To Drive the Cold Winter Away*, three on *Parallel Dreams*) that you can see at a single quasi-graphic glance how much of the work Loreena did on each permutation, and how many songs fit into that category. As the three albums progress, the circles are colored-in more, and there are more song numbers next to the darker icons. Neat graphic design touch.

For *Parallel Dreams*, in fact, as the icons point out, Loreena composed the music for seven of the eight songs, and lyrics for half of the six with vocals. This album is *much* more impressive to me than the preceding two. The music has finally begun to break free from traditional confines, and a large revolving cast of additional players augment Loreena's own keyboard and harp playing. "Standing Stones" even begins to hint at a little rock awareness (but only a little). On the lyrical front, the album's last non-instrumental is actually both *modern*, and politically aware, both very much firsts for Loreena's material. Appropriately enough, it is called "Breaking the Silence".

My favorite stretch on *Parallel Dreams*, though, is definitely the trio of long narratives in the center of the album. "Annachie Gordon" is an eight minute long traditional tale that Loreena sings with a wonderfully expressive directness. "Standing Stones" is traditional lyrics again, but her own music, and this time the Ye Olde touches like "In one of these lonely Orkney Isles / There dwelled a maiden fair. / Her cheeks were red, her eyes were blue, / She had yellow curling hair"

seem intriguing to me rather than bothersome. The difference, I think, is that on *Elemental* these kinds of things sounded like corny song lyrics, whereas here they sound like storytelling elements, rhymes and patterns bred through centuries of oral tradition to help the teller recall the story.

"Dickens' Dublin" is the coolest thing here, in my opinion. It intersperses a taped narration (by an unidentified young Irish girl) of an unsteady version of the story of Christmas with Loreena's song *about* the spoken part's narrator. The girl's accent and the strange cadence of her delivery (I swear it sounds like a speech synthesizer they've somehow programmed adolescent Irish intonation into) I find fascinating, and the Clannad-esque song that surrounds it makes a nice contrast. It's not *Seven O'Clock News/Silent Night*, but then it's not supposed to be.

### *The Visit*, 1992 CD

Warner Brothers picked up Loreena and Quinlan Road for her fourth album, *The Visit*. Fittingly, this is the album on which she really starts to shift her weight onto the foot that heretofore had been *very* gingerly resting on Rock. This isn't *Back in Black*, but it does have several songs of comparable intensity to, say, Clannad's *Macalla*. Assisting Loreena in this transition is a band that includes cellist Anne Bourne and drummer Al Cross, both acquired from Jane Siberry's circa-*The Waiting* ensemble in an off-season trade. This time out the neat credit icons are gone, but piecing together the information they would have told me, the hard way, reveals that of these nine songs, three are original music and lyrics, two are original instrumentals, a couple are traditional music and lyrics both, and the last two are original music for poems by Tennyson and Shakespeare.

The instrumentals I could take or leave, but as I've said before, I'm not really an instrumental-music fan. Of the traditional numbers, "Bonny Portmore" is just pleasant, but the version of "Greensleeves" is startling. In the notes Loreena explains that it was a spontaneous recording during the *Parallel Dreams* sessions, and that she had "always wondered how Tom Waits would sing [it]". Well, it wouldn't sound like this, I'm very sure of that, but hearing Loreena, with her beautiful voice, run through this age-old hymn with her *mind* on Waits' frequency, if not her actual vocal cords, is mesmerizing.

The three originals are all delightful. "All Souls Night" is closest to *Macalla* in mood, while "Courtyard Lullaby" is very slow and ethereal, and "The Old Ways" (in which we discover that Loreena can also play bodhran, not that I have any idea how difficult that is), is somewhere in between. Shakespeare's "Cymbeline" could almost pass as Enya, and might have real

Hollywood soundtrack potential if Shakespeare hadn't saddled it with all these dour pronouncements about how things "come to dust".

The song that makes the album for me, and the one that got me to buy up Loreena's back catalog, is "The Lady of Shalott", Tennyson's long, sad Arthurian tale of a woman driven by loneliness to an enigmatic suicide. If you don't like this song, you best go ahead and hit Skip, because it's over eleven minutes long. For me, though, this is Loreena McKennitt's finest moment, and I could probably listen to her ease in this manner through the entirety of *Idylls of the King*, which I *hated* reading, without the slightest complaint. In an age of rapid-fire pop songs, this is as close as a major label is likely to get to the kind of graceful evening's entertainment that I imagine troops of wandering minstrels serenading medieval royalty with. It is, though this analysis is probably not going to be quoted in my favor by awestruck reviewers, the fifteenth century's answer to *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald*.

The legend lives on, from the Round Table on down, of the dead girl they called Shalott's Lady. Sir Lancelot, it's said, never cradled her head, and she died 'cause her tower was empty.

## Clannad

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### *Macalla*, 1985 CD

Clannad, the world's greatest background-music band (sharing the overall title with ex-member Enya's solo work), have lots of more-traditional albums that come before this one and are, for all I know, vastly more interesting, but this is where I discovered them, thanks to a high-profile guest-vocal appearance by Bono (back before he became a cartoon) on the single "In a Lifetime". A family affair consisting of three Brennans (or, as it is spelled on *this* album, Braonains) and a couple Duggan/Dugains, Clannad circa *Macalla* have a irreproachable knack for melding their Celtic musical heritage with LA Adult-Contemporary / Rock-Without-the-Hard-Edge production (here in the person of Steve Nye). The resulting album is a non-stop joy to listen to, but also a completely non-threatening one, and ultimately, at least for me, a non-memorable one. There are some quite-good songs, notably "Closer to Your Heart" and "Almost Seems (Too Late to Turn)", both of which I prefer to the somewhat listless "In a Lifetime", and I used to think I really liked this album, but I've come to realize that with the one exception of *Sirius*, everything I've ever heard by Clannad or Enya is almost completely indistinguishable from everything

else I've ever heard by them, and this rather mars my *conscious* enjoyment of the albums.

However, I did say they provide the greatest background music available, and I still firmly believe that. This sort of music is a commodity item for me, and thus something I don't need *many* albums of, but having a subsistence allotment is critical. There are times when there is only one thing in the world I want to hear, and this is an album of it. There are other albums of it you could get instead, and they'll do just as well. The one thing I'll mention in favor of *Macalla* in particular is that it begins with a brilliant a cappella number called "Caislean Òir". If you get something else, insist that it, too, have a brilliant a cappella number with a title you can't understand.

### *Sirius*, 1988 CD

All those things I said about the interchangeability of Clannad albums? *None* of them apply to *Sirius*. For one album, no doubt to the horror of their *true* fans, Clannad sells out with a vengeance, and makes a Celtic synth-pop-rock album of truly epic proportions. Supplementing the five actual band members with a hired army of guest players, including Bruce Hornsby, Jai Winding, Robbie Blunt, Mel Collins, Steve Perry and J.D. Souther, producers Greg Ladanyi and Russ Kunkel (who also drums on most of the album) transform Clannad's easy accessibility into a gleaming, overdriven, ultra-commercial, transcendently 1988, impeccably melodic Celt-rock juggernaut (wrong culture, I know, but the most imposing Irish thing I could think of was a cluricaune, which wasn't right). "In Search of a Heart", "Second Nature", "Stepping Stone", "White Fool" and "Live and Learn" are all insanely infectious, and impossible for me to shake out of my head for hours after hearing them. Crashing drums, smoothly distorted guitar, glassy synthesizers and Maire's liquid voice combine hypnotically, rivetingly.

I don't, to be honest, know what it is that the other people in the band had to do with this album. Pól and Ciarán Brennan split the songwriting credits, but on almost all the songs there are guest credits for just about every element I hear. Even Uilleann pipes, something you'd expect *one* of the Brennans or Duggans would be able to take care of, are played by somebody else. The step of recruiting additional backing vocalists seems especially egregious, given that these are all the same people who did "Caislean Òir", which kicks, for instance, Journey's ass. It's possible, I guess, that Maire absconded with some of her brothers' song notes and snuck off to the studio for late-night session-musician assignments in order to make this album. Regardless, I think it's marvelous. I rather expect that you will find

that people who call themselves genuine more-than-one-album Clannad fans will look on *Sirius* with a mixture of amusement and disgust. It has a few songs, like “Skelling” and “Sirius”, that are close enough, perhaps, to *Macalla* to be not unbearable, but this album is clearly a stylistic detour for Clannad, and a suspiciously motivated one, so you either accept it for what it is, or you probably wish it hadn’t happened.

### **Anam, 1991 CD**

After *Sirius* I bought the next Clannad studio album, just in case it was more of the same. It’s not. With Pól gone to form a bizarre world-music trio with some Japanese guys, Ciarán takes over production, most of the songwriting, and the bulk of the instruments. The *Sirius* session hacks are not invited back, and this album returns to the main thread of Clannad’s history.

No matter how many times I listen to *Anam*, the second I turn it off it has vanished from my head. A perfectly pleasant album, and one that convinced me that I now have as many discs like this as I will ever need or want in my life.

## **Enya**

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### **Watermark, 1988 CD**

Enya, who used to be in Clannad, and who is related to them somehow (Maire’s sister? something like that), is about their only competition. She takes “ethereal” to a slightly greater extreme than Clannad does, and her albums are lush, atmospheric washes that positively exude romantic-movie-soundtrack, expensive-car-commercial ambiance. You ought to have one, because you never know when you’ll want to feel like you’re in a romantic movie or an expensive car commercial (a distinction that I’m afraid is beginning to blur). This is a good one, as it has the only individual Enya songs I can distinguish, her unlikely hit “Orinoco Flow” and “On Your Shore”, which I *think* is the one that was in *LA Story* (if it wasn’t that, then it was another one that sounds just like it, which is precisely my point), which is one of my favorite movies, and a perfect (albeit partially facetious) example of what I mean about this being romantic-soundtrack music.

I can’t see needing more than one Enya album, and there will be those who think that having *both* Enya and Clannad is excessive, even, but compared to the price of actually *buying* an expensive luxury car, a few CDs are really nothing.

## **The Edge**

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### **Captive (soundtrack), 1987 LP**

Clannad/Enya fans might like this soundtrack album by U2’s guitarist (with help from Michael Brook, who is mis-credited as Michael Berkeley in large type on the back of the album), which is mostly pleasantly-atmospheric new-agey compositions with a mild occasional Celtic flavor. I consider it forgettable with one critical exception: the theme song, “Captive”, is the first place I ever heard Sinéad O’Connor’s voice, and I still think it is brilliant and moving. It’s a simple song, making the most of Edge’s spare guitar playing run through lots of echoes and reverbs. U2 drummer Larry Mullen Jr. adds mild mannered drums, and even Sinéad’s vocal is restrained by her standards. Her quiet, near-whispered singing, however, completely transforms the song for me, adding a harrowingly subdued emotional intensity that seems to pack a whole film’s worth of uncertainty, fear and triumph into a single song with very few words. I haven’t seen the film, so I can’t tell you how the song was used, or whether the film’s worth of emotions it conveys is *this* film’s worth, but it’s a remarkable track very much worth a search for Sinéad fans.

## **Sinéad O’Connor**

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### **The Lion and the Cobra, 1987 CD**

Sinéad’s own debut album follows through on the promise of her “Heroine” guest vocal sort of the way an atomic bomb named “Firm Push” follows through on the promise of its name. Self-produced, and mostly written by Sinéad, *The Lion and the Cobra* shows a phenomenal stylistic range, from the slow resonant-guitar-feedback grind of “Jackie” and “Just Call Me Joe” to the lithe dance energy of “Mandinka” and “I Want Your (Hands on Me)”. The music here is of little importance, however, compared to the impact of Sinéad’s voice.

Sinéad has, as I see it, four vocal tricks that combine to produce one of the most remarkable singing presences in recent memory. First, she has a stunning voice. She doesn’t display a lot of conventional choir technique, but none of this would work if she didn’t have enviable range, control and emotional precision. I wouldn’t hire her to sing the *Messiah* for a *Hooked on Classics* disc, but I’d sure love to hear it. Second, she uses the incidental sounds of her breathing to her advantage rather than attempting to eliminate them. This is more significant than you might think, and the

ever-present feeling that Sinéad is singing these songs *right* next to your ear is inextricably linked to this album's impact. Third, she is fond of flying with absolutely no warning from one end of her range to another, often within the same syllable. There are a number of other artists in this chapter who are capable of similar vocal manoeuvres, but none of their implementations sound as much like a Ford Thunderbird, on fire, taking a corner on one tire and the driver's-side door frame. Fourth, Sinéad must have a *bank* of compressors, as there's no other way you'd be able to *hear* all the vocal detail on this album.

How much do I *like* it? Well, quite a bit at times, not so much at others. "Jackie" and "Just Call Me Joe" have the most enduring appeal for me, as their turgidly distorted guitar drones (a bit like Billy Bragg at half-speed, played through a torn woofer) hold my interest better than the more upbeat arrangements elsewhere on the album. "Mandinka" and "Jerusalem" are undeniably catchy, though, and "Troy" and "Drink Before the War" do a good job of balancing quiet, calm moments with sporadic infusions of raw anguish. In the end, though, Sinéad's later work has led me to distance myself somewhat from this album, and my appreciation is more intellectual than visceral. I have no qualms about saying that it is an obvious short-list selection if you're whittling down the ranks of debut albums looking for the most striking, but it isn't an album I find myself putting on very often just for the fun of it.

### *Jump in the River, 1988 7"*

In between her first and second albums, Sinéad did another soundtrack song, this one for Jonathan Demme's disappointing *Married to the Mob*. (Did it seem to you like they made a film that made sense, and then removed half of it? Watching the credits I kept seeing scenes that weren't actually in the movie, and thinking "Oh, *that's* what was happening there!") Requiring little help this time around, she plays guitar and does her own drum programming, while The Smiths' bassist Andy Rourke supplies bass and acoustic guitar. The song is in the vein of "Jackie" and "Just Call Me Joe", with lots of thick, pounding guitar, and thus very much to my taste. It ended up being included on her second album, and the flip side to this disk is simply the album version of "Jerusalem", so other than letting me hear the song a year or two in advance of its album release, this single ends up having little significance.

### *I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got, 1990 CD*

Sinéad complemented her world-class debut album by rather quickly becoming a world-class annoyance. Besides badly offending such minor segments of

humanity as Catholics and Americans, which I consider her *personal* life and so not particularly germane, she also developed her music in directions that led in short order from my raving about her to unsuspecting casual acquaintances to my running screaming from the room whenever it looked like one of her songs might come on the radio, which is not good at all when the "room" is a moving car. This trend reached the ridiculous level *after* this album, when she decided that her calling was old big-band numbers, but it gets a healthy start here.

Indeed, I resisted getting this album for quite a long time, on the grounds that it was largely composed of songs I hated and had heard *far* too often already. "Nothing Compares 2 U", the Prince song she made enough money from never to have to work again, grates on my nerves as much as just about anything I've ever heard. The voice and hip-hop drums of "I Am Stretched Out on Your Grave" continues to seem to me like a singularly bad arrangement idea. The strident anti-Thatcher politics of "Black Boys on Mopeds" makes me cringe. "Three Babies" I can't seem to identify with, no matter how hard I try. "Feel So Different" and "You Cause As Much Sorrow" seem listless, and the album-closing a cappella title track doesn't do anything for me, either.

The three songs I *don't* hate, though, are superb. "Jump in the River" still sounds good to me, and the bitter acoustic divorce ode "The Last Day of Our Acquaintance" does for me what all the other songs must do for the millions of people who bought and loved this album. The album's centerpiece, though, and clearly my favorite Sinéad song, is "The Emperor's New Clothes". At least twice as catchy as "Mandinka" or "I Want Your (Hands on Me)", it builds on a rock-solid foundation of John Reynolds' steady drumming and Andy Rourke's bass, adding Sinéad's acoustic guitar, Marco Pirroni's driving electric, and this bizarre dry piston sound that I think might be done by beating on orchestral timpani with plastic spatulas, sampling that, and then playing it back backwards. Sinéad's dual harmony is delightful, the high backing vocal providing a silky counterbalance to the guttural lead. I dance, I clap my hands, I play backwards air-spatula.

Then, I hit Stop.

## Laurie Freeloove

### *Smells Like Truth, 1991 CD*

Laurie Freeloove got some enthusiastic buzz on Ecto at one point, enough that her name stuck in my mind, and when I came across this album in the desperate-cutout bin for \$1.99, I snapped it up. The most

remarkable thing about my copy, it turns out, isn't the music at all, but the physical disc. I have no idea whether all of them are like this (I suspect not), but my disc is actually *two* discs, apparently *glued* together. It must have happened somewhere in the manufacturing process *upstream* of the printing stage, as the top CD has the appropriate graphics on it, and where the ink isn't is *transparent* and the bottom CD shows through, art-free. The bottom CD obviously has the music on it, as it plays fine. I was worried that the double-thickness of the pair would cause my CD-player trouble, but it doesn't, so I've left them stuck together. I imagine that if I ripped them apart I'd find that the bottom one still plays, and the top one is blank, but what fun is that?

Laurie reminds me a little of Sinéad. She has a similarly guttural voice, which hits notes from disconcerting angles that aren't really flat but often seem that way. "Smells Like Truth", my favorite song here, incorporates arresting sound effects and percussion, as does "Heaven on Earth", which also features Eddi Reader singing backup. Both of these songs have an other-cultural oddness to them, and remind me enough of Shona Laing to make me think for a moment that Laurie Freeloze might be from New Zealand. The liner doesn't tell her origins *per se*, but Austin, Texas seems like the location with the most mentions, and that's a long way from Christchurch and Wellington.

And, in fact, most of the other songs on this album don't have the same strangeness as those two. They aren't as interesting to me, either, and as a whole the album strikes me as a competent but not-very-memorable example of the ethereal-female genre. This is Ecto's lifeblood, of course, and if you can't get enough Enya but need something a little less pastoral, this might be worth checking out. There even a cover of "Song to the Siren" shamelessly ripped off from This Mortal Coil, so if you like the last song on this album you should read on to TMC post-haste.

## Hex

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### *Hex*, 1989 CD

Hex is a two-person collaboration between the Church's Steve Kilbey, who produces and provides most of the music, and ex-Game Theory singer Donnette Thayer, who provides the hook to get me interested. The album has *nothing* to do with Game Theory, though. In fact, the first few times I listened to this album I thought it was pretty awful. Kilbey's playing and programming seemed painfully amateurish, stilted and thin, the songs basically

inanimate, Donnette's singing far from exciting enough to justify this being a whole album rather than a couple songs buried on one of the longer This Mortal Coil albums.

I didn't give the album *more* than a few listens until *Vast Halos* came out and struck me as not so bad, after all. Now, with the benefit of some perspective and a little more patience, I think this album isn't half bad, either. Or, more precisely, it's *only* half bad. There's no escaping the fact that except for "In the Net", there isn't a rhythmic moment on the disc, and I can't help feeling that Donnette, by herself, could have done *much* better music, but in certain moods I find the album's stiff minimalism intriguing. Some of Happy Rhodes' stuff circa *Ecto* is similar in mood, and while that's my least favorite period of Happy's career, you might have noticed on the way here that she got a nice long entry from me all the same.

### *Vast Halos*, 1990 CD

The second Hex album earned a place in my collection, against early bets that it wouldn't, on the strength of the methodical single "March", on which Donnette's singing and Kilbey's circling instruments dodge in and out of the measured stomp of percussionist Jim McGrath's whip-crack drums. McGrath proves the addition that salvages the band, as his competent playing gives Kilbey a foundation to work from, and he proves quite capable of filling in moods and textures in the gaps between beams. This in turn gives Donnette a useful background to sing *against*, and though "March" remains the standout in my mind, "Monarch" and "Hollywood in Winter" are also good. The ominous cyclical title litany, with its chant of "One in the hips, one in the spine, one in the body, one in the throat, one in the mind" (bullet-wound locations?), begins to approach the kind of cathartic grandeur that I expected from Donnette all along. The other songs all seem to me to fall a bit short for one reason or another, but the project is *definitely* moving in the right direction. It's a pity that as of this writing there doesn't appear to be a third album forthcoming.

## This Mortal Coil

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### *It'll End in Tears*, 1984 CD

This Mortal Coil is even less of a real band than Hex. The pet project of 4AD Records' magistrate Ivo Watts-Russell, This Mortal Coil amounts to a 4AD house band, with a revolving cast of the label's artists dropping by to perform a mixture of eccentric covers, original compositions by Watts-Russell and co-producer

Jon Fryer, and a song here and there by the guests themselves. The players on *It'll End in Tears*, the first This Mortal Coil album (and the only one that I experienced in isolation), include Dead Can Dance's Lisa Gerrard and Brendan Perry, the Cocteau Twins' Elizabeth Fraser, Robin Guthrie and Simon Raymonde, cindytalk's Gordon Sharp, Colourbox's Martyn and Steven Young, the Wolfgang Press' Mark Cox, and Howard Devoto. The song selection features two Big Star covers ("Kangaroo" and "Holocaust"), Tim Buckley's "Song to the Siren", Roy Harper's "Another Day", Colin Newman's "Not Me", a couple Watts-Russell instrumentals, two songs by Lisa Gerrard, two by Simon Raymonde, and a song called "Fond Affections", by "Rema-Rema", which means nothing to me.

The mood, as befits a record heavy on Dead Can Dance and Cocteau Twins members, is murky, echoey, slow, depressed and monastic, but all in a *good* way. There are very few albums of music as potentially depressing as this one, which has somehow lodged itself in my mind as the soundtrack to Ian Curtis' suicide, though that happened several years before this album came into being. The overpowering liturgical dolor is remarkable in its own right, though, and as a mood album *It'll End in Tears* is quite an achievement. The shifting personnel and cover/original mix keep the album interesting even for a person like me who can't tell one Cocteau Twins song from another, one Dead Can Dance song from another, or even, sometimes, the two from each other, and finds the whole lot resolutely sleep-inducing. It's also worth noting that this album is substantially shorter than the other two, and if you insist on having only one This Mortal Coil disc, it should be this one.

#### ***Filigree and Shadow*, 1986 CD**

The twenty-five song second TMC album is much quieter than *It'll End in Tears*, and very heavy on Watts-Russell instrumentals. Pearls Before Swine's "The Jeweller", Judy Collins' "My Father", Van Morrison's "Come Here My Love", Gene Clark's "Strength of Strings", Tim Buckley's "Morning Glory" and "I Must Have Been Blind", Gary Ogan and Bill Lamb's "I Want to Live", Colin Newman's "Alone" and the Talking Heads' "Drugs" are the covers, and Simon Raymonde, Dave Curtis and Peter Ulrich also contribute tracks. Besides Raymonde, the main participants on this album are not people known to me from any other source: Deirdre and Louise Rutkowski, Jon Turner, Alison Limerick, Martin McCarrick and Gini Ball.

*Filigree and Shadow's* arrangement is less reliant on synthesizers and processing than *It'll End in Tears*,

substituting piano and strings, and it seems quite a bit less depressing than the first album to me. It's also less interesting on a song-by-song level, due mostly the prevalence of so many subdued instrumentals, but as ambiance it functions quite well. An hour and a quarter of ambiance, no less. I don't recommend it as office filler (though I suppose this depends on what you do for a living), but I can lose myself in it quite contentedly.

#### ***Blood*, 1991 CD**

With the exception of appearances by Kim Deal and Tanya Donnelly from the Breeders/Pixies/Throwing Muses/Belly, Shellyann Orphan's Caroline Crawley, and Heidi Berry, the players on *Blood* are mostly holdovers from *Filigree and Shadow*. The covers this time out include the Apartments' "Mr. Somewhere", Gene Clark's "With Tomorrow", Chris Bell's "You and Your Sister" and "I Am the Cosmos", Spirit's "Nature's Way", the Byrd's "I Come and Stand at Every Door", Pieter Nooten and Michael Brook's "Several Times", Mary Margaret O'Hara's "Help Me Lift You Up", the Rain Parade's "Carolyn's Song" and Emmylou Harris' "Til I Gain Control Again". In a change of pace, Ivo's own songs almost all involve singers this time, frequently several.

Although there still aren't a lot of drums on this album, the music here is significantly edgier, more synthetic and more energetic than that on *Filigree and Shadow*. Rather than retreating to the morose fog of *It'll End in Tears*, though, Ivo instead builds tension on top of *Filigree and Shadow's* stately base, and ends up with a very impressive album of warped nether-dimensional crossover, the TMC album that most seriously deconstructs its source material, yet somehow remains faithful to it. Although the Big Star covers on *It'll End in Tears* ensure that it is my first TMC album recommendation, this one has many things to recommend it, as well.

#### ***Original Versions*, 1993 CD**

As much as you may not want to hear this, though, if you purchase an isolated This Mortal Coil album you are making a *big* mistake. *The* way to appreciate This Mortal Coil is to get the 1983-1991 box, which contains the three TMC albums plus this extra disc of twenty-one of the original versions of songs that the band covered. It will be expensive, and I don't know whether it will stay available now that the individual albums have finally seen domestic release, but without this source-material disc you are missing a critical element in your understanding and appreciation of Ivo Watts-Russell's genius.



Listening to the three This Mortal Coil albums, the conclusion you are most likely to draw is that Ivo has an amazingly clear aesthetic vision in his mind, and can bend almost *any* song into his mold. This is a pretty cool thing to be able to do, and if that was really TMC's story I'd still like them a lot. It's *not*, though. The thing that the *Original Versions* disc makes clear is that Ivo's genius had nothing to do with *bending* songs at all. Almost without exception, this disc sounds precisely like *another* This Mortal Coil record. Ivo's secret was in *finding* his aesthetic already existing in the work of so many artists nominally from other genres entirely. The tribute to his and his collaborators' tastes and abilities is that I like this collection just as much as the real This Mortal Coil albums (and, perhaps more significantly, vice versa).

Now, you *can* get some hint of this effect by having some subset of the songs collected here. I'd heard the Big Star songs in both versions before getting 1983-1991, and been struck by how similar the two actually were. Hearing many of these songs in their original context, though, would be very different from hearing them in *this* company, and so even if you have a few of these tracks in other places, I reiterate my recommendation that you shell out for the box. If you think of it as four individual CDs (like, uh, it *is*), the price should seem more reasonable, especially if you pretend that the three TMC discs were still only available as imports.

The track listing, since it isn't printed on the outside and you can't read it off the "individual album" like you can with the other three: Roy Harper's "Another Day", The Apartments' "Mr. Somewhere", Gene Clark's "With Tomorrow" and "Strength of Strings", Big Star's "Holocaust" and "Kangaroo", Rain Parade's "Carolyn's Song", Gary Ogan and Bill Lamb's "I Want to Live", Colin Newman's "Alone", the Talking Heads' "Drugs", Mary Margaret O'Hara's "Help Me Lift You Up", Tim Buckley's "Song to the Siren", "Morning Glory" and "I Must Have Been Blind", Pieter Hooten and Michael Brook's "Several Times", Pearls Before Swine's "The Jeweller", the Byrds' "I Come and Stand at Every Door", Chris Bell's "I Am the Cosmos" and "You and Your Sister", Emmylou Harris' "'Til I Gain Control Again" and Spirit's "Nature's Way".

Also, package design is something of a 4AD specialty, and the box is gorgeous.

# Eden

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from the Marillion album *Holidays in Eden*

## Soundtrack

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Marillion: "Kayleigh"  
Rush: "Red Barchetta"  
Triumph: "Magic Power"  
Magnum: "Heartbroke and Busted"  
Marillion: "The King of Sunset Town"  
Europeans: "Kingdom Come"  
IQ: "No Love Lost"  
Aragon: "The Meeting"  
Yes: "Make it Easy"  
Propaganda: "Duel"

## Introduction

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If I began the book with the least-subtle music I could find, in a way I have reached another extreme. To call Eden the *most* subtle music in this book isn't exactly correct, but this chapter definitely contains the most *complex* music, and the concepts are related. Ironically, power and complexity aren't entirely at odds, and there are several bands in Mega Therion (notably Queensrÿche, Fates Warning and Dream Theater) that have close stylistic similarities to at least the first few bands here in Eden, so in a way the book has come full circle. Still, there is a difference of attitude, or approach, or something like those things, that makes Rush and Magnum discernibly *not* strictly heavy metal.

This chapter is music of drama and complexity. If you are searching for an external label to affix here, "Progressive" is probably it. I've mixed several artists in here, especially at the end, who would probably not be on every Progressive fan's list, and I really do little more than skim the surface of the bizarre alien world that is the worldwide Progressive underground, but other than that the label is pretty accurate. This music is characterized by neo-classical musical complexity, lyrical histrionics (and fascinations with science fiction and fantasy), obstreperous rhythmic head-games, careful production, airbrushed cover-art, a fondness for *extremely* long songs and a virtually complete lack of funk. Not only are the performers in this chapter overwhelmingly male, but the fans are *really* overwhelmingly male, and in my experience this is a set of music capable of evicting women from virtually

any size space. Not that you'd necessarily *want* to do that.

Progressive rock carries something of a chip on its shoulder, owing to it having been largely cast as the specific scapegoat into which most of punk's dirty knives got plunged in the late seventies. This is precisely the sort of big-production, virtue-in-virtuosity, arena-spectacle rock that punk was a violent reaction against, and in embracing punk (which they are required to do to keep their critics' credentials) most critics have implicitly or explicitly affirmed that bands like Yes, ELP and the Moody Blues *were*, in fact, evil. Punk was a reaction to prog; punk is good; therefore, prog is bad. This seems to make a certain sense.

But only in a zero-sum aesthetic system. I take punk's point to be that it isn't *necessary* to be a technical wizard to play rock music, not that it's *bad* to be one; that music *can* be simple, not that it *can't* be complex. In a way punk's very existence, expanding rock's horizons, freed progressive rock to be even more progressive. In practice, though, hating "prog" virtually became a checklist item for critical credibility for a while, and it is only slowly starting to be taken seriously again.

The subgenre hasn't been *completely* incognito along the way, though, and I've accumulated a pretty substantial body of work from a relatively small number of artists who haven't let labels bother them. Here it is.

## Rush

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I've come to believe that Rush-appreciation is as much a sex-linked trait as milk-production and back hair. Here's a party trick you can do with a group of any size (of the right generation): ask everybody who is or once was a Rush fan to raise their hands. Then say "Women, since your hands are free, can you get us men some more beers?" Then, run.

It's quite remarkable, though. I almost *never* meet a female Rush fan, and it's almost as uncommon to meet a man who wasn't, at least at *one* time, a fan of theirs. I'm at a loss to explain why this should be.

In my opinion, there are only two valid reasons to not like Rush. The first one is if you hate Geddy Lee's voice. Voices are very subjective, and Geddy's is high, piercing, and the kind of thing that could very well annoy you. If it does, then so be it. The other valid reason is if your aesthetic wiring is such that you don't believe rock music should have complex arrangements, because Rush certainly has those. In *either* case, if you don't agree that Rush is among the most *talented* bands since the free world more or less mastered recording, then you either aren't paying attention, or you don't

really know what you're talking about. The meta-message behind just about every Rush album after 1975 is "If you have a band, we are better than you."

### *Rush, 1974 CD*

The meta-message behind Rush's eponymous debut album from 1974 is "We've been listening to *way* too much Cream and Led Zeppelin." This is the one Rush record without proper drummer and lyricist Neil Peart, and as a result most Rush fans regard this as a Rush album in name only. Soon-to-be-replaced-and-forgotten drummer John Rutsey is competent, but only just, and the lyrics of these songs are pretty firmly on the poor side. The music is bluesy, in a vaguely unpleasant sort of way, and the band's self-production isn't any help. I really can't think why anybody would like this album.

### *Fly by Night, 1975 CD*

Rush begins, really, with *Fly by Night*. A number of changes made since *Rush* transform the band from a gawky sound-alike trio to a pivotal fixture in the development of modern rock music. First, Neil Peart joins. From almost the instant of his arrival he locked up a permanent hold on any "Best Rock Drummer" award you're likely to propose. He's fast, flashy, capable of mind-boggling syncopation and time-shifts, prone to prolonged solos in concert, and has something of a mania for drum kits with a *lot* of drums in them, but he can drive a groove clear through your skull without letting go of *any* of that, and you'll find yourself undulating to a beat you couldn't consciously replicate if your life depended on it. He also quickly takes over the bulk of the lyric-writing chores, to the substantial relief, no doubt, of Geddy and Alex Lifeson. Peart has one glaringly obvious weakness as a writer: he is chronically pretentious, in a flaky new-age sort of way. On the other hand, I think he is one of the most careful, considered lyric writers I know of, and I'll trade the occasional spate of over-artiness for sincere effort any day. The fact that he *isn't* the one *singing* his lyrics is probably a big part of his secret. He's never faced with the temptation to improvise the lyrics as he sings them, or to get caught up in a sung phrase and simply repeat it, as often happens to even the best writers who sing themselves.

A second change, pursuant to singing, is that Geddy Lee takes over all vocals. The backing-vocal participation of Alex and John Rutsey on *Rush* wasn't notably bad or notably good, but giving over all vocal chores to Geddy was an important stylistic decision, one that helped to define Rush's sound more clearly. It also means that if you hate his voice, you'll hate every

single song Rush ever did or does, which is a nice consistency.

Third, the band abandons the idea of producing their records themselves. Terry Brown, who signs on to produce *Fly by Night*, would go on to produce eight Rush records in a row before stepping down, and while I couldn't really tell you how much of Rush's sound is his doing, it seems reasonable to give him virtual-member credit for the most exciting period of Rush's development.

Fourth, *Fly by Night* features the first (of many) of the long, multi-part story-songs that are one of Rush's most prominent trademarks, "By-Tor and the Snow Dog". At only 8:37, and four movements, this one is rather restrained on the scale of later examples, but it has the right "mythical figures locked in mortal combat" narrative, and the right mini-symphonic musical evolution.

There are a couple of hold-over songs that show that Rush hasn't *entirely* moved beyond *Rush* yet ("Best I Can", and the mercifully short "life on the road is hard" ode "Making Memories"), but the rest of the tracks are prototypical Rush forms. "Rivendell" is the gentle acoustic ballad. "In the End" is the crunching slow power-ballad that starts and ends as gentle and acoustic. "Anthem" is the blazing "Yes quits noodling" Ayn Rand reference. "Beneath, Between and Behind" and "Fly By Night" are the blazing "Yes quits noodling" anthems *without* any Ayn Rand references. These forms would serve Rush well for a good long time.

### *Caress of Steel, 1975 CD*

Rush's third album is only a slight advance over *Fly by Night*, which isn't too surprising seeing as it came out during the same year. The lack of a radio hook like "Fly by Night" meant that it took me a while to get into this album, but now that I have it seems clearly an improvement, and a step along the road to 2112. The best detail is that there is only *one* shlocky atavism, "I Think I'm Going Bald", and it is sandwiched between two excellent short songs, the anthemic "Bastille Day" and the softer "Lakeside Park". The rest of the album is taken up with two imposing epics, the dark three-part *Black Sabbath*-ish "The Necromancer" and the frenetic six-part "Hemispheres" precursor, "The Fountain of Lamneth". Parts of "The Fountain of Lamneth" strike me as embryonic fragments of a host of songs that would crop up over the course of the next four albums, and this makes the song interesting for historical reasons as well as in its own right.

The first three Rush albums are a set to me, mostly because I originally bought them on vinyl in a single

package, *Archives*, a big gray fold-out construction that was probably the only way to sucker anybody into getting *Rush*. Of course, having had all three albums introduced into my collection through this LP-package subterfuge, I had to replace them all with CDs, and *Archive* didn't make the jump to the new medium, so I ended up buying everything pre-*Presto* twice.

## 2112, 1976 CD

The next Rush breakthrough occurs with this, their fourth album. Perhaps it's only because this was the first time I heard of Rush (from Robert Mayes singing "We are the priests" in metal shop, which must have been seventh grade), perhaps it's because this is the first album *after Archives*, but 2112 seems to me to be where the urges on *Fly by Night* and *Caress of Steel* finally coalesce completely. Whatever the reasons, I regard 2112 as the first *essential* Rush album. The first one is of purely historical interest, and the next two are much better, but there isn't much that Rush does on them that they don't do better on 2112.

The soul of 2112, predictably enough, is "2112" itself, a seven-part, twenty-minute musical adaptation of Ayn Rand's short philosophical novel *Anthem*. I'll summarize *Anthem* briefly in case you haven't read it (though you might as well, as it's an extremely quick read and then you can have the satisfaction of explaining it to other less-well-read Rush fans).

The book is set some unspecified amount of time in the future, when unspecified events have brought a form of peace to the world. The good of the human collective has been raised to the status of universal moral imperative, and all aspects of society have been subjugated to a thin idea of the good of society as independent of the will, happiness or needs of any given individual. People are brought up to think in "we"s, never "I"s, their life's occupations are assigned them, they do only exactly what they are told, so that society as a whole may function as efficiently as possible.

One person, the story's narrator, chafes at this intellectual tyranny, and harbors manifold impure thoughts in his confused brain. Assigned to be a Street Sweeper, he wishes to be a Scholar. One day he finds a manhole that leads to an abandoned tunnel, and this becomes his secret laboratory as he teaches himself, against all laws, to be a scientist. Eventually he discovers electricity (which there is none of in this society, presumably because it was held to have caused more harm in the long run than help), and this finally causes him to break his silence. He goes to the Council of Scholars and presents his revelation to them, expecting that they will be overjoyed at his discovery, will welcome him into the company of thinkers, he'll

get to marry the random farm worker he has fallen in love with (love of an individual is also, we're meant to believe, something that has been eliminated from the world), and everything will be wonderful.

As you might guess, this doesn't happen. The Council panics at the idea of something new and rejects his ideas and inventions with a series of inane collectivist arguments, like "What is not done collectively cannot be good", "it would bring ruin to the Department of Candles" and "if this should lighten the toil of men, then it is a great evil, for men have no cause to exist save in toiling for other men". They resolve to report the narrator to the World Council for some appropriately severe punishment, as he has committed about the most grievous transgression that society has a name for. This idea doesn't sit well with him, and he opts to jump out a window and run away.

He escapes into the Uncharted Forest, where everybody else fears to follow. Everyone else except, of course, his true love, who conquers her fear of the forest to join him. Together they march off through the woods. Presently they find an abandoned old library, whose books reveal all the true history of the world that the World Council had denied humanity for their own good, and they rediscover the sacred words "I" and "ego". Presumably they go on to found a new re-enlightened wing of the human race, and things are wonderful thereafter.

As you may have guessed from the tone of my summary, I think *Anthem* is pretty painfully stupid. Rand, in the introduction, takes brief pains to refute the argument that she has distorted the ideas of collectivism, saying that though the world she depicts is not what collectivists say they want, it *is* the logical outcome of taking their ideals literally. Possibly this is the case, but *Anthem* is laughable to me for two fundamental reasons.

First, it assumes that the society it depicts could actually be constructed, and yet a "normal" man could be born into it. I don't believe this for a second. The only way I can see for the society in *Anthem* to function is if the race of humans had been genetically modified in some way to change their instinctive motivations and thought patterns. If that hadn't been done, then rebellions like the narrator's would be so commonplace that they'd destroy society in short order (or at least lead to rebellion of many, not just rebellion of one), and if it *had* been done then this narrator would be unable to think the thoughts he does.

Second, *Anthem* blithely ignores what comes before or after the short time-slice it shows. We are presented with a society that is made to look as awful as possible, with our only window on it the eyes of a narrator who basically shares our perspective, and we are never told either what really lead to this society, nor what the two

protagonists' experiment in individualism ends up amounting to. In the absence of all these things, the narrator's conclusions seem inarguable to the point of blinding obviousness. Add in the missing details, though, and this would quickly become a very different story with a much less-clear moral. For instance, suppose that this society was rebuilt after a cataclysmic war that nearly destroyed the race entirely. In fact, suppose that this story takes place *really* far in the future, when humanity has gone through a *series* of nuclear wars, total rebuilding of society to its former technological state, nuclear war, total rebuilding, etc., and that finally some people decided that there was no way out of the cycle, and the only way of avoiding the destructive-horror stage of the cycle was to avoid the industrial, scientific and information revolutions completely, and so they set out to. Then imagine that the movement begun by our reasonable narrator ends up plunging even *this* noble experiment into the same vicious circle that it was attempting to escape from. As billions of humans are obliterated in quick or slow agonies, every instant of which can be traced directly back to Equality 7-2521's selfish unwillingness to submit to collective wisdom, then will he seem like such a clear hero? Nope.

In the end, I consider *Anthem* nothing more than a 123-page rehash of the most-obvious, least-considered, most-visceral objection to collectivism, "But I *am* an individual". This seems like a very persuasive argument at the outset, but in fact it isn't an *argument* against collectivism at all, it's a *contradictory premise*, for it implies that what the individual thinks is ultimately more important than the welfare of the whole, where collectivism's premise is the reverse. *Anthem*, therefore, is logically tautological. It says merely "If the individual is ultimately more important than the collective, then the collective is not more important than the individual".  $(X > Y) \rightarrow \sim(Y > X)$ . Yeah, so what? What Rand had to do, to really prove the point she seems interested in establishing, was *prove* that collectivism leads to the oppressive society she depicts, and *prove* that individualism leads to something else, and then hope that people agreed with her that the latter consequences were preferable to the former. Now, this would be a very difficult thing to accomplish in a book of any length or format, much less a short pseudo-novel like *Anthem*, so Rand can be forgiven for not accomplishing it. What she can't be forgiven for as easily is claiming to *have* refuted collectivism with this logical non-sense, because that shows that she has, basically, no clue as to why her argument doesn't signify anything, and possibly no real desire to debate the merits of her value-system with the collectivists' in any logically-meaningful way. I'm tempted, then, to dismiss her completely as a thinker on the basis of her

having written this one book. That sounds unfair, because she wrote a bunch of other books, and you might argue that this one was an aberrations. However, she wrote it in 1937, and by the time the text of my edition, with preface, was prepared, in 1946, she had not yet denounced it, and to my knowledge she never did. So while I wouldn't go on a world-wide crusade to discredit her without reading some of her other books, like *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead*, for my own personal purposes I'm content to write her off as an idiot.

Getting back to Rush, their rendition of this thin fable is a bit more palatable to me, as it *treats* it more like a fable. In their version, the narrator finds a guitar in a world that does not know music, learns to play it, and presents it to the Council, who are here characterized as techno-religious tyrants (priests of the temples of Syrinx, with "great computers" filling "hallowed halls") not well-meaning intellectuals. They reject his offering scornfully, but don't actually punish him for having it. He wanders off, despondent, and then suddenly the long-departed "elder race" returns in their spaceships and takes over the world again, and tears down the temples and social progress resumes.

Rush's version avoids, in small but significant ways, both of the worst shortcomings of *Anthem*. First, they don't try to pretend that their narrator's predicament is that unique. The rulers in "2112" are clearly despots, not expressions of some collective will. Nothing about "2112" implies that people in general have changed; rather, they have had religious rule imposed upon them. This is plausible enough. Second, in Rush's version the "elder race", the individualists, were not destroyed, they simply left the planet to continue to "learn and grow" elsewhere, and at the end they return to right whatever wrongs have taken place on their home-world during their absence, sort of like "The Scouring of the Shire" at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*. This reinforces the idea that the collectivist dictatorship was not established out of desperation born of individualism having failed repeatedly and convincingly.

Rush's version is also better aware that its story is not realistic. When the narrator discovers the guitar it isn't even tuned, yet within three minutes he's Alex Lifeson. This is patently implausible, and there's no reason to assume it was *meant* to be realistic. Rand, on the other hand, seems unaware of the myriad unrealistic details in *Anthem*. Also, the corny sci-fi ending, with a voice from the returning ships booming "Attention all planets of the Solar Federation, we have assumed control", is in keeping with the broadly symbolic nature of the rest of Rush's version of the story.

What Rush has done, then, in my opinion, is extracted Rand's central point ("Hey you collectivists, not so fast!"), and presented it in a substantially less-idiotic fashion. This is cool. "2112" also has one other crucial advantage over *Anthem*. It *rocks*. The balance of powers in the story is mirrored in the music by casting the narrator's parts as quiet, acoustic segments, and the priests' as blazingly raucous metal explosions. When you hear Geddy shrieking "We are the priests of the Temples of Syrinx" over Lifeson's squallingly distorted guitar assault, you'll either hate Rush or you'll side firmly with the priests. Thus even as they are aware of the superficial nature of their story, Rush actually structures their narrative better, by letting the form prejudice you toward their antagonists, thus intentionally handicapping their argument somewhat, something that Rand doesn't ever do. There is never a moment in *Anthem* when the establishment seems laudable for any reason whatsoever, so the reader has to go through no process of awakening, they just have to nod as clear injustice after clear injustice are rolled out for their inspection.

And, though this may come as a surprise after that digression, there is more to 2112 than "2112". In fact, there's a whole side of short, more-accessible rock songs, led by the classic geographically-challenged drug ode "Passage to Bangkok" (Bogota, Columbia is not conveniently accessible by rail from the other locations in the story). "Something for Nothing" builds into another powerful shrieker. "The Twilight Zone", "Lessons" and "Tears" are a bit less histrionic, and also somewhat less interesting to me, but the album's second side does a good job of balancing out the long opening opus, and helps make the *album* a classic, not just "2112" itself.

#### *All the World's a Stage, 1976 CD*

Rush themselves mark their career stages by the regular release, every four studio albums, of a live record. Rush's live performances have never been dramatically different from their studio work, so the live albums act first as best-ofs, the live component mostly serving to give dedicated fans something to buy that isn't technically redundant.

This first live album summarizes the first four studio albums with a "Working Man"/"Finding My Way" medley for *Rush*, a "Fly by Night"/"In the Mood" medley that spans *Fly by Night* and *Rush*, "Anthem", "By-Tor and the Snow Dog" and "In the End" from *Fly by Night*, "Bastille Day" and "Lakeside Park" from *Caress of Steel*, a rendition of "2112" that reasonably omits "Discovery" and "Oracle: The Dream", and 2112's "Something for Nothing". The CD leaves out the *Rush* track "What You're Doing", which

appeared on the original vinyl and cassette versions. No loss.

Except for the absence of "Passage to Bangkok", this selection is a pretty good so-far best-of. I wouldn't have included as much from *Rush*, perhaps working an excerpt from "The Fountain of Lamneth" in place of "In the Mood" and "Finding My Way", but otherwise this set hits the high points.

The performances are pretty raw by Rush standards, especially since they hadn't yet reached the stage where the synthesizer sequences they would be forced to use later on would provide some extra glue and filler to both keep them on track and make it sound like more than just three guys up there trying to make all the noises that comprise Rush songs. Also, the early albums are raw enough on their own that the idea of hearing them "live" doesn't have as much novelty as it would with later albums. Serious Rush fans will buy this no matter what I say, and that's fine. Potential fans wishing an introduction to the band's early work would probably be better served by getting 2112 itself, and hearing the suite in its native setting.

#### *A Farewell to Kings, 1977 CD*

*A Farewell to Kings* finds Rush taking more small steps forward. The most significant one here, to me, is the appearance in the instrument credits of synthesizers for the first time. Both Geddy and Alex list bass pedal synthesizers, and Geddy lists a Mini-Moog. Neil, self-conscious about not having anything electronic to claim, expands his laconic "drums" to "Drums, orchestra bells, tubular bells, temple blocks, cowbells, wind chimes, bell tree, triangle" and the intriguingly named "vibra-slap".

Instead of one epic and a handful of miscellaneous short songs afterward, *A Farewell to Kings* mixes its four shorter songs in with the two ten-or-eleven-minute story songs, "Xanadu" and "Cygnus X-1, Book One". Of the shorter songs, "Madrigal" and "Closer to the Heart" are short, largely acoustic, quietly thoughtful, and quite pretty. "Closer to the Heart", in particular, is one of Rush's most enduring moments, a succinct crescendoing anthem free of any sort of lyrical or musical excess, catchy and heartfelt, and something you can sing along with in concert. The two mid-length, mid-mood songs, "A Farewell to Kings" and "Cinderella Man", are muscular and varied, songs like only Rush makes 'em, something like a cross between Fleetwood Mac and Metallica, complexly structured songs that neither outstay their welcome nor attempt to slam through their tempo- and mood-changes like a bad video edit. Geddy even takes a turn writing lyrics for "Cinderella Man", which he probably shouldn't have.

The two epics are the sort of thing you either love or hate. "2112" was nominally twice as long as either "Xanadu" or "Cygnus X-1", but it was really a long *work* made up of shorter *songs*. Both of these, by contrast, are single long *songs*. Depending on your patience and affection for Rushisms, you may find them tedious. Or, like me, you may bask in their elaborate evolutions and intricate playing. Either way, these songs are *not* meandering jams, they are carefully planned and plotted, so don't get this album expecting stoned-out Deadhead instrumental excursions.

If you are just coming to Rush, this is an album to put off for a while. "Closer to the Heart" is the most significant song here, historically, and you'll do fine without it for a little while. Get *2112*, then skip forward a few. This is one for the second pass, once you have a handle on the band's overall stylistic progression.

### *Hemispheres*, 1978 CD

*Hemispheres* is probably Rush's most obstreperous and difficult album. To begin with, its cover features a naked man standing on a huge exposed brain. This probably resulted in countless parents of teenage boys exercising their traditional parental prerogative to reject proposed uses of their sons' hard-earned paper-route money. This is unfortunate, as it's hard to imagine an album less likely to corrupt idle adolescent minds than this one. In fact, there probably is no *better* band for inquisitive suburban teenagers than Rush, whose consistently intellectual and philosophical lyrical investigations encourage nothing but active thought, and are completely free from the sort of mindlessly destructive or libidinous sentiments that their parents *ought* to be afraid of.

*Hemispheres* continues on its obtuse bent by having only four songs on the whole album. In *2112*-like style, the first side is entirely taken up by the title track, which forms the epic conclusion of the saga began in "Cygnus X-1, Book One". The story, for those of you who followed its humble beginnings as a dangerous-sounding space voyage to explore a black hole, takes a very bizarre turn here in the second part. Passing through the black hole, the ship's pilot is transported to the apparently-not-mythical Olympus, where he successfully adjudicates the previously irresolvable conflict between Apollo and Dionysus, uniting the hemispheres of Truth and Love into a functioning, balanced whole. I really love the piece, but it's long and much harder to follow than "2112", so you might react differently.

The album then offers only two short rock songs as antidotes to the sprawling title track. True, both are minor masterpieces, at least within the Rush canon, but there are only two and they are quickly over.

"Circumstances'" primary claim to fame is that "Plus ça change / Plus c'est la même chose" was the first French I ever learned. "The Trees" is a sequel, musically if not lyrically, to "Closer to the Heart". I've seen it explained as an allegory about the Quebec secessionist movement, but I take it as a much more-general thought about the nature of inequality (set in the inequality of nature!). Like in Vonnegut's story "Harrison Bergerond" (was that the title?), the song ends with equality established by force, by handicapping those who turn out to be more capable than others, which seems like a bad thing, though the converse (allowing the more capable to dominate the less-capable) is hardly un-problematic either.

The album then concludes with a ten-minute instrumental called "La Villa Strangiato", whose subtitle "An exercise in Self-Indulgence" is one of the truest phrases that Rush ever wrote. I punch Stop as soon as it begins. Without it the album is quite short, but *very* solid.

Still, it *is* short, and if you don't like "Hemispheres" the two shorter songs will seem like a frighteningly small oasis in between two yawning chasms of boredom (an oasis in between chasms is an interesting twist, don't you think?), so I'd put *Hemispheres* down after *A Farewell to Kings* on the buying priority list. Which isn't to say that you should stop buying Rush albums before you get to it, by any means.

### *Permanent Waves*, 1980 CD

*Hemispheres* brings to a close what I think of as the three-album mid-pre-modern Rush period (with *Rush* being the pre-Rush Rush period, and *Fly by Night* and *Careless of Steel* being the early-pre-modern Rush period, *Moving Pictures*, *Signals* and *Grace Under Pressure* constituting the early-modern period, *Power Windows* and *Hold Your Fire* being the mid-modern period, and *Presto* and on being the first period of new Rush albums that I didn't buy on vinyl first). *Permanent Waves*, then, you can easily see, is the late-pre-modern period. The thing that most keeps it from being lumped in with the albums that come after it is the fact that *Moving Pictures* was the first Rush album I bought, and so will always seem like a turning point in the band's career to me.

And, to be honest, *Permanent Waves* seems like a transition album to me even more than a decade later. It doesn't have any story-songs to compare with "2112" or the "Cygnus X-1" diptych, though "Natural Science" at least has three parts to it and "Jacob's Ladder" shows a pretty good scope, but then it still only has six songs (the number of songs on each Rush album makes a pretty smooth graph: 8, 8, 5, 6, 6, 4, 6, 7, 8, 8, 8, 10, 11, 10, 11). Geddy continues to make more use of

synthesizers, but not nearly as much as on *Moving Pictures*. The playing on parts of this album is quite impressive, but the album as a whole doesn't make me shake my head with wonder like every record *after* this one does. This is also the last Rush album recorded during the Seventies.

*Permanent Waves* splits rather neatly into two halves, each of which consist of two shorter songs and one longer one. The first half is the power side. It leads off with the driving "The Spirit of Radio", another true Rush classic, Alex's squeezed and flanged guitar intro one of the most memorable rock moments ever. Neil and Geddy are playing as well as *they've* played to this point, also, and the song is the most powerful and straightforward Rush has yet delivered. "Freewill", the second song, is only slightly less awesome musically, and it compensates with *vintage* Peart lyrics, capped by the chorus "You can choose from phantom fears / And kindness that can kill. / I will choose a path that's clear; / I will choose free will." These two songs combine to function as a perfect teen-intellectual-anxiety anthem, and prefigure Triumph's "Magic Power" and "Fight the Good Fight" by a year for good measure.

The longer "Jacob's Ladder" settles the tone down then, paving the way for the second short-song pair, "Entre Nous" and "Different Strings", which are slower, softer songs in the vein of "Tears", "Madrigal" or "The Trees". These in turn lead to the sprawling conclusion, "Natural Science", which I think is more similar to "The Camera Eye" on *Moving Pictures* than it is to "Cygnus X-1", "Xanadu" or "The Fountain of Lamneth".

I would put *Permanent Waves*, too, on the "second pass" list of Rush album recommendations, but again, this has at least as much to do with sentimental attachment to *Moving Pictures* as it does with any particular shortcomings of *Permanent Waves*. If, for any reason, you have *Grace Under Pressure* or *Signals* already, and are working backwards, skipping to *Permanent Waves* on your way to 2112 may make decent sense.

### *Moving Pictures*, 1981 CD

For me, this is *the* Rush album. "Tom Sawyer" and "Limelight" were the songs that got me to actually buy the record, and it quickly became one of the most important albums in my collection, as Rush quickly became one of the most important bands. I have it on CD now, of course, but the original LP packaging, with its stiff inner jacket and jet-black finish, is how I will forever see it in my mind.

*Moving Pictures* carries Rush's sound confidently into the Eighties. The synthesizers that began showing up in earnest on *Permanent Waves* here become an element as important as Alex's guitars, Geddy's bass

and Neil's drums. Rush's compositional, arrangement and performance skills also seem to take a quantum leap forward. There are impressive Rush songs going all the way back to *Fly by Night*, but this is the first album that floors me on *every* song with how well these three men can play music. Listen to the instrumental, "Yyz", closely, without any words to distract you, and if you don't hear what I mean, then forget it. Lee's bass-playing is phenomenal, Alex's guitar is unmistakable, and Neil is virtually without competition as a drummer (Marillion's Ian Mosley and Big Country's Mark Brzezicki are the only two I'd even *consider* comparing him to, and Brzezicki at least is a very different *sort* of drummer).

The instrumental aside, *Moving Pictures* delivers six of the greatest Rush songs before or since. "Tom Sawyer", the first song, is a picture-perfect power-of-youth surge, with layers of buzzing synthesizers, Geddy's rumbling bass, Neil's rattling drums and a blistering guitar solo or three.

"Red Barchetta", next, is not the most ambitious of the band's story-songs, but it is my favorite. Derived from (actually, "Inspired by" is the phrase they use) Richard S. Foster's "A Nice Morning Drive" (a poem? a short-story? dunno), it is a slice of life in a dull future where some oppressive law prevents the narrator and his uncle from operating an old automobile. They do, he takes it out for a drive, the authorities spot him and give chase in their hovercrafts, which he eludes by crossing a bridge too narrow for them, and he and his uncle return to the fireside to dream of better days, gone by. I'm not a car fanatic, so it isn't the specific scenario I'm responding to, it's the diligent detail that gives the vignette science-fictional plausibility. I don't know how much of it ("the Motor Law", "the Eyes", "the Wire", "the Turbo") is simply appropriated from Foster, and how much (if any) Peart added himself, but it hardly matters. These few offhand references provide just enough hooks to a richer world beyond the confines of this small tale to make it feel set in a context, and this gives it narrative dimension and richness that rock songs rarely bother to construct.

"Limelight" is Rush's closest thing to a radio-friendly hit yet, even better in this regard than "The Spirit of Radio". The song is concise, the melodic hooks clear, Geddy's voice is a little lower than usual, and it's a song about fame and celebrity, which are *always* popular topics. The Shakespearean allusions in it aren't the usual way rock approaches the subject of fame, but then again, this *is* Rush here. "The Camera Eye", which follows, looks from the title like a continuation of the theme, but in fact it has nothing to do with fame. Instead, it's a rather sophisticated observation about the way cities take on a life independent from the lives of the people that inhabit them, and vice versa. Peart



uses New York and London as his examples, with New York a city driven by its people and London a city whose mood is dominated by its history, but the observation transcends any specific city. Any sufficiently advanced science, Clarke would point out, becomes indistinguishable from magic, and similarly any sufficiently complex mechanical structure will come to seem organic. Modern cities approach this state; from some perspectives they may seem to already have reached it. "The Camera Eye" isn't suggesting subjecting big cities to the Turing test just yet, but it does inspire related thoughts. At least, it does if you're predisposed toward thinking them, like I am.

The mood of the album then abruptly turns darker for the vigilante portrait "Witch Hunt", which is part 3 of "Fear" (in the reverse of the usual practice, the first two parts come on *later* albums). "Quick to judge, / Quick to anger, / Slow to understand", Geddy sings of the mob, but Peart's lyrics avoid slipping into the easy condemnation of those who would enforce their own laws. The vigilante's conviction of his own correctness is both the most frightening thing about vigilantism and the thing that makes it hardest to tell the difference between a crazed and misguided vigilante and a passionate and true defender of embattled values.

The album finishes on a lyrically uncertain but musically decisive note with "Vital Signs". It's hard to say exactly what this song is *about*, but its jittery reggae-like guitar stabs and cyclical synthesizer burlblings slowly pull the mood up from the spooky depths of "Witch Hunt", and by the time the song gets to the end, the lyrics have somehow resolved to "Everybody got to elevate / From the norm", which is as good a thought to end a Rush album on as any.

#### *Exit...Stage Left, 1981 CD*

The second live album covers *A Farewell to Kings* ("Xanadu", "Closer to the Heart"), *Hemispheres* ("The Trees", "La Villa Strangiato"), *Permanent Waves* ("The Spirit of Radio", "Freewill", "Jacob's Ladder") and *Moving Pictures* ("Red Barchetta", "Yyz", "Tom Sawyer"), and throws in the *Fly by Night* song "Beneath, Between and Behind" and a short acoustic-guitar instrumental called "Broon's Bane". The vinyl and cassette also had 2112's "Passage to Bangkok", but the CD omits it.

I'll admit that I'm somewhat puzzled by the selection. Including "La Villa Strangiato" on *Hemispheres* to begin with was a questionable decision, and repeating it live doesn't make any sense to me at all. I would have swapped it for "Circumstances" in a second. The *Permanent Waves* tracks make sense (the first side of the album), but I would have omitted "Yyz" and substituted "Limelight", for sure, and thought

about trying to fit "Camera Eye" in somehow. "A Farewell to Kings" also seem conspicuous by its absence. The original inclusion of "Passage to Bangkok" was a great idea, as I really missed it on *All the World's a Stage*. Leaving it off the CD in favor of "Beneath, Between, Behind", though, just makes me shake my head.

I'm also not entirely sure what to make of the performances. The *Permanent Waves* and *Moving Pictures* tracks are nearly indistinguishable from the album versions. The need for more synth tracks than the three of them can play at once probably forces this, but it does beg the question of what seeing Rush "live" is supposed to mean. The songs all sound great, but they sounded great to *begin* with. I'd recommend that newcomers and casual fans interested in this period steer away from this and get *Moving Pictures* and *A Farewell to Kings*, in that order. Rush's studio albums are just too carefully constructed for the live records to be good substitutes.

#### *Signals, 1982 CD*

*Signals* continues on a pretty straight stylistic line from *Permanent Waves* and *Moving Pictures*. This album is even more synthesizer-focused and atmospheric than the last one, and the record's moods are ones hidden deeper inside emotional territory, less obvious than the fear and anger of "Witch Hunt", the defiant nostalgia of "Red Barchetta", or the surface analysis of "Limelight".

Technology and its effect on modern life is the common thread. "Digital Man" and the NASA anthem "Countdown" are the only songs explicitly dedicated to this theme, but the other songs all work into the meditation somehow. "Chemistry" delves into the idea of a human as a machine, and "The Weapon" alludes further to this idea. "Subdivisions" treats whole cities as machines, designed to mass produce identical humans. "The Analog Kid" and "Losing It" are deliberate contrasts, outposts of bare humanity in the midst of all this science and machinery.

"New World Man", then, is the album's rhetorical centerpiece. I think of it as a sequel to "Tom Sawyer", or an updating of it. Both songs are portraits of modern youth, but where "Tom Sawyer" couches the portrait in Twain's anachronistic terms, "New World Man" is filled with techno-scientific vocabulary and images ("signal turning green", "the big machine", "his systems", "He's a radio receiver", "his power"). Yet the person behind each portrait is largely the same, and both songs echo Peart's fascination with the nature of change, "Tom Sawyer"'s "He knows changes aren't permanent" and "New World Man"'s "He knows constant change is here today" mirroring "Circumstances"' "The more that things change, the more they stay the same".

Musically, *Signals* is a much more subdued album than *Moving Pictures*. The omnipresent synthesizers of the previous album are here joined by thickly atmospheric production, and Geddy's voice and Alex's guitars are both kept carefully in check throughout. The playing and arranging are impeccable, but if you come to this album expecting "We are the priests"-type raw rock drive, you'll be sadly disappointed. These songs flow smoothly, like molded plastic, their carefully-crafted details and meticulous tempo shifts assembled like watch parts into a tightly-knit functioning whole whose components are only evident under close inspection.

Lest you think that I think these changes are a bad thing, I would hasten to point out that *Signals* is probably my favorite Rush album, external considerations aside. *Moving Pictures*, because it was my introduction to the band, will always be special to me in a way that the others can't ever be, but I think that musically *Signals* is a slightly superior album. Depending on which period of Rush, if any, you prefer, it may be more or less to *your* taste.

#### *Grace Under Pressure*, 1984 CD

A number of apparent changes show up in the credits to *Grace Under Pressure*. The most obvious is that for the first time since *Fly by Night*, Terry Brown is *not* this record's producer, Peter Henderson taking over that responsibility for one album. The second thing I notice is that this is the first record to give all three band members credit for electronic instrumentation. Both Geddy and Alex list "synthesizers", and Neil lists "electronic percussion" along with his usual "drums and percussion", the band having some time back given up the habit of trying to list every individual instrument used in the creation of the album. Lastly, I believe this is the first album to streamline the writing credits all the way down to "Music by Lee and Lifeson, Lyrics by Peart", a strict division of labor that has persisted (wisely, I think) ever since.

The album makes a nice end to the trilogy begun by *Moving Pictures* and *Signals*. Musically, it rebounds from *Signals'* insularity, and is in some ways even more direct and clear than *Moving Pictures* (perhaps this is the result of the new producer, or perhaps it's the *cause* of the producer change). Synthesizers still abound, but they are used here less for the thick textural washes of *Signals*, and more as counterpoint to Lifeson's guitar and Lee's singing, both of which are much less buried in the mix this time around. These songs are faster, edgier, *harder* than *Signals*, certainly, and in a way *Moving Pictures* as well. I'm tempted to say that this album is a partial return to *Permanent Waves*, but I can't

exactly explain why I think that, so it's bound to be deceiving, so I won't mention it.

Lyrically, and I may be imposing some of these relations, it seems to be very much a follow-up to the two prior albums. "Afterimage" I connect to "Chemistry" (though the title and its placement near the beginning of the album have much more to do with this than the lyrics, as "Afterimage" is actually a sad eulogy to a departed friend). "The Body Electric" is clearly the sequel to "The Digital Man", anthropomorphising a robot rather than mechanizing a human. "Kid Gloves" is related to "Subdivisions", a thought fragment from after school is over.

The only overt sequel, mind you, is "The Enemy Within", which is the *first* part of "Fear". Now that the entire trilogy has leaked out in reverse (*Signals'* "The Weapon" was part two), I can say with the confidence that though all three songs are excellent and interesting, the "trilogy" isn't anything more than the sum of its parts. All three are *about* fear, but there's no narrative thread that connects them more firmly than that, and the common titling seems more geared toward heading off criticisms that Peart is repeating lyrical concerns than it does toward a real multi-part Rush epic like "Cygnus X-1".

One strange lyrical detail about this album is how much "red" there is in it. It begins with "Red Lenses", one of the few Rush songs I can honestly say I don't much like. Musically, the song seems to spend most of its length meandering aimlessly in search of a rhythm, and lyrically I just don't find this monologue on the subject of a color interesting for any reason. Peart doesn't *connect* the color to anything, the way Kate's "Symphony in Blue" does, for instance.

Then there's "Red Sector A", a disturbing prison song that I can't decide when it is set (WWII? some unspecified future conflict?). The song itself doesn't mention "red", "sectors" or "A", which leaves me wondering why the title is what it is. Perhaps "Red Sector A" has some historical referent I've missed or forgotten about.

And then the color crops up in "Distant Early Warning" ("Red alert / Red alert") and "Between the Wheels" ("We can fall from rockets' red glare"). It isn't mentioned in "Afterimage" or "The Body Electric", but retinal flashes and blinking LEDs both *connote* red to me. Only "The Enemy Within" and "Kid Gloves" wholly escape associations of red. Odd.

On one last note, the liner for *Grace Under Pressure* (or the booklet of the CD) features one of my favorite pieces of Rush art (which is saying something, as permanent Rush graphics director Hugh Syme is a *very* interesting artist), embodying the album title in one simple photograph of an egg in a vise.

### *Power Windows*, 1985 CD

Whether Peter Henderson's production on *Grace Under Pressure* wasn't to the band's liking, or there was some other reason for his departure, *Power Windows* switches producers again, replacing Henderson with Peter Collins. Collins seems to work out quite well, but this album doesn't sound *enough* different, or different in any way clearly related to the producer, for me to tell how much influence either producer had over the project, and if you were to tell me that Peter Henderson simply changed his last name to Collins in between *Grace Under Pressure* and this, it wouldn't upset my worldview very much.

Rush from *Power Windows* forward becomes something of an all or nothing proposition. They play about as well as any three humans can be expected to play musical instruments, they write great songs in the unmistakable Rush idiom, and they turn out of new album of them every couple of years. If you like their sort of thing, they are exactly the sort of thing you like; if you don't get it now, forget it, as Rush shows no sign that they will ever be any other kind of band than the one they are. That's not to say that the albums from this point on are all the same, at all, merely that the outside edges of Rush's sphere seem to have been defined, and the band seems content to spend the rest of its days (which I expect to be numerous) inhabiting the niches it has found and/or created for itself.

*Power Windows'* contribution to the Rush canon, in my opinion, is some of the band's finest chorus hooks. "Grand Design", "Manhattan Project", "Marathon" and "Emotion Detector" all have *killer* choruses. Not that there's anything wrong with the *other* four songs (except perhaps "Mystic Rhythms", which I'm not that crazy about), or with the *rest* of these songs, but when Geddy hits "Against the run of the mill", "The big bang took and shook the world", "From first to last / The peak is never passed" or "Right to the heart of the matter", I am swallowed whole by the music, and Rush is, for a few moments, the whole magical musical universe, myself adrift in it, watching galaxies spiral and crash around me, diverging and converging in the ultimate time-lapse *Koyanisqaatsi* (sp?) outtake.

This album also has one of Rush's finest Big Science songs (a genre of which Peart is the undisputed lyrical master), "Manhattan Project", about (of course) the construction of the first atomic bomb. The collective view of this event these days is pretty negative, focusing mostly on the horror that the scientists created, and therefore their implied irresponsibility in building something that does so much damage and so little "good". Peart is more thoughtful than this, though, and this quick portrait tries to go behind the *results* of the invention and get you to put yourself behind the

eyes of the participants, or failing that, simply to remember that there *were* humans, intelligent humans who did not *mean* evil, involved at every step of the process, trying their best to do what they *thought* was good. Writing the atomic bomb off as evil may make some sense from the comfort of many years' distance from a world war that it ended and a Cold War that at time we weren't sure we'd survive, but the atomic bomb in many ways *created* this world in which it has come to seem evil, and without having played out a timeline in which we didn't build it it's hard to talk meaningfully about whether it was a good idea or not.

*Power Windows* continues some of Neil's other lyrical fascinations, as well. "Middletown Dreams" is the adult portrait to complement "Subdivisions", the chafing kids' parents' story. "Marathon" is a sort of prequel to "Losing It". And "The Big Money" is another example, like "Limelight", of his sporadic foray into conventional topicality.

### *Hold Your Fire*, 1987 CD

This is the only Rush album that I didn't get into immediately. In fact, I didn't even *buy* it immediately. It came out in the middle of college for me, at a time when I was most distanced, I think, from my pre-college self, and another Rush album just didn't seem like a useful thing to add to my life. Some time later I ended up picking up a used copy just because it was cheap, and even then, listening to it, it didn't do much for me. The most exciting element in theory was that Aimee Mann, who I was very much into at the time, sings backing vocals on "Time Stands Still", but in practice her presence on the song is pretty subtle, and hardly what I'd hoped for.

*Hold Your Fire* was also the last Rush album that came out before I made the switch to CDs, and this resulted in its getting somewhat unfairly neglected as I moved on to *Presto*. Eventually, when I decided to replace all my Rush vinyl in reverse chronological order, it got another chance, and the second time around I like it a *lot*. I don't have a lot to say about the album as a whole; it's most like *Grace Under Pressure* in my mind, a little faster and heavier on guitars and bass than *Power Windows*, which had some of *Signals'* soaring tendencies.

The individual songs, though, are marvelous. "Force Ten"'s driving energy, "Second Nature"'s dramatic sweep, the dueling bass and keyboards above slashing guitars on "Prime Mover", the eerie grace of "Mission", the jittery verses of "Turn the Page", the surprisingly successful Oriental balladisms of "Tai Shan", all these are eminently worthy Rush moments. And what point is there in wanting a Rush album to be more than another eight or ten great Rush songs?

### *A Show of Hands*, 1989 CD

The third in Rush's live series, this one is the most questionable. The period it represents, *Signals*, *Grace Under Pressure*, *Power Windows* and *Hold Your Fire*, is Rush's most synthesizer-dependent, and the era that least lends itself to live performance. The infrequent instances when these versions *don't* sound like the original recordings sound more like mistakes than new takes on the original songs.

As another best-of, this isn't that great either. *Signals* is represented by "Subdivisions"; *Grace Under Pressure* by "Distant Early Warning" and "Red Sector A"; *Power Windows* by "The Big Money", "Marathon", "Manhattan Project" and "Mystic Rhythms"; and *Hold Your Fire* by "Force Ten", "Time Stand Still", "Mission" and "Turn the Page". The out-of-era bonuses are "Witch Hunt", from *Moving Pictures*, which is cool, "Closer to the Heart", which makes it two live albums in a row to include that song, and a long drum solo called "The Rhythm Method". The skew toward the latter two albums seems exactly backwards to me, and I would have included two more songs from *Signals* and another from *Grace Under Pressure*. In fact, my selection would have been: "Subdivisions", "New World Man", "Losing It"; "Distant Early Warning", "Kid Gloves", "Between the Wheels"; "Manhattan Project", "Marathon", "Emotion Detector"; "Time Stand Still", "Second Nature", "Mission". I guess this is *pretty* close, statistically, to what they picked, but leaving out "New World Man", at least, seems plainly idiotic to me.

I'd have to recommend that even reasonably dedicated fans skip this one, as it adds vanishingly little to my understanding of Rush. If you would have to put anything down in the record store to pick this up, don't.

On the other hand, if you're a hopeless completist already, like me, or have too much money on you, the drum solo is pretty cool.

### *Presto*, 1989 CD

*Presto* was the first Rush album released after I began doing year-end top-ten lists, and it made #6 on the album chart, the song "The Pass" slipping in at #9 on the song chart. The next two Rush albums didn't make their years' lists, but this really isn't a reflection on Rush. Rush albums are of an amazingly consistent quality, and I invariably like them a lot. How they fare in their year has a lot more to do with what else comes out. Rush is such a familiar presence to me that the element of surprise, which often propels unexpected music onto my lists, just isn't there, and so Rush albums become something of a constant in my musical worldview, with the quality of any given year in which one comes out measurable by how many albums I thought were *better* than Rush, and how many weren't.

This "quality" has as much to do with how much money and energy I put into acquiring new music in that year as it does with the actual quality of the music being made in the world, of course, but art rewards attention.

*Presto* reminds me a lot of *Power Windows*. Like that album, its strengths seem to me most in individual hooks. The choruses of "The Pass", "War Paint", "Superconductor", "Anagram" and "Red Tide", the last couple verses of "War Paint" and "Presto", all of these have the kind of melodic punch that leaves visible bruises. There isn't a good science song to replace "Manhattan Project", but there is "Superconductor", whose title relies on its Big Science allusion for its misdirection.

Peter Collins temporarily absent for two albums, Rupert Hine produces this one and the next. I don't know for a fact that Hine was a long-time Rush fan, but that's what this album sounds like. The keyboards get pushed back again, Lifeson's guitar forward. Neil's drums are mixed in extremely dryly, to make it all the more obvious what an amazing player he is (the first Missing Person album is like that, too). The album sounds most uncannily like the old days on "Presto", where the acoustic guitar kicks in and for a few bars we're back in "Closer to the Heart".

There are a couple missteps. I don't much care for "Scars" or "Hand over Fist", neither of which ever seems to find the hook it is circling around. Still, if *you* can make a thirteenth album this good, you're leading a pretty impressive life, and the world could use more of you. Long live Rush.

### *Roll the Bones*, 1991 CD

The second Rupert Hine-produced album, *Roll the Bones*, is rather a lot like the first one. It has another heaping pile of fabulous songs, and a couple not so fabulous moments. The worst of these later sort is the rap break on "Roll the Bones". Rush is *not* funky, they're never going to be funky, and they shouldn't try. Their attempt at rap is beyond laughable into painful, the combination of rap stylings with Rush's otherwise ultra-white music, and rap catchphrases like "get busy" and "homeboy" with Peart's decidedly un-street-like vocabulary ("Gonna kick some gluteus max" being one of the worst examples of this) showing as clearly as anything how rock music continues to perpetuate the schism between blacks and whites in this country.

That's just part of one song, though, and the rest of the album stays in territory Rush understands, and acquits itself admirably. My favorite moment, I think, is the chanted series of invented labels that punctuates the choruses of "You Bet Your Life", inspired hybrid

designations like “deconstruction primitive performance photo-realist” and “gold adult contemporary urban country capitalist”. Is there anything *new* on this album? Well, not really. All Rush albums are like other Rush music, but this one is perhaps the most like the album *right* before it, and so is one of the least satisfying for me. “Least satisfying” among Rush albums, though, isn’t much of a put down.

### **Counterparts, 1993 CD**

If *Roll the Bones* found the band slipping slightly, *Counterparts* is a crashing return to form. Peter Collins is back at the console, the synthesizers are almost all back in their cases, and the band slams through a powerfully-charged album on the strength of guitar, bass and drums, just to remind the lapsed that they *can*. By the end of the first three songs, “Animate”, “Stick It Out” and “Cut to the Chase”, Rush has firmly reestablished, if there was ever any doubt, that not only are they the masters of what they do, but that adjacent landholders better watch their fences carefully, as Rush isn’t always content to sit inside the borders they’ve drawn for themselves.

*Counterparts* is easily the heaviest Rush album, their closest brush with “real rock” since the first ten minutes of *Permanent Waves*. Lifeson, whose guitar playing was forced to compete with Geddy’s synthesizers for the prior decade, emerges as the dominant musical force on this album, roaring and slashing his way through these songs with Geddy and Neil breathlessly in tow, mostly doing their best simply to simultaneously keep up and stay out of Alex’s way. There are some synthesizers sprinkled throughout the album, but they are never the bearers of the melody, and the beginning of “Between Sun and Moon” is about the only place where they are clearly audible on their own for any length of time.

Alex proves to be, though I already knew this, a mesmerizing guitarist. He mostly avoids gratuitous soloing (actually, he *entirely* avoids *gratuitous* soloing, and mostly avoids *soloing* at all), instead generating a towering wall of chords that undulates like that bridge in California that tore itself apart when the wind hit its harmonic frequency. In the rare moments when Alex gives him some space to play in (like parts of “Alien Shore”), Geddy does some impressive things on his bass, too. Neil is uncharacteristically restrained on drums throughout, content for the most part, for once, to do what most drummers *only* do, which is to keep the beat.

Coming after seven albums that relied heavily on synthesizers and studio-grandeur, this snarling, stripped-down format comes as something of an initial shock, and my reaction after listening to the album once

was a distinct feeling of loss. Where are the soaring synthesizer choruses? Where are the smooth orchestral dreamscapes? Where are the songs about science? What are all these blazing songs about love and loss and determination doing on a *Rush* album?

It didn’t take more than another listen or two to reorient myself, though. This is still indubitably a Rush album, I just had to back away from *Roll the Bones* and *Presto* and remember the larger range into which Rush albums fit to spot it. Part of the trouble comes from the fact that after eighteen years of writing lyrics, Neil is beginning to understand how sung lyrics differ from written poetry. Now, back under *Fly by Night* I cited the fact that he isn’t the singer as one of Neil’s *advantages* as a lyric writer, and I still believe that. For *Counterparts*, though, in keeping with the spirit of the music, he seems to have made a real effort to decrease the distance between his words and the music. These songs are more personal, more direct, less verbally intricate. Previously it’s hard to imagine Neil’s name affixed to a song with the chorus “Ahh yes to yes to ahh ahh to yes / Why the sun why the sun”, but *sung*, that line is quite effective and evocative. About the only moments when this experiment goes awry are the two “I knew” verses of “Nobody’s Hero”, where the AAAA rhyme scheme seriously undermines the solemnity of the sentiments (a friend dying of AIDS, a little girl killed in some unspecified, but randomly brutal, way). Other than that, though, the lyrics do an impressive job of being *less* impressive on their own, more a part of the music.

As if to compensate for the lyrics, the liner for *Counterparts* is *very* detailed. The lyric side has a small graphic for each song, with a phrase from it rendered in some interesting text/background treatment. The other side is a fascinating collage of images and words that would take me far too long to describe. I don’t know of anybody who buys albums for liner art, but if you happen to meet such a person, be sure to recommend this. And, tell them that the music is worth listening to, too.

## **Triumph**

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### **Rock and Roll Machine, 1978 LP**

Ever wonder how Rush would have turned out if they’d kept making music like their first album? Well, something like *Triumph*, is my guess. *Triumph* is another competent Canadian power trio with progressive/metal tendencies. They made one classic album, and this isn’t it. About the only thing I can say in favor of this record is that it has their cover of Joe

Walsh's "Rocky Mountain Way", which is interesting in a thick-headed sort of way.

### ***Allied Forces*, 1981 LP**

*Allied Forces* is Triumph's one brief moment of distinction. Or, more precisely, it *contains* the band's one truly great song, "Magic Power", and a couple of other tracks ("Fight the Good Fight" and "Say Good-bye") that are good enough to prove that "Magic Power" wasn't a *complete* fluke. "Magic Power" is a classic rock radio anthem (*about* radio, not just played on it) about music's power for escape. "Fight the Good Fight" is a serviceable shake-your-fist-in-the-air defiance song, about nothing in particular (and thus useful for any occasion!), that sounds even more like Rush than Triumph usually does. "Say Good-bye" is a mindless power-ballad that has a few really good hooks, and some nice chorus harmonies.

The rest of this album hasn't worn very well, I find, and Triumph has gone from being a band I used to think I liked a lot to a one-song footnote on par with April Wine or Honeymoon Suite.

## **Magnum**

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Magnum is one of those uniquely British entities that it seems virtually nobody off that island can make heads or tails of. Imagine combining Rush, Kansas, Styx, Queen, 38 Special, Jethro Tull, Marillion, ZZ Top, Yes, Def Leppard and Foghat. Those are mostly pretty popular bands, and you'd imagine a synthesis of them would do okay in the US. As best I can tell, this hasn't been the case. Other than my friend Matt, who introduced me to the band, I've yet to meet anybody else here who has even heard of them, let alone likes them.

### ***Kingdom of Madness*, 1978 CD**

Magnum's first album is a little uneven, but a pretty impressive beginning. Richard Bailey's metallic analog synthesizers firmly root the album in 1978 (and he also plays the flute). Rex Gorin's galloping drums move the songs along briskly. Lead singer Bob Catley's vocal delivery isn't quite up to Freddie Mercury's operatic drama level, but he puts plenty of emotive histrionics into things all the same. Songwriter/guitarist Tony Clarkin provides the rest of the music, with everybody but Gorin chiming in on backing vocals.

There are some real Magnum classics on this album. The epic opening track "In the Beginning" is a portentous start, and the title track, which works acoustic guitar, flute and some bird noises into the time-

honored big-electric-guitars rock formula, belongs in the ranks of timeless rock treasures. The mellower "All That Is Real" has a languid grace, and some nice vocal harmonies (in the hard-rock mold; this isn't exactly barber-shop). "Invasion" rumbles along on a lead-guitar line that falls about halfway between mock-classical and dueling-banjos. "All Come Together" is a little stiff and halting, but has a number of very nice melodic moments.

The rest of the album is pretty uneven, though. "Baby Rock Me" is schlocky and regrettable. "Universe" is orchestrally overblown, but lacks the invigorating pomp that Magnum would eventually learn to invest "overblown" with. "The Bringer" and "Lords of Chaos" don't have anything *fundamentally* wrong with them, but I'd hardly class them with Magnum's best.

Seeing as this is the band's first album, though, and remembering what Rush's first album, in particular, sounded like, I'm inclined to cut the band a generous wedge of slack. Check out the entries for *Marauder* and *The Collection* before you buy this album, though.

### ***Magnum II*, 1979 CD**

Magnum's second album finds them improving quickly. Better production, a year's technological development in synth gear, and a collection of songs that cleaves much closer to Magnum's emerging trademark sound combine to produce an album that I find satisfying almost all the way through. "Great Adventures", "Changes", "The Battle", "Reborn", "So Cold the Night", "Foolish Heart" and "Firebird" are all inimitable Magnum power romps, over-emotive anthemic arena-rock standard-bearers of the very finest sort. If this sort of thing doesn't seem patently unbearable to you, this is great stuff. Take "Bohemian Rhapsody" and scrub off the most obvious Italian-operas, and you'd get something in this vein.

"If I Could Live Forever" is, for variety, a monumental power-ballad. "Stayin' Alive" is not a heavy-metal cover of the Bee-Gee's disco megahit, which is too bad, because that would have been hilarious, while the song it actually is is rather underwhelming.

The catch regarding *Magnum II* is that while it's a very solid album and would certainly seem worth buying on its own, *The Collection* and *Magnum II* each contain six of these ten tracks, leaving the omittable "Stayin' Alive" as the only song you can't get elsewhere. As you see, I didn't let track overlap keep *me* from buying all the Magnum albums I could find, but for the less fanatic of you I think the

compilation/live approach to early Magnum makes much better sense.

### ***Marauder*, 1980 CD**

This is the live album. Why would a band release a live album after only two studio releases, and then even have a six-song overlap between the live album and its immediate studio predecessor, leaving out both of the single tracks from its first album? Beats the hell out of me, but it works out pretty well. Only three of these tracks are repeated on *The Collection* ("Changes", "If I Could Live Forever" and "The Battle"), and the live versions of these here are all excellent. "Changes", in particular, sounds *much* better live than it did on *Magnum II*, where it already sounded pretty decent. Even "Lords of Chaos", the studio version of which I wasn't that enthralled by, perks up strikingly in concert. The stage suits Magnum.

The most important track inclusion, though, is "In the Beginning", as that was the one important track off of *Kingdom of Madness* that didn't make it onto *The Collection*. I'd still recommend the compilation as your early-Magnum starting point, but *Marauder* is the one to get next, if you want another. The first two studio albums can then be skipped in safety.

Or, bought cheap.

### ***The Eleventh Hour*, 1983 CD**

I'm missing one Magnum album before this one, 1982's *Chase the Dragon*. When I pick up the trail, not that much has changed. Mark Stanaway has supplanted Richard Bailey on keyboards, and the band has continued to mature musically, but they are still playing Magnum music, and playing it damn well. *The Eleventh Hour* ended up getting them dropped from Jet Records, but inveterate heavy-metal back-catalog scavengers Castle Communications eventually re-released the Jet stuff on CD, and the band went on to several albums on Polydor, so little lasting damage was actually done (and Jet's eventual release of *Archives* shows that even they eventually realized that dropping Magnum might not have been an unqualified victory).

This album finds Magnum starting to make the slow transition from their "early" sound, which made a lot out of changing tempos and Wagnerian excess, to their slightly different "later" sound, which retains the Wagnerian excess but tends to dispense with the tempo changes in favor of smooth, relentlessly steady mid-tempo chugging. "Hit and Run" sounds the most like their later albums, with "One Night of Passion" the most like their earlier work to my ears (quite a bit like "All of My Life", come to think of it, especially the odd piano bits that crop up every once in a while). The highlight for me is definitely the grandiose piano-

driven power-ballad "The Word", a sweeping schmaltzathon of the sort of which Clarkin is the reigning progenitor.

There are several other good songs here, and the three that made their way onto *The Collection* ("So Far Away", "One Night of Passion" and "The Word") hardly exhaust the album's potential. If you're delving into early Magnum in earnest, this record will seem like a much better investment than the heavily redundant first two. On the other hand, the record's overall sound is decisively stranded between the albums that come before and the albums that come after, so if tastes of Magnum are all you're after, I wouldn't bother with this one.

### ***The Collection*, 1990 CD**

Castle's 19-track, 77-minute early-Magnum compilation is the ideal introduction to the band's first era at least, and probably the best place to start even if you intend to work forward. It takes from *Kingdom of Madness* "Kingdom of Madness", "Invasion" and "All That Is Real"; from *Magnum II* "Great Adventure", "The Battle", "If I Could Live Forever", "Firebird" and "All of My Life", as well as a remixed (and much improved) studio version of "Changes"; from *Chase the Dragon* "The Spirit", "The Teacher", "On the Edge of the World" and "Soldier of the Line"; from *The Eleventh Hour* "So Far Away", "The Word" and "One Night of Passion"; and from the *Vintage Magnum* compilation, somewhere along the way, three otherwise non-album single tracks, "Back to Earth", "Hold Back Your Love" and "Everybody Needs".

This is a marvelous selection. The first two albums are well represented; "In the Beginning" is the only thing I might miss, and as I pointed out before, it's on *Marauder*. *The Eleventh Hour*'s sample is fine. The four *Chase the Dragon* tracks, which were new to me here, are *all* superb, with "The Spirit" and "Soldier of the Line" being career standouts, and the three non-album tracks are every bit as good as anything else here. There isn't a weak moment on this entire disc. Compiler Ian Welch's breathless liner notes, which open with the questionable clause "Supergroup of the Nineties they may be", seem unjustifiably enthusiastic, at least when read here in the US where when you say "Magnum" people assume you're talking about some beer intended to compete with Colt 45, but his taste in Magnum music is impeccable, and if I ever get ridiculously famous for having written this book I'll see that this collection gets reissued with a big "Approved by glenn" sticker on the front.

### *On a Storyteller's Night*, 1985 CD

Thus begins the second phase of Magnum's career. Describing Magnum as having two distinct phases may be somewhat deceptive, as they hardly go through the sort of metamorphosis that usually prompts impassioned early/late debates over the likes of Ministry, PIL, Talk Talk, the Psychedelic Furs or U2. In fact, you have to be pretty observant to recognize the difference as being anything but natural advances in production and synthesizer technology showing up in the music. And, to be fair, Stanaway's shiny new keyboards and good thick mid-Eighties-style production, here courtesy of Kit Woolven, are the first thing you will notice about *On a Storyteller's Night*. The stylistic change, though, begins with the drums, where Rex Gorin sits no longer. Jim Simpson takes his seat for one album, before Mickey Barker joins up for the duration on *Vigilante*. The new drummers show a much greater willingness to eschew tricky off-beat cymbal flashes and just sit back and pump out a sturdy, thumping, unwavering four-square rock-backbeat stomp.

The infectious kineticism of the drums percolates up through the rest of the band. Wally Lowe's bass keeps pace, and Mark Stanaway's keyboard playing edges even further into the realms of coursing angel-string fills and heavenly-chorus voice-bank washes. Clarkin's guitars smooth out and make more use of velvety overdrive and sustained chords, and Catley's vocals fit perfectly already, and so don't have to change a bit.

There came a point in Rush's career when I said that everything after that point you'll either like or hate. Magnum is an even more severe case of this. Starting with this album, Magnum almost completely abandons the notion of musical progress. Their next five albums are about as interchangeable as rock records get, and you could take the fifty songs from them and rearrange them in pretty much whatever combinations you wanted to. In fact, there appear to be several, if not dozens, of compilations from this period that do exactly that. Any one of them, or any of these individual albums, would do equally well as a representative of the over-produced, over-wrought heartstrings-plucking pseudo-medieval Olympus-stadium-tour guilty fried-food glory that is Magnum circa 1985 forward.

In a way this really is to rock music what Wagner was to opera, music that takes hundreds of years of musical tradition, extracts only the most powerful, instantly-stirring major-key elements, throws out all the complexity that was intended to *earn* the cathartic payoff, and then crafts a new idiom composed entirely of the "good parts", sort of like brownies made by

throwing every form of chocolate, ice cream, honey, sugar and butter you can find into a big bowl, stirring it up, and then pressing it into rectangles with sheer force, skipping the baking step entirely. Now, I can think of three possible reactions to such a gambit: one would be to take a bite, experience every enzyme in your body with the foggiest notion of survival-of-the-fittest stampeding toward your brain carrying large cardboard signs with the hastily lettered message "*Don't Eat That!!*", and decide that you would rather shoot yourself in the head with a mink revolver. A second reaction would be to appreciate the brownie, or maybe half of it, but to judiciously decline having another until at least a few months have gone by. The third reaction is for your eyes to glaze over and your hands to begin monomanically shoveling all the spare brownies they can find into your mouth before starting on the ones that anybody else hasn't finished yet. Down this road lies obesity, friendlessness, and an early demise. The only safeguard to this sad fate is if for some reason there *aren't* any more brownies to eat just now, and you really can't get another more often than every year or two, no matter how badly you might want to.

This last reaction is the one I have to Magnum. My mind hears this music and recognizes that it is merely a cleverly constructed appeal to my basest musical instincts, and lacks the real sophistication of many other much better bands, including several in this chapter, not to mention ones from other equally-worthy genres. My mind, however, gets very little say in the matter. My ears are in pure ecstasy, my body pulsing along with the drums, my nervous system locked into a rhythm whose appeal must originate in the persistent slap of waves on the crusty heads of our trilobite ancestors, or the womb-modulated echoes of the thumping of our mothers' hearts. I become a rock-cliché zombie, and with my eyes rolled back into my head I shuffle out the door, into the Square, in the door of the nearest record store, over to the M section, and begin pawing through the bins looking for more Magnum CDs.

Of course, there usually aren't *any* Magnum CDs, let alone new ones. Several record stores later, the cold winter air has begun to restore me to my senses, and I remember that I *have* all the Magnum albums I know of. Gradually, my senses return to me, and I return home and put on *Incesticide* or some Fugazi to clear my mind.

Anyway, this explains why I keep buying Magnum albums every time I catch word of a new one, even though I've long since given up any illusion that a new one will be *different* from the ones I already have. In fact, if they ever do change styles, I'll probably be crushed. The world is a better place if



somebody keeps making these albums, and all things considered it's probably wisest if the chore is handled by one band.

The highlight of *On a Storyteller's Night*, to the extent that these albums have individual highlights, is "Les Morts Dansant", which, retitled "Call to Heaven", is the Magnum track that Patty Smyth covered on her first solo album, *Never Enough*. I love both versions, though I think the song actually suits Patty better than it suits its composer and his compatriots. It's in 3/4, you see, and that kind of throws this band off.

### *Vigilante, 1986 CD*

*Vigilante* was the first Magnum album I ever bought, another one of those \$1.99 LPs that Underground Records carried me through college on. Replacing it with a CD proved quite a chore, and if it weren't for my business trip to Amsterdam in 1993, I probably still wouldn't have a copy. As it is, I think FAME records, right off of Dam Square, is who I have to thank for shrinking the pink and blue unicorn cover down to CD-booklet size and sucking the delicious music into the digital domain intact. Polydor may have helped.

This really is a killer Magnum album. I'll avoid simply reiterating all the goopy things I said about them above, but "Lonely Night", "Midnight (You Won't Be Sleeping)", "Holy Rider" and "Vigilante" are masterfully indulgent. This is the first album with new drummer Mickey Barker, who sounds great. It's produced by Roger Taylor. There are nine songs, and it's about forty-four minutes long. Well, what are you waiting for?

### *Wings of Heaven, 1988 CD*

This one has another nine songs, and runs nearly fifty minutes. Production by the band, Albert Joekholt and Joe Barbaria. No lineup changes. Um.

The highlights, for me, are the opener, "Days of No Trust", and the epic (10:34) finale, "Don't Wake the Lion (Too Old to Die Young)". This is the only later Magnum CD I've ever seen in Boston record stores, so it may be the easiest to acquire, should my descriptions have failed to ward you off.

### *Goodnight L.A., 1990 CD*

Did I say that Magnum never really changes any more? Shame on me, this album features as radical a stylistic paradigm shift as you will find anywhere: it's DDD! Not only that, but long-time Rush collaborator Hugh Syme did the cover photo.

This album actually hit the top ten briefly in Britain (as did *Wings of Heaven*, for that matter). It

contains eleven more unassailable Magnum songs (total time, 48:40), including "Heartbroke and Busted", which may be the ultimate one-song synthesis of the Magnum gestalt. I played it for Matt after I picked up this album (which I hadn't known of before I found it) in London in 1992, and he couldn't do anything but shake his head slowly and say "Yep, that's Magnum". Producer Keith Olsen attempts to make a mark on the proceedings, drying out the snare-drum mix a little and pushing the guitars up and the keyboards back a little. This results in the album sounding a little murkier than the last few, but in the end the difference is of little consequence.

I don't know what the title refers to. Unless there's an enclave of ardent Magnum fans on the West Coast that I, here in Boston, don't know about, I can only imagine that L.A.'s response to Magnum's well-wishing would be "Uh, thanks, but who are you?"

### *Sleepwalking, 1992 CD*

Well, four albums were enough to wear out Polydor's patience with Magnum. Undaunted, the band reappears on Music for Nations, with Clarkin himself taking over production, having discarded his hat and shaved his head and his beard (!?) for the occasion. The band is starting to show a few signs of age in the liner photo, but their sound is undamaged. The strange fascination with the US shows up again in an American flag held by a jack-in-the-box on the cover, and the song "Only in America". The US, for its part, continues not to display any particular fascination with Magnum, or even consciousness of their existence, unless you count Ranjit, the email-order prog-rock importing specialist who every once in a while unearths another Magnum CD to keep the revenue stream from me to him trickling along.

At this point I'm more than a little surprised that Magnum is still alive and recording. They've now been working for 18 years with only three personnel changes, and *Sleepwalking* is every bit as good as anything they've ever done. I can't help wonder if one of these days Clarkin is going to wake up and realize that he's been doing pretty much the exact same thing now for almost half his life, and decide it's time to switch to sitar and make reggae instrumental versions of 1930's show-tunes.

In the meantime, the more Magnum albums he sleepwalks through, the happier I am.

### *Archive, 1993 CD*

1993 saw a couple emails from Ranjit, alerting me to new Magnum releases. One was a best-of, which I skipped, and thus can't tell you anything about. The

other was this Jet resuscitation of some hoary Magnum vault-fodder.

It's pretty interesting what they uncovered, actually. The first four songs, "Sea Bird", "Stormbringer", "Slipping Away" and "Captain America", are from the band's very first recording sessions, in 1974. The notes allow that the band was still searching "for a musical identity" at the time, and indeed these songs are the sort of groovy boogie that I would have thought nobody would have the courage to admit to after Spinal Tap's thing about flower people. The title of "Stormbringer" is about the only thing that sounds like the band Magnum would eventually resolve to be. It's fascinating, though, to hear proof that the band didn't actually *have* to turn out the way they did.

The next four, "Master of Disguise", "Without Your Love", "Find the Time" and "Everybody Needs", are from the 1976 session for *Kingdom of Madness*, but were passed over for the album. They did the right thing. The boomy sing-along version of "Everybody Needs" here is not the same as the much better one on *The Collection*.

Then there's a couple of 1979 outtakes, one a track called "Lights Burned Out" that was originally slated for *Chase the Dragon*, the other yet another version of "Kingdom of Madness". "Lights Burned Out" is a dangerously limp piano ballad, but the "Kingdom of Madness" recording is quite good, if basically superfluous.

The collection winds up with a couple 1982 tracks. The first is a version of "The Word" with The London Philharmonic Orchestra. A neat idea, but the non-orchestra parts of the recording are very hissy and dull. The final song is a uncharacteristically bluesy and upbeat party-rock *The Eleventh Hour* outtake called "True Fine Love", which again, I think they did well to omit.

On the whole, if you aren't *really* into Magnum, this is a tidy heap of garbage that you can step over without breaking stride. Even I, a dedicated Magnum fan, haven't much more to say about it than "They got better", which I do in the same voice that Cleese uses to explain to King Arthur why he's not *still* a newt.

## Marillion

Marillion is another band much better appreciated in Britain than in America, the definitive "neo-progressive" band, and another one I wouldn't have known a thing about if it weren't for Matt. I don't know *how* he knew of them; I think he was in England when "Market Square Heroes" came out. Magnum, Marillion and IQ, I picked these three up from Matt as a set, and

Marillion has gone on to join Big Country, Kate Bush and Game Theory/The Loud Family in my most exclusive echelon of favorite artists. Marillion is, in fact, the most recent artist to be added to that list, in 1989 or so. (It's only recently that I've had an explicit such list, but Big Country joined it at about the time of *Steeltown*, 1984, Kate got her grip on me with *Hounds of Love* in 1985, and Game Theory earned their place with *Lolita Nation* in 1987. I guess I'm overdue for a new addition.)

Since I've now been buying CDs for a few years, CDs themselves have come to be unremarkable. That is, the *format* is no longer novel. Back when CDs were new to me, though, Marillion and CDs were inextricably linked in my mind. The summer Matt and I lived together, 1988, while we were working on the *Lampoon's* awful *Time* parody, Matt had a CD player and I still wouldn't for quite a while (not until after college, late in 1989). His Marillion CDs, particularly *B'Sides Themselves*, made quite an impression on me, and though I really liked the band and did eventually buy a used copy of *Clutching at Straws* on vinyl, it somehow seemed wrong to me to be buying Marillion LPs. When I finally got a CD player, I bought two Marillion CDs the same day, and had the rest of the back-catalog within two months.

### *Script for a Jester's Tear*, 1983 CD

The first Marillion album, *Script for a Jester's Tear*, doesn't find the band quite fully formed. In particular, the absence of eventual drummer Ian Mosley, who would join in time for *Fugazi*, means that the rhythms and drum work on this album aren't quite up to the lithe standard of the band's later records. The compositions, correspondingly, are a little rougher and less confident than they would become, with more exposed edges and angles. For some, that makes *Script* the best Marillion album, the one least tainted by whatever impulses would come along later. For me it makes it the least friendly, though most of the songs would show up later in live or remixed form, and there seem much improved. I conclude from this that whatever awkwardness this album has is mostly failure of execution, not of inspiration.

Marillion's core strengths are very similar to Rush's. The musicians, bassist Pete Trewavas, guitarist Steve Rothery and keyboardist Mark Kelly, are all brilliant players. Life Alex Lifeson, Rothery channels his playing *into* the music, rather than trying to stand out of it like many metal guitarists are wont to. Trewavas is a creative bass player, and a solid rhythm-section participant, even more so once Mosley arrives. Kelly is an effortless keyboard player, filling the spaces around the stringed instruments without ever turning into Keith Emerson, who I consider to divert attention

from the music with his florid playing the same way Malmsteen or Eddie Van Halen do with their guitars. Marillion are individually as talented musicians as you'll find, but their real power is as an ensemble. Having seen them play live more than once, I can report that their synergy is in no way a studio creation, either.

The band's other strength, to match Rush's, is their lyricist (in this case also the singer), Fish. Not an erstwhile existential philosopher like Neil Peart, Fish is a tormented poet of the finest sort, weaving tortuous verbal webs to express tortured emotional states. His lyrics are riddled with puns, alliteration and consonance, assaultively literate, and Fish inhabits the shadowy world straddling the ugly mundanity of working class drudgery on one side, and a magical semi-tragic romantic-poet's dreamworld on the other. The jester on the cover, and in the title track, is Fish's self-image to a T. A real man, with real pain, under the costume, he dons the colorful garb hoping that by assuming the role of the harlequin he can escape his real world of stained sheets, close walls and scratchy records, and escape into the imaginary world where magic is real, where his tights shimmer with his aura, where the bells on his tassels jingle of their own accord, and merriment sparkles off of mead goblets and crystal chandeliers onto elves and nobility dancing away endless spring evenings in a intricate ballet choreographed by unseen hands, puppeteers surely, but puppeteers of such refinement that the marionettes beg not to be set free.

Where Peart is basically a writer who happens to write lyrics, Fish is a lyricist first, a "writer" only second. He is a *spoken* poet, as much concerned with the cadences and elisions of the words as they roll off his tongue as he is with the sentences they form. Game Theory's Scott Miller is the only other verbal wordsmith I'd consider comparing him to, and if I had to give a single award for the best lyricist in rock music, I'd have to hand it to Fish on the strength of his actually *printing* his lyrics in Marillion's albums, so I can tell what it is he's saying.

*Script for a Jester's Tear* opens with "Script for a Jester's Tear", the plaintive "So here I am once more in the playground of the broken hearts" announcing Fish's entrance. The band joins him slowly, Kelly's piano and keyboards leading the way for Rothery's quiet guitar and Trewavas' soft bass, the song suddenly exploding into a strident, skittish limp as Fish hits "The game is over". The song is, though it takes most of its length for this to become wholly apparent, a sad letter to a departed love, the narrator having played the jester just a little too long. "I never did write that love song", he admits, and so he loses her; so the jester destroys himself by the very calculated revelry that makes him.

He cannot bear to let down his jovial facade, yet it precludes real happiness by its nature. If clowns, attempting to be endearing, frighten children, then jesters, attempting to embody mirth, are the ultimate tragic heroes.

"He Knows You Know", for a change of pace, is a harrowing song about uncontrollable drug addiction. "You've got venom in your stomach, you've got poison in your head. / When your conscience whispered, the vein lines stiffened, you were walking with the dead." I'm not entirely sure I understand the pronoun references in the chorus, but I *think* the title expands to "The listener should be aware that the addict is aware of his addiction". At least, that does make the song sound even more sinister, as it defuses the listener's easy defense of assuming that the addict is so consumed by his addiction that he hardly feels the pain it causes him. Imagining that the addict understands what he is doing to himself, even as he does it, makes the scenario that much more terrifying.

"The Web" returns to the jester's sporadic narrative, a tale of self-castigation over romantic failure that weaves in and out of *Script for a Jester's Tear* and *Fugazi*, finally culminating in *Misplaced Childhood*. This episode of the story is essentially the narration of this album's cover, the bereft artist trying to convince himself that he has the power to write himself out of his tragic role, that he controls his life, rather than being controlled by it. "I cannot let my life be ruled by threads", he sings, attempting to believe that his costume neither is his soul, nor contains it. "Decisions have been made", he repeats. "I've conquered my fears." He doesn't sound convinced.

"Garden Party", for a *real* change of pace, is a sardonic depiction of an elite Cambridge (England, not Mass.) afternoon tea. The video for this song is a classically naïve mini-film of the sort that quick-cut image-conscious advertising-aspirant American video-makers would never think to do, nor would know how to execute. The band, as schoolboys, invades the garden party and instigates a rollicking pandemonium before retreating victoriously. Although the band claims that this song is based on a real party they were once invited to (presumably by accident), neither the song nor the video have a precisely documentary air about them.

"Chelsea Monday" returns ominously to gritty underclass reality. Something like Marillion's version of Billy Bragg's "The Busy Girl Buys Beauty", this is Fish's ode to unfulfillable dreams, to a "catalogue princess, apprentice seductress, living in her cellophane world in glitter town". It makes a pair with the concluding track, "Forgotten Sons", which is Marillion's "Army Dreamers", about "Chelsea Monday"'s subject's male peers, who joined the army and went off to be

famous, only to be quickly killed and even more quickly forgotten.

If you're interested in Marillion, I certainly wouldn't start here. The music and production are, although excellent objectively, hurried-sounding and uneven compared with *Misplaced Childhood*, and though all six of these are excellent songs, and well worth hearing, all but "The Web" reappear elsewhere, in what I consider somewhat superior versions. You'll want this, mind you (there aren't that many Marillion albums, after all), but it can wait.

### *Fugazi*, 1984 CD

With Ian Mosley's arrival, the proper cast of Marillion is finally assembled, and *Fugazi* is a significant improvement on the first album. It is simultaneously more accessible and more true to at least *my* idea of what the band is *really* like. The music, with Mosley providing a surer foundation, is smoother and sounds better developed to me. Ian is easily one of the world's most impressive drummers, on par with Neil Peart in terms of technical skill, and of a similar stylistic bent. Where the songs on *Script for a Jester's Tear* often seemed *arrhythmic* at times, these songs take the same intricate metric impulses and make them seem as natural as clock ticks. The difference this makes in the overall coherence of the album is remarkable.

The song order also seems better calculated here. Rather than intermingling the introspective chapters in the jester's saga with off topic songs, *Fugazi* puts the four related songs in the center of the album, and surrounds them with the three that to me *don't* seem to be part of the ongoing story.

The first of these, "Assassing", is practically hit single material, except for the fact that it's seven minutes long. Actually, according to *British Hit Singles* it *was* a hit single, though this seems an implausible length for one. Ah well, it wasn't a hit *here*; the Brits must have longer attention spans. I guess, with so few radio stations, they'd have to. Anyway, "Assassing" is a moving, if perplexing, epic. Rothery and Kelly trade quick guitar and synth hooks in the verses, after a long Eastern introduction (Fish doesn't come in until past the two-minute mark, so maybe that's what they cut to make it a single), and for the chorus they exchange elaborate solos. Fish is buried deep in his own language, which is both the song's transport and its subject. "Listen as the syllables of slaughter cut with calm precision, / Patterned frosty phrases rape your ears and sow the ice incision, / Apocalyptic alphabet casting spell the creed of tempered diction, / Adjectives of annihilation bury the point beyond redemption, / Venomous verbs of ruthless candour plagiarise assassins' fervour." What the hell does it mean?

Something about words, communication, something self-referential no doubt, but I can't quite put it together. "The pen is mightier...", perhaps. Or maybe the pen is the sword.

"Punch and Judy", which was the other single from *Fugazi*, actually *looks* like a single. It's a comfortable, marketable 3:18, has an ever-popular subject (a marriage gone bitterly sour! everybody loves those!), and ends with a morally uplifting message ("just slip her these pills and I'll be free"). What more could you ask for?

The album then more or less starts over with the delicate opening of "Jigsaw". It and the next three songs I interpret as parts of the jester's tale. "Jigsaw", which seems like an obvious musical sequel to "Script for a Jester's Tear", is the singer's realization that the relationship will not work, that the pieces that are missing are too valuable (note in the cover picture that the missing piece in the puzzle of the jester is where his heart should be). "Stand straight, look me in the eye and say good-bye" he pleads, yet his song is as much evasion as anything else. "We are renaissance children becalmed beneath the bridge of sighs, / Forever throwing firebrands at the stonework". This is not sober contemplation of their real chances of success, it is a wishful dramatization, an attempt to write them both into a story they are almost certainly not living in, to make them tragic heroes rather than accomplices in their own downfall.

The narrative turns sharply inward on "Emerald Eyes", which seems to be the jester's only-semi-coherent raging against everybody but the real source of his suffering, himself. After exhausting that line of inquiry, he turns on the woman in "She Chameleon", depicting her as a calculating lizard. The truth leaks out again, though, in the brilliant line "As I lay in sweating monologue I sensed the lovelight fade". Paint her picture however he will, the jester can't escape the fact that he is the author of his own misery.

Finally, in "Incubus", he confronts this reality. "I've played this scene before", he admits. "I'm...the producer of your nightmare". Yet, not quite willing to take *all* the responsibility, he insists that she, too has played the scene before. As the song ends they stand there "waiting for the prompt", both paralyzed and unable to act even as they know they are merely playing out a scene they've already gone through many times in both their minds.

The story is left hanging there, however, for now. "Fugazi", the last track, is a sequel to "Forgotten Sons", *Script's* last track. This one is the story of the home that the forgotten sons left behind, and how things are no more peaceful at home than they are at the front. "Do you realize", the singer asks, "this world is totally fugazi?" And, assuredly, it is. ("Fugazi" comes from

some army expression. Presumably it works out to be an acronym for something, but beyond the obvious “fucked up” I can’t tell you exactly what it is supposed to stand for. “Fucked up, generally armed with zero intelligence” has the right letters, anyway, and probably captures the original intent pretty well.) The word “fugazi”, though, takes on a strangely exotic tone, and makes me think of some sort of limbo-stranded demon, which is I think closer to what *Fish* means by it. I also love imagining that Fugazi, the DC straightedge band, took its name from this album, which is a pole away from them musically, but ironically not that far spiritually.

“Fugazi” also has one of Fish’s best couplets, in my opinion: “Sheathed within the Walkman wear the halo of distortion, / Aural contraceptive aborting pregnant conversation”. Ah, how I do cherish these moments inside the man’s rococo mind.

### ***Real to Reel, 1984 CD***

Thinking, perhaps, that Magnum had really hit on something, Marillion too chose to release a live album after only two studio releases. The three *Fugazi* tracks here, “Assassing”, “Incubus” and “Emerald Lies”, sound almost identical to the album versions. *Real to Reel* salvages itself, however, with blistering new-band renditions of “Forgotten Sons” and “Garden Party” that I think are significant improvements on the originals on *Script for a Jester’s Tear* (“Garden Party” in particular seems like a new song in Mosley’s hands), and the two non-album songs “Cinderella Search” and “Market Square Heroes”.

“Cinderella Search” was the b-side to “Assassing”, and that’s exactly what it sounds like. “Market Square Heroes” was Marillion’s first single, and remains one of their greatest songs. I saw them close a show with it on the *Holidays in Eden* tour, ten years a singer and a drummer after they created it, and it still tore the place down. It’s on *B’Sides Themselves* (as is “Cinderella Search”), so you don’t need to get it here, but on the other hand, this is a superb live version, so why not.

I have to admit that before I’d actually seen and heard Marillion play live, their two live albums didn’t seem that overwhelming to me. The band is so precise that their live versions seldom drift very far from the studio originals, they don’t play covers, and they aren’t big on solos, and both live records are produced very cleanly. Now that I’ve seen them, though, I really covet live versions of anything, as the mere label “live” on the cover puts me mentally back in the audience, basking in the glow of their music and the intensity of the crowd. That this is Fish singing, and I’ve only seen them in the Hogarth era, even that seems irrelevant. They are Marillion, they are one of the coolest things

the world has yet to dream up, and I can’t wait until they come around again.

### ***Misplaced Childhood, 1985 CD***

Marillion’s first trilogy concludes with the album that to this day remains both their defining work and in my opinion one of the finest rock albums ever recorded. Where the first two albums mixed songs that were related to the jester’s shadowy tale with those that weren’t, *Misplaced Childhood* is a single continuous strand that both concludes the story and, to an extent, creates it in retrospect. Without *Misplaced Childhood*, the disconnected threads that weave through *Script for a Jester’s Tear* and *Fugazi* wouldn’t form any coherent shape; they need this focused final chapter to give the story narrative critical mass.

*Misplaced Childhood* is what is usually called a “concept album”. That is, it is not a collection of individual songs so much as it is a single album-length musical composition. It does break into sections, but so do Beethoven symphonies. It is *not*, however, a “rock opera”, which is another label commonly applied to any rock record that breaks from the song-collection mold. “Rock opera” implies that the songs relate, episodically and probably sketchily, an underlying (usually linear) narrative, a story that could be told in some other way, and would likely be more *efficiently* told in prose. Opera (opera enthusiasts should skip this under-informed dismissal of their beloved genre) is a highly artificial art form, the level of distancing represented by the translation of the story into stage and music not often improving the work’s communicative ability. “Rock opera” is even further removed; it implies that a story has been turned into an opera, which has then been converted into rock music rather than “opera” music (this conversion is often implicit, of course; you don’t need to actually compose a conventional opera along the way as a transition step). Rock being generally less-suited to narrative-relation than opera (which is saying something), this whole process generally results in a work whose story is completely incomprehensible without a libretto (when this happens in opera the language barrier is usually lamely cited as the excuse), and whose printed story informs its actual music, rather than vice versa.

This album is the reverse of that. While there is something of an underlying chain of events that can be faintly discerned in the background of the song-cycle, the album is not trying to tell that story. *Misplaced Childhood* is *itself* the focus of attention. It is a musical poem in the truest sense, a work of art that could not be told in any other way. Trying to write, in prose, the regrets and pain and caring and nostalgia and bitterness that Fish and the band spin out in both words

and music through this meta-song-trying to write all this in prose would be nearly hopeless. This is not the translation of another work into a musical format, this is an indigenous musical artwork that resists translation into any other *non*-musical medium. Simply sustaining *any* psychological narrative over the course of an entire album is no minor feat in the pop-song environment of this era in recorded music, and *this* narrative can stand, I'm convinced, with the best of any past century.

The album opens, quietly, with the hushed strain of "Pseudo Silk Kimono", a sort of narrator's meta-prologue, announcing that the singer is about to open his heart. The music is mostly a careful keyboard pattern, with subtle bass underscoring and some ambient guitar notes. Fish is restrained, as befits an actor standing at the verge of the stage, in front of the closed curtain, in a single spotlight, introducing the imminent play.

The drama itself bursts forth in stunning brilliance with the most obvious place to begin, the honest love song that the chapters on the first two albums had skirted around. "Kayleigh" is my favorite Marillion song, their biggest hit (#2 in the UK as a single), one of the most beautiful and painful love songs, a moment of the sort that makes life a joy. I won't ruin it for you by explaining the lyrics, except to quote my favorite line, towards the end: "Kayleigh, I'm still trying to write that love song. / Kayleigh it's more important to me now you're gone". This sums up the point of *Misplaced Childhood* as well as anything: it is the singer's attempt to come to terms with things for his *own* benefit. "Getting her back", "proving her wrong", "showing her her mistake", none of these things are even incidental goals; these are the thoughts of a man reassembling a broken life, trying to find the arrangement of available pieces that will produce an operating machine, wondering what such a machine, even if he figures out how to build it, will *do*.

The singer then, wandering through a park, hears a group of children singing a simple, near-nonsense song, and it hits him in just the right mood for him to imagine that *it*, as simple as it is ("Lavender's blue dilly dilly lavender's green, / When I am king dilly dilly / You will be queen."), is the missing love song he'd been trying so hard to fashion. "Lavender", as the song of this song, is itself a beautiful, airy interlude, Steve Rothery's soaring guitar solo helping to turn it from the literal children's song to the singer's *experience* of that song.

Allowing "Lavender" to release the songless tension of "Kayleigh" then frees the narrator of that particular albatross, and allows/forces him to face the exposed reality of his past. "Bitter Suite" begins this process. It is broken into a number of short segments, as if the singer is only able to piece together the old

pain a small section at a time. Through the fragments a picture begins to take shape of a lonely girl, a lonely tryst with a scared prostitute, feelings of loss. It is not clear yet (or, indeed, ever), whether the prostitute is Kayleigh or is another woman who resembles her ("the parallel of you") with whom the singer tries to drown his sorrow, or if this dalliance is what *broke* their relationship. It is possible, even, that this is the singer's imagining of a scene in Kayleigh's life, and that her customer in it isn't him, or that neither of them are really in the story, and he's just trying to write a story that will help him understand the one he *didn't* write.

Whichever it is, by its end I have the sense that the singer has come to at least loose grips with his own culpability, and in "Hearts of Lothian" is going in search of its cause, lingering somewhere in his past. This song, which splits into "Wide Boy" and "Curtain Call", and segues into "Waterhole (Expresso Bongo)", is a brutal portrait of the bravado and emptiness of his (and her) youth, sort of Fish's version of the Jam's "Saturday's Kids".

The story turns personal again in "Lords of the Backstage", in which the singer begins to reconstruct the parts of his love that were noble, the impulses worth remembering. "I just wanted you to be the first one", he repeats, meaning, I think, as much that he wanted her to be his first lover as that he wanted her to be the first to break out of the vicious life-circle that they both grew up in, even though he now knows that she couldn't escape.

The five-part "Blind Curve" is the last spasm of memories before the singer makes his eventual peace with his past. He remembers dead friends, pestering interviewers, suicidal urges, the feeling of having lost his childhood, and then, in the "Threshold" section, begins to compare his pain to the pain of others around him, of the world, measuring his suffering against war widows, famished children, the casualties of a struggle between nations that in the end is virtually indistinguishable, except for the scale, from the Friday night posturing of the wide boys. Borders between people, borders between nations; nations *are* borders between people (note that it is "Perimeter Walk" that brings him to the "Threshold", and note how the borders between these songs aren't drawn sharply).

He wakes from this catharsis of rage into "Childhood's End", where he discovers that "the only thing misplaced was direction", and "there is no childhood's end". "Do you realise", he asks himself, "that you could have gone back to her?" His suffering, you see, was as much part of the story as the lost love; probably his suffering was *more* the story's point. Now that he sees this, even now he could go back to her, but he realizes that this would just pull him back into the same circles again, and from his newly-found, newly-

free perspective, he sees the uniforms and allegiances of his youth as part in miniature of the plague of nations, just more borders being drawn on what should be uninterrupted ground.

Armed with this unearthed truth, the suite charges into its finale, the impassioned new beginning "White Feather", in which the singer resolves to carry Kayleigh's token in lieu of that of a nation, pledging himself to the one thing he has given up, rather than any nation or cause he might be tempted to actually defend, determined to make each decision on its own merits rather than in service of some artificial construct. Not only has he freed himself, but he has found the path that allows him to give Kayleigh a place of honor in his world, even though she herself probably wouldn't understand it. In choosing white as his flag, he has also finally rid himself of the shifting colors of the jester's costume, thus achieving freedom from both his internal and external pressures in one step.

There is, to be sure, an amount of egoism in this (why is *he* the only one able to accomplish this escape, this awakening?), but the egoless aren't prone to expressing their egolessness in art, so we're largely stuck with that. I consider the presentation well-balanced. It ends, after all, only with the singer's resolution, not with any actual accomplishments, so we are explicitly left within his intentions. It is a story of mental deliverance, of an internal awakening, and as such I think it is well-motivated, believable, and affecting. When the band kicks into "I will wear your white feather, / I will carry your white flag, / I will swear I have no nation / 'Cause I'm proud to own my heart", I'm on my feet singing along, caught up in the music, satisfied that for once a rock band has *earned* the right to all the power they can wring out of their instruments.

#### ***Brief Encounter*, 1986 EP**

After a tour of the US in 1986, opening for Rush (god I wish I'd seen that show), Marillion released this five-song sampler in the US in commemoration of their visit. It begins with two otherwise unreleased (at *that* time) tracks, "Lady Nina" and "Freaks", both of which would show up on *B'Sides Themselves* later. "Lady Nina" is another compassion-for-the-prostitute song that I imagine was consigned to b-side-dom (of "Kayleigh") to keep in from confusing the narrative of *Misplaced Childhood*. "Freaks" (the b-side of "Lavender"), too, is tangential to the jester's narrative, a plaintive song summarized by the line "All the best freaks are here / Stop staring at me". Actually, come to think of it, this would make sense as *part* of a jester's story, a jester wondering why, amidst a court of monsters, he is still the center of attentions he doesn't want. I can't see

where it would fit into *this* jester's story, though, and perhaps neither could Marillion. Both songs are terrific, especially the chorus of "Lady Nina", but you'll have a much easier time finding them on *B'Sides Themselves*, as *Brief Encounter* wasn't reissued on CD.

The rest of *Brief Encounter* is a live sample of one song from each of the band's three albums to that point. "Kayleigh" represents *Misplaced Childhood*, and the other two albums' title tracks stand in for them. As I said before, Marillion is something very amazing to *experience* live. Stripping their live performances back down to audio-only, though, puts you more or less back where you started, and you might as well just play the original album. Still, the three live songs here are as good as they get; "Script for a Jester's Tear" is brilliant, "Fugazi" edgy and dynamic, and hearing the crowd sing along with "Kayleigh" invariably brings tears to my eyes. Then again, all three songs are also on the double-live album *The Thieving Magpie*, so except for its value as a collector's item, this EP has nothing unique to demand a vinyl search.

#### ***Clutching at Straws*, 1987 CD**

After the focused brilliance of *Misplaced Childhood*, *Clutching at Straws* comes as an inevitable shift of gears. With a note following each song in the lyric booklet recording the site of its composition, this is as much a collection of individual songs as *Misplaced Childhood* was a single unit. Common lyrical fascinations and the will of the music itself pulls a few of these songs together into clumps ("Hotel Hobbies", "Warm Wet Circles" and "That Time of the Night (The Short Straw)" are close to being a suite, and "Sugar Mice" and "The Last Straw" are its slight return), but on their own they are for the most part pretty insular, at least as Marillion songs go.

Written largely on the road, the lyrics to these songs seem to reveal Fish as sliding into the depths of depression at an alarming clip, the steady diet of hotels and strangers wearing heavily on him. The prefatory quote from Erasmus' *The Praise of Folly* and the wordlessness of the concluding fragment "Happy Ending" do nothing to dispel this illusion. In retrospect, the fact that after this album Fish left the band seems unsurprising.

The opening triptych, all the same, is one of the band's best sustained stretches, nearly rivaling *Misplaced Childhood* itself. Buried in the miseries of lonely hotel rooms, misguided empty love affairs, alcohol and hopelessness, these songs burrow into themselves as if hoping that somewhere in the emptiness, if you embrace it sincerely enough, there is a core of invisible strength. The phrase "warm wet circles" becomes a mantra, a mark of shame that could be a comforting embrace if you'd let it, if only you

could forget the glass of flat beer that left it, the cynical seducer's tongue. Fish and backing vocalist Tessa Niles toss the words back and forth as if neither are eager to say them last.

To emphasize the break after the opening suite, the CD slips its short bonus track, the pretty but depressing "Going Under", in as track 4. The pace picks up again with "Just for the Record", in which a slithering bent-note guitar line from Steve Rothery dances around Fish's voice like a snake trying to charm him.

The album then hits a particularly rich lode with "White Russian" and "Incommunicado". Written in Vienna, "White Russian" reads like a return to "Fugazi" in light of the resolutions of "White Feather". Instead of merely raging at racism and ignorance, this time around Fish tries to be positive, and ask "where do we go from here?". Unfortunately, when no answer presents itself, the question turns desperate, rhetorical, its implied unanswerability a cry of despair despite the best optimistic intentions. "Incommunicado", fleeing from contemplating injustice, is a giddy I-want-it-all meditation on fame, the narrator longing for the kind of fame that would *force* him in to hiding (relieving him of the responsibility for looking out for anybody but himself?). It's also this album's most accessible potential single, the most apparent "hit" to my ears since "Punch and Judy" (I know "Kayleigh" was a hit, but it's really too precious to me for me to think of it that way).

There's another short intermission next, called "Torch Song", and then the first incarnation of Marillion gathers its strength for one final lunge. It begins with the dramatic "Slàinte Mhath", Rothery's chattering guitar rattling against Kelly's purring synthesizer, echoing in the open space of the verses, only to take flight in the soaring chorus, which is one of Marillion's most rapt moments. "Sugar Mice" comes back to earth, back to the reality of a Milwaukee hotel, as if the last six songs have been a feverish dream on a lumpy rented bed. It begins as a road song, but quickly transforms into a character piece, a monologue of a man who has left his family, for what he thinks are noble reasons, only to find that in trying to improve everybody's lives he's hurt them all, and ended up alone at the end of a deserted bar, missing his children, trying to figure out where exactly the mistakes were. The album cover shows the bar as it is in this man's mind, populated by all the Hollywood heroes who ground their promising lives into the scarred wood, their inevitable ends showing in their cardboard frames and haunted eyes. Fish's personality, at this point, has completely overshadowed that of the band, and it's difficult for me to remember that there are any other participants, that the music I'm hearing isn't merely the soundtrack to his weary, but poetic, thoughts.

"The Last Straw", fittingly for a final song, revisits all of this, dragging every shiny pain out one more time before plunging it into the singer's heart, Niles' wailing backing vocals giving voice to a pain that is beyond even Fish to express. "Happy Ending", the last offered hope of rescue from this morbid surrender, proves to be but a single hollow laugh, which does nothing so much as slam the door all the more firmly on the brittle outstretched wrist of hope, smashing its nice, expensive watch.

### ***B'Sides Themselves, 1988 CD***

*Clutching at Straws* was the effective end of the Fish era, but record companies being what they will, it drags along a little longer in practice. The best result of this artificial extension is this collection of b-sides, which assembles in one place an hour of music that you would otherwise have a *very* hard time finding now.

The early epic "Grendel" comes from the 12" version of the band's debut single, "Market Square Heroes". "Charting the Single" was the flip side of "He Knows You Know". "Market Square Heroes", though it *was* a single in its own right, is here credited to its appearance on the 12" of "Punch and Judy", as is "Three Boats Down from the Candy", which was originally the b-side to "Market Square Heroes", if the poster on the wall in *Script for a Jester's Tear's* cover picture can be believed. "Cinderella Search", which was also on *Real to Reel*, was "Assassing"'s 12" b-side. "Lady Nina" and "Freaks", the two tracks from *Brief Encounter*, come from "Kayleigh" and "Lavender", respectively. "Tux On" was the flip side of "Sugar Mice", and the live medley "Margaret" (jumping out of chronological sequence) was on the 12" of "Garden Party".

Spanning the band's first five years as these tracks do, they form a pretty interesting overview of the band. "Grendel", "Charting the Single" and "Margaret" all feature Mick Pointer on drums, and "Market Square Heroes" and "Three Boats Down from the Candy" even have the band's *previous* drummer, John Martyr. Myself, I might have junked "Grendel", or at least not started with it. It's *very* long, and smacks of relative immaturity, and "Market Square Heroes" would have made *such* a riveting beginning to this collection.

Other than that, though, these songs are uniformly essential. "Three Boats Down from the Candy" and "Charting the Single" have a charming awkwardness to them, "Cinderella Search" and "Lady Nina" and "Freaks" are all excellent, and "Tux On" is a fascinating glimpse at a *Clutching at Straws*-era moment that isn't *self*-absorbed. "Margaret", the twelve-minute finale, finds the band romping through their warped prog-rock variant of the traditional Scottish epic "Loch



Lomond", which I think is a marvelous congruence of my musical interests. Georgia, who just walked in as the song got started, looked at the CD player, looked at me, and said "This is horrifying", so I guess you might not find this as captivating as I do, but after all, it is a b-side.

### *The Thieving Magpie*, 1988 CD

The Fish era formally concludes with this double-CD live album. The first disc acts as a best-of for *Script for a Jester's Tear* ("He Knows You Know", "Chelsea Monday", "Script for a Jester's Tear"), *Fugazi* ("Jigsaw", "Punch and Judy", "Fugazi") and *Clutching at Straws* ("Slàinte Mhath", "Sugar Mice", "Incommunicado", "White Russian") and miscellaneous ("Freaks"). The second disk reproduces the *entirety* of *Misplaced Childhood* (the second half of which is marked as CD-only bonus tracks).

On the one hand, whoever picked the tracks for this album took care not to repeat anything from *Real to Reel*. The result of this conscientiousness is that between *Real to Reel* and this, "The Web" and "She Chameleon" are the only songs from the first three albums, combined, that aren't represented in live versions. One could, I guess, buy the two live albums and *Clutching at Straws*, and call the Fish-era covered. I recommend against it, though. As close as the live version of *Misplaced Childhood* is to the record, the album is so close to perfect that falling short by even the smallest amount seems unconscionable. Once you've bought *Misplaced Childhood*, the value argument for getting *The Thieving Magpie* falls apart, and at that point you might as well take the studio route all the way. You'll need "Market Square Heroes" and "Lady Nina", at the very least, so get *B'Sides Themselves* next. I can't really tell you *not* to buy the two live albums, since I obviously did, but when you do, know that you're just doing it out of your love for the band, not because your understanding of Marillion is incomplete in any way without them.

### *Seasons End*, 1989 CD

When Fish left Marillion, I think most of the fraction of the world who gave the matter any thought would have anticipated that that was it for the band. Fish's presence was such a remarkable one, so seemingly central to the band, that it probably seemed hard to imagine that they'd even *consider* carrying on without him. A new band might get formed with many of the same members, but it wouldn't be, *couldn't* be, Marillion. Right?

Dead wrong. As a comparison of *Seasons End* and Fish's debut solo album *Vigil in a Wilderness of Mirrors* proves, at least to me, Fish turns out to have had a

much more minor role in Marillion's music than you might guess. At times I've been even known to claim that *Seasons End* is a *better* album than *Misplaced Childhood*, and though I've currently waffled back to thinking that *Misplaced Childhood* is slightly more amazingly wonderful, *Seasons End* is a very impressive album, in rather a different way.

Trying to literally *replace* Fish would have been futile, and so Marillion didn't. New vocalist Steve Hogarth is a very different sort of singer and writer. First off, he is a much better singer, technically. I continually downplay the importance of technical singing skill in rock music, but in the case of Marillion, the *players* are so adept that Fish's relative roughness was always, if not *problematic*, at least noticeable. Steve Hogarth is a beautiful, expressive singer, and his presence elevates the band, musically, a notch or several.

Secondly, as a lyric writer he (with or without occasional writing partner John Helmer) is not even remotely trying to compete with Fish's dizzying wordsmanship. Fish's facility with machine-gun wordplay and labyrinthine language-pyrotechnics *was* one of the most intriguing things about first-life Marillion, and Hogarth simply (and wisely) lets that go. In exchange, he merely tries to be sincere. It's not that Fish *wasn't* sincere, but Fish's sentiments were always cloaked in their complex explications, and this imposed an unavoidable distance that had to be broken through. Hogarth doesn't hide behind anything, and so doesn't have to break through any self-constructed barriers to reach you. He is also much less self-absorbed, much less depressed, and so much less depressing than Fish could often be, particularly on *Clutching at Straws*.

Lastly, precisely because Hogarth is not such an arresting focus for attention, like Fish was, I think the balance of the band as a whole is much improved by the change. *Misplaced Childhood* and *Clutching at Straws* felt very much like Fish albums, and *Seasons End* both is a solidly Marillion album, and also shows how much the earlier albums really were more than just Fish's doing after all, no matter how central he appeared.

Among the Marillion fan community, opinions on the two singer-eras are predictably mixed. A large faction adores Fish's Marillion (and refers to it as such: "Fish's"), and regards Hogarth-era Marillion as, at best, another band entirely, and at worst as an awful pop perversion of what should have been neo-prog-rock's guiding mastergroup. A second, slightly smaller, faction is content to regard the two eras as separate bands, but thinks that both have their independent merits. A smaller-again third faction persists in thinking of the band as a constant, despite the vocalist change, on the ground that the other four members end up having more to do with the band's sound than the

vocalist does (I usually fall into this camp). The last faction, usually quickly shouted down, insinuate with a grin that with Fish Marillion was hopelessly beholden to early Genesis, and that it's only since Hogarth replaced him that the band really developed a full identity of their own (and, to be fair to this aberrant position, Hogarth does sound *much* less like Peter Gabriel and Phil Collins than Fish did).

Wars on Freaks (the Marillion Internet mailing list) and rec.music.progressive over this topic are frequent and impassioned, so other than acknowledging the various viewpoints, I'll mostly dismiss most of the negative views by fiat, and for the purposes of this book insist that not only is Marillion clearly a single band despite the vocalist change, but that *either* incarnation deserves their spot on my short-list, and that the two eras only combine to make the group more praiseworthy (and, parenthetically, worth two songs in this chapter's soundtrack).

*Seasons End* announces the band's continuing health immediately and unambiguously with the stunning opening track, "King of Sunset Town". A hypnotizing tale of a beggar king who understands the evanescence of both his reign and his realm, it showcases every element of the band's individual and collective skill. Each part has never sounded better, and they've never combined with greater liquidity and impact (does that make this a deuterium water balloon?).

"Easter", the second track, Hogarth described somewhere as originally an attempt to write an anthem for Ireland. It gets sidetracked a little, I think, and in the end doesn't seem quite strongly enough tied to Ireland to qualify, but perhaps if I was Irish I'd think differently. If I were them, though, I'd tweak the words a little and keep the music, because the gentle picked-acoustic-guitar opening is gorgeous, the slow-building middle section is soul-stirring, and when the explosive last section kicks in you've got a fight song hinting at enough pent-up power to turn "Going Down to Liverpool" into a march.

When Fish fanatics slog post-Fish Marillion for writing too many pop songs, I think they are mostly reacting to two catchy sub-four-minute *Seasons End* tracks, the first of which is "The Uninvited Guest", a devilish song about temptation ("I was there when you said insincere 'I love you's to a woman who wasn't your wife / And I fronted you the money that you ran away and blew on the biggest regret of your life") that features some decidedly unrestrained power-chord guitar from Rothery. Me, I think it rocks, and I don't much care how "unproggy" it is.

The title track is next. There has been much debate on whether the title is really supposed to be "Seasons End" (no apostrophe), "Seasons' End" (the end

of seasons in general) or "Season's End" (the end of this season). Having listened to it all, I see no reason to alter the printed punctuation, and so I take "seasons end" to be a complete clause. Of course, none of the *other* song titles are complete clauses, and "seasons' end" is the way that makes most sense in the phrase "Getting close to seasons end", which opens the song, so if you'd rather it that way, be my guest. Any way, the song is an interesting perspective on ozone depletion and global warming, a rare poet's lament rather than an environmentalist's acrimonious rebuke. Oscillating keyboard patterns from Mark Kelly form most of the song's structure, with Steve R., Pete and Ian mostly just giving understated support to Mark and to Steve H.'s vocals.

For variety of subject matter, "Holloway Girl" turns from the global scale to a single women's prison in northern London, and offers a ray of ardent hope to some unfairly imprisoned inmate there. I have no idea whether Holloway Prison is known for imprisoning innocent and promising young women, or whether Steve Hogarth just wandered by one day and hypothesized the scenario, but I did go so far as to locate the jail in my London *A to Z*, with an eye to figuring out whether an A-bomb in Wardour Street would provide effective cover for a jail break. I don't, I would hasten to point out, actually *have* an A-bomb, nor would I really consider using it for such a purpose (the IRA keeps London a bit on the jumpy side, so I didn't want to leave any doubt about that), but even if those things weren't as resoundingly true as they are, Wardour Street and Holloway Prison are on adjoining pages (45 and 61, to be precise), and I'm afraid a bomb there would probably take the prison out in a manner not conducive to any escape that stipulated the survival of the prisoners during the process.

"Berlin" is another song for the "It's *down* already" scrap pile of art inspired by the now-vanished Berlin Wall. Politically-aware artists probably mourn the Wall's destruction with the same strange ambivalence that stand-up comedians felt when Dan Quayle left DC. While it stood, the Wall was an incredibly powerful symbol of separation, Berlin itself a city of (apparently, I've never been there) desperate vitality, the spectacle of an East Berliner essaying the perilous crossing perhaps the ultimate act of media-glare heroism. As Communism failed to live up to its idealistic rhetoric, the Wall turned from keeping the heathen out to keeping the subjugated in, and pressure from the inside is always harder to resist than pressure from the outside, and so it is no more. I have a half-formed song about it that will be hopelessly obsolete by the time I complete it, in which a man who was an East German border guard and shot a man who was trying to cross the Wall, crosses into West Berlin after the Wall comes

down and runs into the man's wife (who *made* it) and her child (finding out that she was pregnant was what prompted their attempted escape), who of course has no father because of what *he* did. The interesting twist in the song is that this border guard wasn't just obeying orders, he *believed* in the Wall, believed in the potential of communism (as opposed to Communism), and sees the Wall's destruction as the final betrayal of noble goals by forces that forever undermined real communism by turning official Communism into such a monster that capitalism seemed the only way out. In his mind, Stalin and Lenin end up being the greatest robber-barons of all, and he's left standing alone on a West Berlin street, heartbroken in the middle of exultant celebration, wondering where in the world a communist is supposed to go now.

Marillion's song, on the other hand, is about the dream of being free, as personified in the person of a tired Berliner bar blonde whose picture is found clutched in the hand of a shot-down escapee. The irony, of course, is that she feels just as imprisoned by her life as he did by his city, and in the end the song mourns for *everybody*.

The next one is the CD bonus track, "After Me", a short but overwhelming evocation of sadness that actually, honestly, really makes me cry. It's over-sentimental, probably, but for some reason the verse "There's a stray dog she feeds / That she found in the street, / And he loves her to hold him / But he won't let her keep him, / And he claws at the door / To be let out at night, / And she makes do without him, / And she worries about him. / She named him after me." really gets to me.

Perhaps in anticipation of this, the next song is one that cheers me up instantly. "Hooks in You"'s text is a somewhat sinister portrait of romantic addiction (or drug addiction cast as a woman), but the title is more appropriate as a description of the music, which is packed full of enough irresistible pop/rock hooks to make Van Halen sound like one of those white noise tapes that are supposed to help you sleep. To the Fish-is-God-ists among Marillion fans, this song establishes beyond a shadow of a doubt that Steve Hogarth is the Anti-Christ. For my part, I hop around the room in uncontrollable glee, forked tongue licking lips excitedly, long red tail slapping against the closet door and then swinging around to knock over my razor, which I plug into the same power-strip as my distortion pedals to recharge, owing to some peculiarities about the way our bathrooms are wired that I think I won't go into just now.

The last song, "The Space..." returns to the mood of "Easter" or "Seasons End", Kelly's sawing synth-strings charting the main course around which the other players dart, building toward the climactic proclamation

"Everybody in the whole of the world / Feels the same inside", which is a pretty optimistic way to end an album for a band whose last album closed with a death-rattle.

Don't you think?

### *Uninvited Guest, 1990 7"*

My single for "Uninvited Guest" is actually a strangely shaped picture-disk that I have to put on the turntable carefully so that the decorative protrusions don't cover up the 12" sensor hole, as the music is only on the innermost seven inches. The flip-side is the non-album track "The Bell in the Sea", a dense song that would have fit in fine on *Seasons End*. In fact, making *it* the bonus track, rather than "After Me", might have given the album a slightly more-palatable overall character to older fans. If it was *twice* as long, and replaced "Hooks in You", too, the loyalists might *really* have shut up. As it is, it's nice but hardly overwhelming, so if you have to wait for the band's next b-sides collection to hear it, I wouldn't fret. On the other hand, this single sure is a cool shape...

### *Easter, 1990 12"*

The 12" for "Easter" uses the 7" edit of that song in order to make room for three live songs. The one on the first side is a spirited, if faithful, rendition of "Uninvited Guest". The flip side is more interesting, as it finds Steve Hogarth beginning to assimilate Fish's territory, doing "Warm Wet Circles" and "That Time of Night". I was very curious, when I went to see Marillion on the *Seasons End* tour, both how Hogarth would handle Fish's material, and how the *crowd* would react to how Hogarth handled Fish's material. Both surprised me. Steve doesn't actually try to *imitate* Fish, of course, but neither does he try to *reinterpret* the songs. He sings 'em with all the reverence of a dedicated fan singing beloved classics. The crowd, for their part, seemed to go out of their way to make Steve welcome, which strengthened the feeling, during the performance of the older songs, that Steve and the audience were experiencing them together, both losing themselves in Fish's familiar tales as if by leaving Marillion Fish had set the stories free, rather than taking them with him.

As a strategic move, the band couldn't have picked better material to begin Hogarth's *recorded* inroads into the back catalog. The trilogy is too charged, too full of emotional attachments, but *Clutching at Straws* is therefore vulnerable, and "Warm Wet Circles"/"That Time of the Night" is its soul. When Steve rips into "So if you ask me where do I go from here, my next destination isn't even that clear", it's clear that everything is going to be just fine. It isn't

Fish, but it's something else, something just as wonderful in its own way (somehow Hogarth defuses some of the song's sadness without actually changing the words), and wonderful things are too far between in this life to let one get away just because it stands where another one used to.

### *Holidays in Eden, 1991 CD*

Marillion's sixth album turns inward, and it did take me several listenings to begin to absorb it, where *Seasons End* appealed to me *instantly*. The first few times I heard it, it seemed *muted*, murky, as if heard from the depths of a dream. The keyboards are mixed lower, and are less often the lead parts; in fact, the album has fewer "lead" parts. It sounded at first like the *cover*, a dark, shadowy picture of an abstract forest at night, featureless creatures peering up at a dim moon. There were a couple of obvious standouts, like "Cover My Eyes (Pain and Heaven)" (which ended up #6 on my 1991 top-ten song list) and "Dry Land", but at the time I wanted it to be another *Seasons End*, or another *Are You Sitting Comfortably?*, even *more* brimming with pop hooks, and it's not that.

It didn't take me very long to re-orient myself, though, and the album ended up #3 on the album list. Between this and Big Country's *No Place Like Home*, which was #2 that year, I felt like 1991 was a very *personal* year. Both *No Place Like Home* and *Holidays in Eden* strike me as quiet triumphs, for reasons that are a lot harder to explain in Marillion's case. I think I admire it even more for the fact that it *isn't* just *Seasons End*, part two, and yet *isn't* *Script for Another Jester's Tear*, either. *Seasons End* proved that there was life after Fish, but *Holidays in Eden* is the album that proves there is *health* after Fish. This is the album that shows that a Marillion with Steve Hogarth fully integrated continues to be a brilliant band with a coherent direction all their own.

You've got to give it a chance, though. Even Matt didn't think that much of it until the band came through St. Louis, where he was going to medical school, just before he left, and then Boston once he'd gotten here, and hearing these songs in concert (along with some pestering on my part) got him to listen to the album more. When *Freaks* does its polls, *Holidays in Eden* invariably comes in last. "Worst Marillion Album" is hardly a terrible fate, though, even if it were true, and I don't think it is.

"Splintering Heart" opens the album. Like "The King of Sunset Town", it starts quietly, fading in slowly enough that I always have to look back to make sure I actually hit Play. And, somewhat like "The King of Sunset Town", it builds to a raging boil by about midway through. "Splintering Heart"'s highs, though,

are much shorter than "The King of Sunset Town"'s, there are only two, and the first is instrumental, rather than vocal. Only on the last verse do the vocal and instrumental releases meet, and even when they do the effect is more like a gale-force storm than the buoyant rhythms of "The King of Sunset Town".

"Splintering Heart" subsides into "Cover My Eyes (Pain and Heaven)", a thoroughly brilliant song that starts out with U2-like guitar-delay and then launches into a riveting two-part chorus whose driving rhythm carries over into the second verse. The way Steve sings the words "pain and heaven" is indescribable, and very much out of Fish's sphere.

The album's one embarrassment, "The Party", is next. An overwrought song about a girl who goes to her first "real" party and gets in a little over her head, it might have been fine if it wasn't invested with such slow, somber drama. As it is, with Kelly's dolorous piano trudging behind Hogarth's too-intense delivery, most of it comes out pretty laughable. It picks up by the end, but not enough to make you forget the beginning.

Recovery is prompt, though, as the next song, "No One Can", is a poignant, soothing song (a love song, actually, but "poignant, soothing love song" sounded too sappy, and it's *not* sappy). For a Marillion song it's disarmingly simple, and their willingness to put their usual intricacies into abeyance for a song is, I think, admirable. They do return immediately, for the title track, where Kelly's organ, piano and synth sounds vie with Rothery's guitar for attention. Keyboard parts form the murmuring of the creatures in the jungle that saps away the narrator's enthusiasm for his home, and the ambivalence over whether the lure of Eden is a good thing or a bad thing for this reason is strong.

"Dry Land" is another great Marillion song. That sounds like a content-less comment, but it's significant because "Dry Land" *isn't* a Marillion song, it's the title track from the album by Steve Hogarth's *previous* band, How We Live, which makes it Marillion's first recorded cover. If you didn't read the fine print here, or the explanation on *A Singles Collection*, or hear Hogarth explain it on a video, or hear the original, though, you'd never know. "No One Can" and "Dry Land" make a perfect pair, the former showing that Steve is now as much part of the writing process as the performing.

"Waiting to Happen" is another start-slow-and-build song, beginning with strummed acoustic guitar and a sort of monkey-grinder/flute synth part, which quickly gives way to a chorus that is probably the album's most powerful moment, leading to the line "I have waited to feel this / For the whole of my life". It does this cycle twice, in fact, and if you hit the

backwards button right before it actually finishes, you can hear it four times!

The eighth track is next. The eighth track of *Seasons End* was "Hooks in You", and "This Town" is *Holidays in Eden*'s answer to it, crashing into motion with a siren's wail, and not letting up for a moment. If you didn't like "Hooks in You", this isn't likely to be much more to your taste, even though the end does break out of 4/4 for a bit, before sliding into the brief "The Rake's Progress".

"The Rake's Progress" serves as an opportunity to catch your breath, straighten your clothes, and regain your composure in general, because "This Town" isn't the way the album ends. "100 Nights", which is the conclusion, is a flowing finale that recapitulates the album quite well, and recalls "The Space..." enough that, as with "Splintering Heart" and "The King of Sunset Town", the comparison makes the relative restraint of "100 Nights" all the more apparent. The final phrase, though, "But while you're out there playing you see / There's something you should know: / She spends your money on me", is just barbed enough to recall "Uninvited Guest", and remind you that *Holidays in Eden* is Marillion firmly in control of their own art. The reprise of "This Town" that closes out the track is like the last flashes of a dream that go through your head, right after you wake up, right before your mind dumps you out into the real world, searching for the snooze button on the alarm clock.

#### **Cover My Eyes (Pain and Heaven), 1991 CD5**

In the world of Marillion, fortunately, there *is* a snooze to postpone the end of *Holidays in Eden* with: singles. In fact, there are several of them. The single for "Cover My Eyes" includes that song, "The Party" (should have been a non-album track!), and an oddly rock-and-roll song called "How Can It Hurt". "How Can It Hurt" is pretty out of character for Marillion, and intriguing for just that reason. The US release of *Holidays in Eden* actually adds it and the *No One Can* b-side "A Collection", so if you don't have the album yet, or were patient or poor enough not to spring for the import as soon as it came out, you can skip this single. I don't recall where in the sequence "How Can It Hurt" went, but I can't think of anywhere to put it where it wouldn't do bizarre things to the flow of the record. Before "This Town" is the best place I can think for it, since "This Town" is a mood-shift anyway.

#### **No One Can, 1991 CD5**

"A Collection" is pretty, but slight, more or less just Steve Hogarth and an acoustic guitar, though the rest of the band thinks of noises to make in the background. It, too, is on the US version of *Holidays in*

*Eden*. This single has its own justification even so, as the third track (besides the album version of "No One Can") is a live version of "Splintering Heart" recorded while *Holidays in Eden* was still very much in construction, at a tiny pub near the studio at a gig whose motivation I have forgotten (but which is explained in the video *From Stoke Row to Ipanema*). Marillion's previous tendency for their live versions to be indistinguishable from their studio versions is beginning to dissolve, and this rendition of "Splintering Heart" is different enough from the finished version they eventually arrived at that this single is worth a small quest for the dedicated fan.

#### **Dry Land (clear vinyl), 1991 10"**

"Dry Land", for some reason, produced a plethora of single formats. The strangest is this clear-vinyl 10", which comes in a striking, if not-very-functional, foldout cover. B-side fodder for this array comes from an *acoustic* (well, acoustic guitars *and* keyboards, but no drums) Borderline appearance that the band had the foresight to tape. This disk features *Holidays in Eden*'s "Waiting to Happen", *Seasons End*'s "Easter", and the *Clutching at Straws* song "Sugar Mice". The acoustic settings suit all three songs surprisingly well, and the crowd's emotional singalong on "Sugar Mice" (the *whole* thing, not just the chorus) makes you wonder whether Marillion really even *needed* a new singer to perform the old songs with. People in the audience can be heard spontaneously losing their minds during all three songs, and I can't say I blame them.

#### **Dry Land (picture disk), 1991 12"**

As if obeying some unwritten rule that in the digital age all vinyl releases must be strange in some way, the *other* version of the single for "Dry Land" is a 12" picture disk. Besides yet another copy of the album version of "Dry Land", this one adds three more songs from the Borderline gig, "Holloway Girl" and "King of Sunset Town" from *Seasons End* and a cover (Marillion's *second* cover) of the Who's "Substitute". The band is sort of hedging their bets by making their first cover of something nobody is likely to have heard before, and their second an acoustic-set excerpt, but still, it shows that they're opening their minds.

Both the *Seasons End* tracks sound great in this abbreviated form. "The King of Sunset Town", in particular, holds up much better without the drums and electricity than I would have expected. Hogarth's goes completely berserk to compensate, though, and that more than makes the difference. I'd say this is the single most important of the Borderline tracks to hear, which makes it a shame it didn't make it to the CD single. The "Substitute" cover is also something of any

eye-opener for anybody who might have figured Marillion couldn't play a solid rock song. It doesn't sound quite like the Who, of course, but I don't think Townshend or Daltrey would be horrified.

### ***Dry Land*, 1991 CD5**

The CD format of this single is very disappointing. Besides two versions of "Dry Land" (the album version and an unneeded "edit"), it picks "Holloway Girl" and "Easter" from the possible array of *Borderline* tracks. Not only do I not understand why it needed to pick tracks that also appeared on the vinyl versions, but even given that premise, these two would have been my *last* picks out of the six available. "King of Sunset Town" and "Sugar Mice" would have been my choices if I could only have two, preferably with "Substitute" tossed in in place of the "Dry Land" edit. Oh well, nobody asks me. Yet.

### ***A Singles Collection*, 1992 CD**

If you don't know anything about Marillion, the band celebrated its ten anniversary by providing you with an ideal introduction. Subtitled "Six of One, Half-Dozen of the Other", this collection has six songs from each of the band's singer-eras, with a couple bonuses thrown in for good measure. Fish's four albums are represented by the singles "Garden Party" (from *Script*), "Assassing" (from *Fugazi*), "Kayleigh" and "Lavender" (from *Misplaced Childhood*), and "Warm Wet Circles" and "Incommunicado" (from *Clutching at Straws*). Hogarth's tenure is represented by "Easter", "Uninvited Guest" and "Hooks in You" (from *Seasons End*), and "Cover My Eyes", "No One Can" and "Dry Land" (from *Holidays in Eden*). Those dozen are supplemented with the new song "I Will Walk on Water", and a cover of Rare Bird's "Sympathy".

Several of the songs are different from the album versions, and so merit a little elaboration. "Lavender" is the most extreme difference, as the single extends the album's minute or so into a nearly four-minute song. As Mark Kelly notes in his liner blurb for the song, making songs longer wasn't usually Marillion's problem. "Assassing", too, comes out longer as a single than on the album (I *told* you I didn't understand it), and was remixed for single release. "Warm Wet Circles" and "Garden Party" are also different mixes, with "Garden Party" being dramatically changed by the remix, for the better I think.

Of the new songs, "I Will Walk on Water" is catchy and upbeat, though I probably wouldn't have put it on a best-of on its own merits, and I confess that I don't share Steve Hogarth's fascination with "Sympathy". Still, between these two and the remixes, and the extensive liner notes, there is more than

enough here to keep an existing fan entertained. For the new fan, I'm not sure the selection is *perfect* (it's only singles, after all), and you could argue that the songs/album ratio favors Hogarth over Fish rather heavily, but as a broadstroke introduction to the band's entire career, I think this collection does a great job. I have a pet peeve about compilations that *aren't* arranged in chronological order, so if you want to hear it they way I would have ordered it, program your CD player for 8, 6, 2, 12, 4, 10, 3, 5, 7, 1, 9, 11, 13, 14.

### ***No One Can* (1 of 2), 1992 CD5**

Believing, I guess, that "No One Can" hadn't *quite* had all the sales milked out of it yet, Marillion put out a pair of singles for it as an *A Singles Collection* track. This one, the first, has 1992 acoustic versions (recorded at Marillion's own studio, The Racket Club) of "Cover My Eyes" and "Sugar Mice". The piano rendition of "Cover My Eyes" is spellbinding, Hogarth sounding positively transported. "Sugar Mice", done with acoustic guitar and just a little synthesizer and bass, is equally magical, and almost makes up for leaving the *Borderline* version of the song off the CD5 for "Dry Land". The second disc has a "remix" of "Cover My Eyes", and "Sympathy" (the album version, I *think*), which seemed like a low enough return on investment that I didn't bother with it.

## **Fish**

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### ***Vigil in a Wilderness of Mirrors*, 1990 CD**

Fish's debut solo album resolves completely any doubt I might have had about where the *musical* inspiration in Marillion resided. Not in Fish.

On paper, this album looks phenomenal. The supporting cast, including Mark Brzezicki on drums, John Giblin on bass (neatly linking three of my four favorite artists!), and Carol Kenyon and Tessa Niles on backing vocals, is impeccable. Fish has a new logo, Mark Wilkinson's cover and liner illustrations are fantastically detailed; all pieces are in place for an intricate masterpiece that would transcend whatever limitations there were that Fish was chafing at in Marillion.

It doesn't happen. Fish and keyboardist Mickey Simmonds prove utterly unequal to the task of writing music to stand up to Fish's lyrical aspirations, and there isn't a single song on this album, with the possible exception of parts of "View from a Hill", that doesn't leave me feeling twinges of pain. Fish is too exposed, too isolated, and the vocal contortions that worked so well with the rest of Marillion behind him seem awfully

pretentious left on their own in these quieter, *weaker* settings. By the last track, "Cliché", even his knack for lyrics seems to have abandoned him.

A very sad disappointment.

### *Internal Exile*, 1991 CD

Fish's second album is a huge improvement on his debut. He recruits Chris Kimsey, who produced *Misplaced Childhood* and *Clutching at Straws*, to apply a little of the old sonic magic to it, and whether it's Chris' doing, Fish's, or new guitarist and co-writer Robin Blount, *somebody* breathes a volume of new life into this record. Admittedly, it's life of a sort that sounds, for the most part, like a conscious Marillion impersonation, but damn it, that's the sort of music that seems to suit Fish best. "Shadowplay" and "Credo" open the album in fine style, the latter sounding alarming like "White Feather" at times (I keep expecting the next line to be about hitting the street back in '81).

"Just Good Friends (Close)" and "Favourite Stranger" form a short slump, but "Lucky" recovers, something of a cross between "Tux On" and a distillation of *Clutching at Straws'* woes. "Dear Friend" is a dip, "Tongues" another rise, in my opinion. High points notwithstanding, though, it isn't until the last two songs on this album that Fish shows any sign of having greater potential than half-formed rehashing of his Marillion days. For the first of these, "Internal Exile", he acquires the services of three members of Scottish band Capercaillie, and the Celtic march air that their fiddle, whistle and accordion lend both finally deliver on the liner notes' claim that "this album was inspired by my country", and finally give Fish an effective musical setting that *doesn't* sound like it was cribbed wholesale from listening to his old band's albums. When the band kicks into the whirling instrumental finale, I begin to think that they've *really* hit on something. My standing opinion of Capercaillie, that they could be a great rock band if they'd just take off their traditionalist blinders, is manifesting itself here, I'm aware, but the synergy seems remarkable.

The last song is actually a cover of an old Thunderclap Newman song, "Something in the Air". That isn't the remarkable part, though. Fish's *arrangement* of it, using programmed percussion and a bagpipe-y keyboard sound, is fascinating, especially coming on the heels of "Internal Exile". The drum-machine is another touch that doesn't owe anything to Marillion, and I think it works well (though I remind you that I like drum-machines).

*Internal Exile* still isn't an album I can wholeheartedly admire or recommend, but it shows

enough improvement and promise that I'm not going to give up on Fish for a while yet.

### *Songs from the Mirror*, 1993 CD

What, Fish *perverse*? *Fish*? Naw. There must be some other reason for this inexplicable album entirely of covers that appeared to fill the time between *Internal Exile* and *Suits*.

Here, apparently driven by some internal urge, Fish covers: the Moody Blues' "Question", the Sensational Alex Harvey Band's "Boston Tea Party", Pink Floyd's "Fearless", the Kinks' "Apeman", Argent's "Hold Your Head Up", a Sandy Denny song called "Solo", Genesis' "I Know What I Like", T. Rex's "Jeepster" and David Bowie's "Five Years".

I don't know what else to say about this album. Fish does a decent job with all of these tracks. I don't know *why* he does it, to begin with (and reading between the lines in the liner notes I suspect that a *bunch* of people didn't quite get it), but what difference does *that* make?

## Europeans

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### *Recognition*, 1983 EP

Watching *From Stoke Row to Ipanema*, Marillion's video-documentary of the *Seasons End* tour, listening to Steve Hogarth explain some of his past, I was stunned to hear him say that he was once in a band called the Europeans. "I've got a Europeans record!" I shrieked to nobody in particular (Georgia hates Marillion, so I was watching by myself, you see), and I dashed into the music room to retrieve it. Sure enough, "Steve Hogarth: keyboards, lead vocals ('Kingdom Come'), vocals". I'd never made the connection, mostly because the Europeans regular lead singer, Ferg Harper, sounds nothing like Hogarth, and the band as a whole sounds nothing like Marillion, but I was gratified to see that the one song on this EP that I always thought was *really* remarkable, "Kingdom Come", was the one track Hogarth sang lead on.

Though the Europeans, if my efforts to locate *other* of their records are any indication, were painfully obscure, you wouldn't know it from the personnel on this album. Vic Coppersmith-Heaven produces, and the additional-vocalist list includes Carol Kenyon, Kiki Dee and Toni Childs. Even so, the closest thing to widespread Europeans recognition in my awareness was an appearance on *Beavis and Butthead* of some of the middle (i.e., not the credits) of the video that a fragment of appears on *From Stoke Row...*, which the duo

pronounced the worst thing they'd ever seen (it *did* look pretty ridiculous).

The six songs on this EP are a pretty strange sample. The first side ("A-E-I-O-U", "Recognition" and "Innocence") sounds like double-speed Bauhaus remixes. "Spirit of Youth" reminds me of The Expression. "American People" *starts* to, as well, but hits an unexpectedly beautiful chorus. This leads into "Kingdom Come", a haunting, quiet epic that doesn't sound like the other songs at *all*. I first heard it around the time of Echo and the Bunnymen's "Ocean Rain", and REM's "Camera", and those three songs are forever linked in my mind, songs that take the profoundest silences and twist them into a dimension where silence is not a lack of sound, but an emotion, a cusp of experience when all the *noise* goes away, and everything that remains fits together, harmonizes, perfectly. Steve Hogarth's angelic vocals and ethereal keyboards carry it.

## How We Live

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### *Dry Land*, 1987 CD

Steve and Europeans guitarist Colin Woore went on to form How We Live (Hogarth taking over vocal duties), who released this album and a few singles, to no noticeable acclaim. I'd never heard of them, and didn't expect to ever hear this, but one of the Freaks tracked down a *box* of these CDs to the Dutch Marillion Fan Club (lord knows how *they* got them), and mediated a bulk-purchase for a bunch of eager mailing-list members (thanks, Bill!), and so to my surprise I have this CD after all.

*Dry Land* sounds, surprisingly, like about a midpoint between the Europeans and *Holidays in Eden*. Steve's instincts are apparent, though the arrangements here tend towards upbeat post-New-Wave-y synth pop. Many songs are merely fun ("The Rainbow Room" raises "fun" to "irresistible"), but a few are frighteningly close to Marillion-level grandeur. "Games in Germany" is an amazing synthesis of "Forgotten Sons" and "Berlin", and the original version of "Dry Land" sounds so much like Marillion's that it's no wonder Steve claims to see ghosts when he sings it.

The *most* amazing thing, to me, is that Marillion evidently signed Steve up without ever *hearing* this record. You'll probably have a hard time finding a copy, but if you do run across one, it makes a fascinating appendix to the Marillion story.

## IQ

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IQ was the other band that Matt steeped me in the summer we lived together. He picked a good time for it, because 1987-89 was the one narrow window during which one could acquire *any* IQ recordings in the US, thanks to the band's short lived tenure (*Nomzamo* and *Are You Sitting Comfortably?*) on Polygram-distributed Squawk. Georgia and my '92 London trip netted me the first two albums, and the rest I have the ever-resourceful Ranjit to thank for.

### *Tales from the Lush Attic*, 1983 CD

IQ's first two albums were a bit of a shock when I first put them on. Compared with the third and fourth, which were my introduction to the band, these two seemed extremely obtuse and meandering. Where the Squawk albums were *neo*-progressive, much more in the later-Marillion mode, the first two are *old*-style neo-progressive (parse *that*), with a much greater propensity for long, florid instrumental interludes and a belligerent lack of pop hooks. *Tales from the Lush Attic* opens with the twenty-one minute sojourn "The Last Human Gateway", by comparison with which the eight- and fourteen-minute songs "Awake and Nervous" and "The Enemy Smacks" seem positively succinct. The two actual short songs, "Through the Corridors (Oh Shit Me!)" and "My Baby Treats Me Right 'Cause I'm The Hard Lovin' Man All Night Long" (a two-minute piano instrumental, don't let the title fool you) practically disappear in this context.

It's taken me a while, but I *can* now listen to *Tales* pleurably. I have to be in a patient mood, as these songs take their own sweet time getting anywhere, and Georgia has to be not around, because this stuff drives her crazy, but either these songs are better-constructed than I initially gave them credit for, or else with enough repetition they become familiar enough that their randomnesses *seem* to become intentional.

All copies of this and *The Wake* in circulation appear to be bootlegs, so if you know somebody with a copy (other than me), my usual principled objection to taping it is waived. Don't listen to it first, though, as that might dissuade you from committing the cassette, and then it won't have the chance to grow on you.

### *The Wake*, 1984 CD

The second album, *The Wake* (actually, there was an album *before Tales...*, called *Seven Songs into Eight*, or something like that, but I think it was only ever available on cassette, and the masters have now been lost, so I generally pretend that it never existed), is quite a bit more accessible than *Tales...* The average



track length skids down to about seven minutes, with a couple near four and two near nine being the outliers. Melodies abound (though they don't quite *dominate* just yet), and the gratuitous keyboard digressions are kept to a decent minimum. "The Wake" and "The Thousand Days" are nearly single material, Paul Cook's measured, pounding drums on the former and the "I'm storming the angels" chorus on the latter definitely my favorite moments on this album.

The acquisition notes from *Tales...* apply to this, as well. I suspect that most people who have one of these two albums have both. They won't fit, together, on a 90-minute tape, but if you get a 100 and leave "Headlong" off of *The Wake's* side, they should fit fine.

### ***Living Proof*, 1985 CD**

Released on IQ's own Giant Electric Pea label (that's right, the band actually gets money if you buy this!), this is a recording of a 1985 British TV appearance that originated as a bootleg, which the band recaptured and cleaned up for official release. The band was rehearsing for the *The Wake* tour at the time, and this (combined with, I suspect, worries about the attention span of a TV audience) biases the song selection towards the band's shorter songs. "Awake and Nervous" is the only track from *Tales from the Lush Attic*, but they play everything from *The Wake* except for "Headlong" and "Dans le Parc du Chateau Noir", and toss in the non-album tracks "It All Stops Here" and "Just Changing Hands".

Considering the complexity and length of IQ songs, the band's obvious ability to render them in concert is pretty amazing, and reason enough to get this album, if you have the chance. The two non-album songs are also worth hearing, though "It All Stops Here" also appears on *Nine in a Pond is Here* and *J'ai Pollette D'arnu*. Plus, if you taped the first two, here's your chance to send the band some money.

### ***Nine in a Pond Is Here*, 1989 CD**

My copy of this CD is a picture disc with literally no further information than the band name, title, track listing, and times. The story, as best I've been able to gather secondhand, is that these are rehearsal tapes from the band's preparation for another tour, very shortly after new vocalist P.L. Menel replaced the departed Peter Nicholls. Opinions divide on the two singers (a miniature of the Fish/Hogarth wars), but I tend to prefer Menel, at least based on the relative strengths of the first four studio albums. Hearing him singing some of the older IQ songs is thus a welcome twist. The performances here also have a raw, sloppy vitality to them that I find quite charming.

The eight tracks split pretty evenly between *Tales...* ("The Last Human Gateway", "Awake and Nervous"), *The Wake* ("Outer Limits", "The Wake"), non-album tracks ("It All Stops Here" again, "Fascination" and "IQ"), and a completely bizarre "Glenn Miller Medley". Evidently the vinyl release of this album had a *fourth* side, not included here, that was even more bizarre and unlistenable than the medley, and rec.music.progressive consensus seems to be that the CD is better off without it.

### ***Nomzamo*, 1987 CD**

IQ's second era begins with *Nomzamo*. The parallels between IQ and Marillion are remarkably close: both Fish and Peter Nicholls were well-liked and considered essential. Both Steve Hogarth and Paul Menel are technical improvements, but alienated a large number of the band's original fans. Both bands, after switching singers, made a couple of albums that were considered much less Progressive than their predecessors.

In this, as well as everything else, IQ seems destined to travel in Marillion's shadow. Though Nicholls and Fish have certain vocal similarities, as do Hogarth and Menel, Fish and Hogarth are definitely further extremes of each type. Where Marillion's course changes seem to have been self-imposed, label pressures evidently played a large part in IQ's increased accessibility. Label-driven or not, this incarnation of IQ is the real one to me, and I consider *Nomzamo* and *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* to be two of the most magical albums that Marillion *didn't* make.

*Nomzamo* opens (and closes) with "No Love Lost", which resurrects the deliberate drumming of "The Wake" and pairs it with a soaring vocal performance from Menel. Guitarist Mike Holmes and keyboardist Martin Orford provide solid support without, for once, leading the song off on tangents for their own purposes. People who *prefer* long instrumental sidetracks in their music will find this whole section of IQ's career very disappointing, but for people like me for whom music is basically supposed to have *singing*, the change is welcome.

"Promises (As the Years Go By)", next, is a catchy pop-song that I have to imagine *could* have been a big hit among left-over Journey and Styx fans, who probably wouldn't have noticed how much *better* the song was than those bands', only that the singer has a high voice, the band uses lots of synthesizers as well as guitars, and it's a nice mid-tempo suitable for necking or that part of your parties when you want more people to be eating than dancing. "Nomzamo", on the other hand, with its six-beat measures and dry percussion, would go right over their heads, so maybe it's just as

well that "Promises" wasn't a huge hit after all. It's tempting to associate "Nomzamo" with "Fugazi", as both titles sound like invented words with "z"s in them. In fact, I think I will.

"Nomzamo" strikes me very much as IQ's "Fugazi". Not only do both titles sound like invented words with "z"s in them, but the songs are similarly angular, and they even deal with somewhat similar themes. Where "Fugazi" is angry and part-despairing, though, "Nomzamo" is more thoughtful and questioning. "If we believe that we are what we leave, / I left a hope - What did you?", Menel asks, toward the end. For the longest time I couldn't tell if the word "Nomzamo" represented a place, a person, a philosophical state, or something else. It could easily have been all of those, or perhaps Greek for "Inflatable Emu", but I didn't need to know what it meant to see why they made it the title track. (Matt, after reading the first draft of this book, recalled that it was Winnie Mandela's middle name, or something of the sort. A trip to the library fleshed this theory out: before her marriage, her name was Nomzamo Winifred. This fact makes the song a lot *clearer*, but doesn't necessarily improve it.)

"Still Life" is a little bit on the listless side for my taste, but "Passing Strangers" is a giddily upbeat pop confection, with delicious backing vocals from P.L., Martin, bassist Tim Esau and extra voice Mickey Groome. Like "Hooks in You" on *Seasons End*, "Passing Strangers" is a touchstone for everybody who hates the fact that IQ is now making short pop songs, but when a band can make short pop songs *this good*, I really think everybody should shut up and let them.

Besides, the next song, "Human Nature", is an IQ epic in the grand old style. Menel fits into the longer format splendidly, and I like "Human Nature" better than the older songs, even for the sort of thing that they all are. It helps, I admit, that *Nomzamo* comes with lyrics, which make it easier for me to feel like I'm actually following the song. ("The Last Human Gateway" simply won't all fit into my head at once without some kind of aid, and my not-very-deluxe MSI Distribution *Tales...* packaging offers no such assistance.) When "Human Nature" gets to the last verse, and Menel sings "It goes from great to grand, / Falls into place like something that we planned, / When you curl your arms around my frame / Or curl your lips around my name", I actually feel like it's the conclusion of an emotional explanation that I was just listening to, rather than simply the end of the song.

"Screaming" speeds up again, brassy synth stabs animating the chorus' "When I take my dying breath / You'd better bet your life I'm going out, / Screaming, / Like I came in now, / Screaming". The album proper then ends with the haunting World War I ballad

"Common Ground", the line "We are fighting to turn No-Man's Land into a common ground" capturing both the war's (and war's, in general) noble aims and its ultimate irony.

The CD adds two more songs. "Colourflow" is a touching, cool-ly jazzy, emotional duet between Menel and Jules (whoever that is; presumably it's not Joolz). The CD concludes (and having only ever heard this on CD I can't imagine the album ending any *other* way) with a stunning piano-and-vocal-only version of "No Love Lost", Martin Orford's unadorned piano proving as effective a setting for Menel's dramatic delivery as the full band, at least in this case. It's a moving end to a powerful, moving, inviting, involving and exciting album.

### *Are You Sitting Comfortably?*, 1989 CD

And compared to *Are You Sitting Comfortably?*, *Nomzamo* is a restrained, reluctant slow evolution from IQ's former selves. *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* was #2 on my 1989 top ten album list (after only *Seasons End*), and the opening track, "War Heroes", was #2 on the song list, right behind "The King of Sunset Town". Long-time Rush producer Terry Brown produces this album, and under his direction the band seems to fully embrace their newfound power for channeling their instrumental and compositional virtuosity into riveting pop/rock exaltations.

"War Heroes" is a sequel of sorts to "Common Ground", stepping for a moment inside the confused mind of a soldier, who *wants* his actions to be the unambiguous heroisms that war is (or, I guess, used to be, since it's been quite a while now since anybody has gone on about the glory of war with any sort of sincerity) portrayed as being composed of, yet realizes even as he fights that the only people who will view what he does as such were the people who painted the shining pictures in the first place, illusions of a reality that *they* have obviously stopped seeing.

"Drive On" executes an interesting perspective shift and, modulo actual guns, shows the emotions of a boy in the invaded town. He, too, wants to believe in the situation's glorious facade, and the town's frightened reaction to the stranger crushes him. His longing to escape fills "Drive on, drive on... / I want to go to Paradise" with desperate hopelessness. I wish I could figure out how the last couplet "If I'm worth having / I'm worth waiting for" fits into this interpretation.

The wryly titled instrumental "Nostalgia" acts as an introduction to "Falling Apart at the Seams", which is one of the only two songs on this album that old IQ fans will probably identify with. I love the part about his landlord's brothers coming to throw him out.

"Nostalgia"/"Falling Apart at the Seams" ten minutes are soon gone, though, and the next two songs, "Sold on You" and "Through My Fingers", are brilliantly exuberant pop, complete with the chorus lines "Melanie won't run-run-runaway" and "Girl with the summer tan...". These two tunes make me *very* happy, and the lyrics aren't nearly as empty as they might appear on a first scan. They are in the pop argot, but touches of wit ("You're one in a million, / You'll always come first; / All the zeros follow you.") and honest feeling ("All I wanted to see was you / Coming home to me") salvage them from the usual girls-and-cars junkpit. Plus, check out Tim Esau's intense fretless bass work on "Through My Fingers".

"Wurensh" is the other long song. It's a tribute to the band's growing skill and Terry Brown's production, and a warning to older fans, that this song doesn't seem to me so much a prog-epic like IQ's older songs as it does a pop song that has somehow grown larger and more complex than anybody thought pop songs could grow. It's an amazing song, I think, but amazing in the way that "Sold on You" is, a song with the rare power to hold a three-minute attention for ten. Of course, that's me saying that, who likes to think of myself as having an attention span closer to ten minutes than to three, but still, "Wurensh" seems remarkably devoid to me of those sections where I imagine the band saying, while writing it, "And then we'll jam for a while".

"Nothing At All", the last song, reminds me of "Colorflow", except that it isn't a duet, it's not jazzy, and it's about finding heaven in dreams, not sharing. But other than those differences, it reminds me of "Colorflow" a lot. Plus, I had to look up "Deucalion and Pyrrha" (Greek mythology: the only people spared when Zeus flooded the world; lobbed rocks over their shoulders to create a new race), and I'm always impressed by rock songs that make me look things up.

### *J'ai Pollette D'arnu, 1990 CD*

Ostensibly in memory of the band's deceased bass player (I can't make heads or tails of the liner notes on this subject, and assume that they are a joke, or refer to some sort of inanimate object or possibly an animal), this incomprehensibly named disc is a collection of rare and live tracks. The first four are of the nominally-rare sort, though rough versions of "It All Stops Here" and "Intelligence Quotient" were on *Nine in a Pond Is Here* (and "It All Stops Here" is on the live album *Living Proof*), and "Dans le Parc du Chateau Noir" is on my copy of *The Wake*. "Sera Sera", on the other hand, is new to me, having been intended for a 12" of "Drive On" that never got made.

The last four tracks are live recordings from around Britain in April 1989. The first is a very-compressed oldies medley of "The Last Human Gateway", "Outer Limits", "It All Stops Here" and "The Enemy Smacks" (at least, the credits *claim* it covers all those songs, in under fifteen minutes). The remainder are "Common Ground" and "Promises", from *Nomzamo*, and "Wurensh" from *Are You Sitting Comfortably?*. These sound terrific, particularly "Common Ground". The CD as a whole is still pretty odd, but by now I've gotten pretty used to buying odd IQ releases.

### *Ever, 1993 CD*

As I write Fish has yet to rejoin Marillion, but after IQ and Squawk parted company, IQ and Paul Menel *also* went their separate ways, and the band replaces him with none other than their original vocalist, Peter Nicholls. Tim Esau also seems to have vanished along the way (too many jokes about dead bass players, maybe) (or maybe they weren't jokes), and is replaced by John Jowitt, who also plays in Martin Orford's *other* band, Jadis. Guitarist Mike Holmes produces the album. *Ever* is exactly what you might expect from a band who were dumped by their pop-aspirant label, rehired their old singer, and declined to retain an outside producer. The lessons (both good and bad) from *Nomzamo* and *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* inform their original musical impulses, and produce a hybrid album that I find very satisfying, if not *quite* as thrilling as the previous two. In a very competitive (and Marillion-less) 1993, *Ever* just managed to inveigle its way into a tie for the last spot on the album list (with Fugazi! (the band)).

As much as I was sad to see Paul Menel go, Peter Nicholls sounds a good deal better than when he left (when he already sounded pretty decent, mind you), and though this album has two over-ten-minute tracks to lure the prog-disciples back, it shares an important characteristic with *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* in that it never seems to wander. Even "Further Away", the longest song, makes good use of solid structure and memory-prodding theme recapitulation to hold together extremely coherently.

It also has a couple songs that could easily be Menel-era leftovers. "Out of Nowhere" has a great guitar crunch, "Leap of Faith" is slow and gentle like "No Love Lost", and "Came Down" is another song that I insist on associating with "Colorflow" despite a dearth of actual musical similarities.

IQ isn't going to get famous on the strength of their own label's distribution, however; I have yet to see a single Giant Electric Pea release on an American record-store shelf, even ones with normally-strong importing, and though I did see a copy or two of *J'ai*

*Pollette D'arnu* around Amsterdam on my trip there in '93, Holland is something of a prog-rock oasis. It's a shame, and it's depressing to have one of one's favorite bands unable even to quit their day jobs (I mean, presuming they would *want* to; I *like* my day job), but hard-to-get IQ albums are certainly better than no IQ albums. Let's just hope Ranjit never goes out of business.

## Pallas

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### *Knightmoves to Wedge, 1986 CD*

Pallas is actually *another* band Matt introduced me to, this time by the sneaky tactic of getting me to order this CD from Ranjit for him, and then not coming around to get it for long enough that I went ahead and listened to it myself, at which point I had to order another copy. Pallas falls somewhere between IQ and Magnum, stylistically. This CD is a reissue of the album *The Wedge* that adds the songs from *The Knightmoves 12*". The liner notes don't point out which tracks are which, so I don't know.

I don't have much to say about it. It's not going to change your mind about neo-Progressive rock one way or the other, but in the same sorts of moods in which Magnum records sound like the greatest things ever invented, Pallas sounds pretty damn good to me. They aren't quite as talented as IQ, in my unsolicited opinion, but they have stronger rock instincts, and if you squint your ears just right this sounds like the course that IQ *could* have followed if the two Squawk albums had been really successful. The squeezed, goose-honking guitar sound on "Throwing Stones at the Wind" is also one of the coolest things I've ever heard.

## various

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### *SI Magazine Compilation Disc, 1991 CD*

*SI Magazine* is the printed voice of Holland's prog-rock haven. This compilation disc commemorates the tenth anniversary, and 100th issue, of that magazine, by assembling a 14-track summary of the state of European "progressive and melodic rock" (as they describe it). Included are tracks by Brassé, Pendragon, Landmarq, The Last Detail, Tracy Hitchings, Oblique, Differences, Jadis, For Absent Friends, Now, Gandalf, Egdon Heath, Shadowland and Pallas.

I'm sorry to report that I'm *clearly* a prog-rock dilettante, as most of this strikes as noodling, wimpy garbage. Tracy Hitchings' "Escape" is okay, though it

mostly sounds like Pallas with a female singer. Jadis and For Absent Friends are okay, and I can see why both bands opened for Marillion at times, but though they'd kill time pleasantly until Marillion came on (and would definitely be better than the people I've seen open for Marillion), I wouldn't be crushed if I showed up late and missed them. Egdon Heath reminds me of Happy Rhodes. Only Pallas' "War of Words" sounds good enough to me to prompt further purchases, and I already *knew* I liked *them*.

### *SI Magazine Compilation Disc Too, 1993 CD*

The second *SI* compilation, celebrating the establishment of the company's German branch, contains otherwise-unavailable tracks by IQ, Shadowland, Wings of Steel, Landmarq, Pallas, For Absent Friends, Jadis, Chandelier, Theshold, Paul Menel, Timelock and No. This disc is *much* stronger than the first one, or much more to *my* liking, anyway. IQ's song, "N.T.O.C. 'Resistance'", is superb (very much in keeping with the shorter songs on *Ever*), and though I'm not that crazy about the Menel song "Let's Hear It for Freedom" (Aha! Here's where Tim Esau's got to!), it's good to see that he's still making music after leaving IQ. Pallas' "Never Too Late" is pretty understated and mellow for them, but nice all the same. In fact, nearly everybody acquits themselves well on this collection, though not quite well enough to sell me any more CDs like this.

One fascinating detail, though, is the large degree of member overlap between the bands. If being in a prog-rock band can't pay the rent, be in *five* prog-rock bands!

I've also found that, in my experience, hardcore Progressive fans tend to be alarmingly close-minded and intolerant of anything outside their small musical sphere. To be fair (or to be unfair equally), this is a quality shared by serious genre-fans of many other genres, as well, especially heavy metal and rap, as devotees come to believe that their genre is the *only* source of good music, and that, thus, "good" is equivalent to "adherent to genre stereotypes". I am always suspicious of, and sorry for, people whose record collections and top-ten lists fit compactly into a single, carefully demographied, market-defined genre. I'm even sorrier for bands who spend their careers trying to sound even more like their peers than their peers, rather than just making music. (And as Martin Eden from Chandelier once observed, prog rock is the only genre with *more* bands than fans.)

In the cases of heavy metal and rap, though-how can I put this without offending anybody? (Or, *should* I put this without offending anybody? Aw, what the hell, let's offend some people. This is only a book, and

it's not like I'm saying Mohammed was a child-pornographer.) In the cases of metal and rap, the genres don't exactly select for intelligence. That's not to say that all metal or rap fans are stupid, that all metal or rap artists are stupid, or any other similar blanket statement, it's just that refined intelligence and a fine aesthetic sensitivity are often neither necessary for appreciating metal and rap, nor particularly useful, and sometimes aren't even tolerated very well. Progressive rock, on the other hand, tends to be very intellectual (or pseudo-intellectual, but being pseudo-intellectual requires even more reading than being actual-intellectual), and demands (and in the best cases, benefits from) a quite sophisticated level of music awareness. I keep thinking that this should make Progressive fans as a group rather enlightened people, with very open musical minds, but it just doesn't seem to be the case. Prog fans' reviews of prog albums are frequently little more than a list of titles, followed by assessments like "very proggy" or "not very proggy", and notes like "two songs longer than ten minutes" that are intended to be ringing endorsements, not liner-note trivia.

On a slightly larger scale, though, I'm sure I'm guilty of about the same thing. I suspect that a half-decent ethnologist would have little trouble explaining *my* musical tastes as a genre-fascination with some component of Western musical tradition, and my ideas of "good" as simply conformance to a fundamental musical stereotype that stretches straight back to Bach. So, who am I to preach of tolerance and open-mindedness, eh?

On the other hand, there are some notable cases where prog-rock fanatics are really *right*, and that might be true of me, as well.

## Aragon

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### *Don't Bring the Rain*, 1990 CD

Aragon wasn't on either SI compilation, and this album isn't on SI's label, but the other two are. I'd heard of Aragon from rec.music.progressive discussions of bands related to Marillion and IQ, and seen them on Ranjit's price list, and though I had no idea what they really sounded like, when I ran across this deleted debut in the unindexed junk bins at Strawberries Underground it seemed like something that could be easily pawned off on somebody else if I hated it myself.

And actually, I quite like it. Aragon describes themselves as "Theatre Rock", and indeed vocalist Les Dougan's delivery is histrionic even in the context of bands like Rush, Marillion, Magnum and IQ. Over-

dramatized vocals are the thing that Georgia hates most about prog-rock, and Aragon are pretty much Hell's soundtrack for her, but I think they're *very* cool. If you imagine a Marillion/IQ/Pallas sort of band fronted by the most pretentious-voiced Austrian heavy-metal shrieker you can imagine (though the band is actually Australian), that's about what Aragon sounds like. It's either frightening or invigorating, and probably not anything in between.

Aragon's slow songs, like "The Cradle" and "Solstice" here, work well, but they are at the best when go all out, like on "For Your Eyes" and "In the Company of Wolves", and the chorus of "Cry Out". Their ambition nearly gets the best of them on the epic "The Crucifixion", but they wrestle valiantly with disaster, and though I'm not sure they register a decisive victory this time around, the struggle is entertaining to hear.

### *The Meeting*, 1992 CD

Aragon's magnum opus, under construction even at the time of *Don't Bring the Rain*, is some gigantic project called "Mouse". *The Meeting* is the fifth act of this epic. The liner notes explain its arrival in advance of the containing work by saying that "Act V will not be available on *Mouse* the album, due for release late 1992, but is an essential part of the overall story." Well, as I write this entry in early 1994, there's still no sign of *Mouse*, and without it I can't evaluate the claims of this part's integrality to the story (though seeing as I can't figure out this chapter by itself, perhaps the converse dependence, at least, holds), but if these twenty-seven odd minutes are indicative of the intensity of the *music* on *Mouse*, it's going to be most deliriously overblown creation since The Ring Cycle.

The band seems to have jettisoned their human drummer, Tony Italia, and the programmed drums on *The Meeting* remind me of Celtic Frost's pioneering introduction of drum-machines to heavy metal. Aragon has a unrivaled knack for mallet-type keyboard parts (orchestral bells, marimba, kalimba, that sort of thing), and Dougan's voice can go from ballad-legato to hyperkinetic hysteria with the most shocking rapidity. It's frightening how well the various urges on *Don't Bring the Rain* come together for this EP, even more frightening how much intensity the band manages to pack into less than half-an-hour (I keep having to double-check the time; it feels like there is *much* more than half-an-hour of music on *The Meeting*). Bring on the *Mouse*!

### *Rocking Horse*, 1993 CD

Still no sign of *Mouse* a year later, so Aragon placates the faithful with this collection of old demos.

All but one of these songs predate *Don't Bring the Rain*, and they sound it. The twenty-minute title track is *way* too long, "Ghosts" sounds like Jean Michel Jarre on the studio version and those Japanese karate-drummers on the live one, and "Touch" sounds like Andreas Vollenwieder. Only "Changes" approximates the intensity of *Don't Bring the Rain*, and nothing here approaches the level of *The Meeting* or the implied Ragnarok explosiveness of the still-absent *Mouse*. My advice? Just wait patiently. This doesn't make the time go any faster.

## Yes

I actually didn't, until recently, think of myself as a Yes fan. I had a vinyl copy of 90125 lying around, and liked it, but other than that the handful of Yes songs that I knew through cultural pervasiveness, like "Starship Trooper", "I've Seen All Good People" and "Long Distance Runaround", were *old* stuff, music that I really didn't even *consider* buying, like the Beatles or something, not of my generation. They did have this great cover of Simon and Garfunkel's "America", though, that I'd always wanted, and one day on a whim I picked up *Yesterdays*, just to have that one song.

### *Yesterdays*, 1974 CD

To my considerable surprise, I found myself liking the *other* songs on this album, too. "Sweet Dreams", "Survival" and "Astral Traveler" are very cool, in an archaic sort of way (this compilation came out in 1974, but some of these tracks were recorded in the *Sixties*!), and "Looking Around" and "Time and a Word" turn out to be familiar songs, though I hadn't known either by title. In a sudden fit of newfound justification, I rushed out and began my Yes collection in earnest, jumping straight to the lavish boxed set *Yesyears*. I doubt very many other people bought a four-disc box as an introduction to Yes, but it worked out pretty well. The band has a long career with lots of collections and substantial track overlap, and between the box's booklet and some considerable Lotus Agenda hacking, I was able to make a surprising amount of sense out of the mass of possible directions.

*Yesterdays*, then, ends up being my earliest Yes release (or the release that has the earliest material on it, at any rate). It provides "Looking Around" and "Survival", from the first album, *Yes*; "Then", "Sweet Dreams", "Astral Traveler" and "Time and a Word" from the second, *Time and a Word*; as well as the full ten-plus minute version of "America", and "Dear Father", the UK b-side to the "Sweet Dreams" single. *Yesyears* fills in a couple more tracks from *Time and a Word*, and

one more from *Yes*, and that seemed like plenty to me from two albums released nearly before I was born. The third album, *The Yes Album*, I *considered* getting, but *Yesyears* has half of its six tracks, and if I ever get around to buying *Yessongs* it has another one, and it seemed unlikely that the last two, which had been left off of *Yessongs*, *Classic Yes* and *Yesyears* all, would make that much difference. I moved on to *Fragile*, where the action really appeared to get started.

### *Fragile*, 1972 CD

*Fragile*, which contains both "Roundabout" and "Long Distance Runaround", two songs I still tend to confuse with each other, despite the fact that the first is about three times as long as the second, was the first hugely successful *Yes* album, and probably as pivotal a piece of male adolescent experience for people eight years older than me as *Moving Pictures* would later be for me. I, on the other hand, bought it because *Yesyears* only included four of the nine songs here, and I wanted to hear the others.

For a blockbuster album, *Fragile* has a pretty strange premise. There are four real Yes songs (which add up to over half an hour), but the other five are one solo composition each by the five band members (who were, at the time, Jon Anderson, Bill Bruford, Steve Howe, Chris Squire and Rick Wakeman). I don't know who thought this was a good idea. Wakeman's keyboard adaptation of excerpts from Brahms 4th Symphony is pretty laughable, the thirty-five seconds of Bill Bruford's "Five Per Cent for Nothing" aren't brief enough, and Steve Howe's solo acoustic guitar piece "Mood for a Day" sounds like that sort of blandly agreeable music that PBS used to play in between shows that didn't last the full half-an-hour. Anderson's multi-voiced "We Have Heaven" is kind of cool, though, and Chris Squire's bass-army exploration "The Fish (Shindleria Praematurus)" gets a good groove going.

Of the four "real" songs, "Roundabout" and "Long Distance Runaround" should be familiar to you. "South Side of the Sky" starts off very strongly, then slips off sideways and is gone forever, as Jane Siberry would say (though not, mind you, necessarily about this) (actually, the song revives for the last two minutes, anyway; if you cut out the middle half you'd have another tight, short song like "Long Distance Runaround", but they didn't). "Heart of the Sunrise" is a solid epic, but if you get *Yesyears* there are *two* versions of it there (studio and live).

In retrospect, then, I think I could have safely skipped this album, too, as *Yesyears* represents it just fine.

### *Close to the Edge*, 1972 CD

The next Yes album finds the band entering its “how few songs can we put on an album and get away with it” phase, *Close to the Edge* tying with *Relayer* for the overall lead with only three, though *Tales from Topographic Oceans* manages the lowest song-to-platter ratio, with four songs on a double-album. If long convoluted multi-part songs drive you crazy, you might as well fast-forward to *Tormato*, because they don’t snap out of this phase very quickly.

Half of *Close to the Edge* is “Close to the Edge” itself. The other half is split between “And You and I” and “Siberian Khatru”. *Yesyears* has “Close to the Edge” and a live version of “And You and I”, so “Siberian Khatru” is really why I went ahead and bought this album. I kind of like it, but it’s possible that I didn’t *really* need another song like this, and if one would suffice “Close to the Edge” would definitely be it.

### *Tales from Topographic Oceans*, 1973 CD

I like to think that if *Tales from Topographic Oceans* had been recorded in the CD era, it would have been a single, 74-minute song. Still, you have to admire a band for having the gall to put out a double-album with exactly one song per vinyl-side.

Actually, I guess you don’t *have* to. In fact, you could pretty easily take the gesture as a sign that the band had lost the last shred of decency or intelligence that it once had, and that its members should probably be taken out and shot to prevent further embarrassment to their families.

But, I choose not to. I readily admit that I have only listened to this set three or four times through in its entirety, and during none of these sessions did I bother to pay rapt attention to the proceedings. That doesn’t keep me from loving the album, though. I love the idea of it, and the reality of it has enough going for it not to dispel the theoretical fascination. It’s like having some very talented musicians noodling away in the corner of your apartment for an hour and a half, coming up with something really interesting at least as frequently as every two or three minutes. As long as you aren’t trying to have a discussion on a couch right in *front* of the corner they’re noodling in, it’s a pretty cool thing to have going on. The fourth movement, “Ritual – Nous Sommes Du Soleil”, is on *Yesyears*, but you can’t really experience *Tales* properly in an excerpt, because it’s essential to get to the point, after an hour or so, where you suddenly realize that the thing is *still* playing, and that you still haven’t chucked your speakers out a window.

Of course, enjoyment of that particular moment presumes that in fact you *haven’t* chucked your speakers

out a window already, which is hardly a foregone conclusion. I’m not going to risk bodily injury by actually *recommending* this album, but I’m glad *I* have it.

### *Relayer*, 1974 CD

*Relayer* is another three-song album. The first half is “The Gates of Delirium”, the second half is split between “Sound Chaser” and “To Be Over”. If you’re into these endlessly-meandering masturbatory jam-sessions, here’s another album of them, but personally I think this one is scraping the bottom of the inspiration barrel, and I’d take *Tales from Topographic Oceans* over *Relayer* any day. *Yesyears*’ sample is “Sound Chaser” and the “Soon” section of “The Gates of Delirium”, and I think that’s actually more than enough of this album.

### *Going for the One*, 1977 CD

Yes begins the slow return to the land of the clear-eyed with *Going for the One*. Its interminable marathon, “Awaken”, strikes me as a substantial improvement over anything on *Relayer*, and it actually has three short songs that can be fully enjoyed without sedation, “Going for the One”, “Parallels” and “Wonderous Stories”. “Wonderous Stories” is a soft, lilting throwback to the first few albums, and “Parallels” is a look forward towards 90125, while “Going for the One” is like a *Tormato* track arriving one disc early. “Parallels” was even new to me here, so I almost feel like I got something for buying this.

### *Tormato*, 1978 CD

Edging ever so gradually toward 90125’s pop eureka, Yes finally manages to make another album with *eight* songs on it, none longer than eight minutes. They haven’t *exactly* got the hang of this format back yet, and a few of these tracks (“Future Times”/“Rejoice”, “Madrigal”, “Arriving UFO” and “Onward”) seem lost to me. The other four, though, “Don’t Kill the Whale”, “Release, Release”, “Circus of Heaven” and “On the Silent Wings of Freedom”, are superb, and find Yes shoehorning their prodigious musical talents back into a suitable rock-song frame for the first time in quite a few years. “Release, Release” and “On the Silent Wings of Freedom” both have especially powerful choruses, to the extent to which Jon Anderson’s thin falsetto *can* generate power.

*Tormato* also finally finds things looking up in the anti-redundancy department, as only *two* of these songs (“Don’t Kill the Whale” and “On the Silent Wings of Freedom”) are on *Yesyears*. I’m still not *completely* sure that I think “Release, Release” and “Circus of Heaven”

are good enough to justify this album by themselves, but they're at least close.

### ***Drama*, 1980 CD**

*Drama*, it has to be said straight off, perverts the notion of a Yes album in an important way: Jon Anderson is absent. Yes' revolving cast and extended family is part of its charm, to be sure, but it's pretty amazing to realize that bassist Chris Squire is the *only* member of the band to have played on every Yes-labeled album. Anderson's shrill voice is an integral part of Yes' charm for me, and the idea of making an album without him is mostly ridiculous.

On the other hand, Trevor Horn, who sings on this album, does a pretty capable *impression* of Anderson, so in the end all is not lost. While not quite up to 90125's levels, the production quality and sonic modern-ness quotients of *Drama* are easily Yes' highest yet, and *Drama* is the first Yes album I can listen to without having to be in a "period" mood.

If only they'd come up with lots of strong songs to apply their shiny new sound to, this might have been a killer album. As it is, "Machine Messiah" loses me, "White Car" is forgettable, and "Into the Lens" and "Run Through the Light" seem to be missing hooks that *ought* to be in there somewhere. "Does It Really Happen?" and "Tempus Fugit" sound great, but they're both on *Yesyears*, with the result that this is yet another Yes album that leaves me feeling like I needn't really have bothered.

### **90125, 1983 CD**

The Yes of 90125 might as well be a completely different band. It's very hard to credit that this set of super-sharply-produced, snappy, musically-rich pop songs comes from the same band who did "The Gates of Delirium". Anderson, Squire, Alan White and Tony Kaye are old hands at this, so the credit for the sudden gale-force second-wind must go to new guitarist Trevor Rabin and now-producer Trevor Horn, the former for injecting some entirely new sensations into the songwriting atmosphere, and the latter for finally steaming the last vestiges of left-over Sixties odor out of the wall-tapestries in the band's rehearsal studio.

There's not a single dull moment on this whole album. It opens with the sampled percussion and seething guitar of "Owner of a Lonely Heart", one of the few songs ever to *please* me by hitting #1 in the US. Possibly you have heard it. Well, the album only gets better after it.

"Hold On" does some intense rhythm shifts, turning its quick 3/4 into 2/4 (or a slow timing I don't know how to express, where the second and third ticks of the 3/4 fade away and leave the downbeats to be the

quarters of a four-beat pattern (Can you have 4/1.333?)). "It Can Happen" contributes an oscillating sitar part that earns a special spot in my heart for being easy enough that even I can play it on a keyboard. The intro to "Changes" does some *really* weird rhythm thing that I can't even *follow*, let alone compute. It's like they subtract half of every fifth beat, or something. I think they're just doing it to flaunt the fact that they can. If I could, I would.

The instrumental, "Cinema", is short and sweet. "Leave It", with the long a cappella lead in, capped by crashing synth drums that instantly retreat to a muted dancy drum machine shuffle out of which they sporadically erupt into life again, is a true production triumph, and so far from Yes' old stylistic haunts that if you were afraid of flying, you just wouldn't go. "Our Song" has another rhythm that I get lost trying to count. It's almost as if each phrase has a *random* number of beats, which Alan White somehow makes sound seamless. It's like that puzzle where you rearrange the pieces and somehow there ends up being one less rabbit. I never *could* figure out how that worked.

"City of Love" is straightforward by comparison. "Hearts", the last song, is the new Yes' attempt to do an old-Yes-style languid epic. It doesn't work at all, and ends up being by turns sinister and romantic, with not a whiff of the old trademark musical freefalls.

### ***Big Generator*, 1987 CD**

You can take a good thing too far, though, and Yes proceeds to. *Big Generator* is, for a Yes album, appallingly simplistic and clichéd. If 90125 discovered a breathtaking synergy in dumping Trevor Rabin's mainstream instincts into the vat of Yes' old convoluted predilections, *Big Generator* reveals that nobody thought to shut off the "mainstream" tap after the proper mix was achieved. After four years of dilution, there isn't even an effervescence of Yes left, and this album is homogenized LA cookie-cutter studio-rock of the blandest sort. It's well *played*, and "Love Will Find a Way" is a catchy song, but there's no shortage of *technically-competent* studio hacks, and even the cheesiest of bands can usually manage to duct-tape together enough hooks to assemble at least *one* passable song. The only song that sounds at all distinctive to me on this album is "I'm Running", and *that* sounds like an outtake from a scrapped new-age Charlie Brown special.

If I could forget that this album is Yes, it would be merely inoffensive. Every time Jon Anderson opens his mouth, though, I remember, and it disgusts me all over again.



### *Anderson, Bruford, Wakeman, Howe, 1989 CD*

The Yes family squabbles resulted in this patently Yes album coming out under the long-winded sobriquet of its members. I don't care what Chris Squire's lawyers say, this is Yes, and Yes is where I'll list it. It's got all Yes members, it's got a Roger Dean cover, it's got long multi-part songs and preposterous lyrics. In fact, it's got everything an old Yes fan might want from a new Yes album.

That's what makes it so embarrassing for the official Yes to have this come out as not Yes: listen to some old (*Tormato* and earlier) Yes, then to this and then to *Big Generator*, and I have every confidence that you'll agree that *AWBH* is old Yes ten years later, while *Big Generator* is something irrelevant. 90125 was a remarkable convergence of impulses, but it just didn't hold up in the long run. *AWBH* have made just as much musical and production progress (production by Anderson and Chris Kimsey, who did Marillion's *Misplaced Childhood* and *Clutching at Straws*!) as the official Yes managed, but they did it without losing their stylistic identity.

This album is far from flawless, mind you. Anderson gets his way a little too often, I think, and there are too many roman-numerals on the track listing, and too many filler-interludes in the music. It shares with old Yes the need for patience in the listener, as some of these tracks take a while to develop. On the other hand, the *sound* of the album is marvelous, and for me this is an album that fills all the same roles as old Yes records like *Close to the Edge*, only with equipment that doesn't sound like it has to have fresh rubber-bands put in in between takes. Also, considering that these four are historically probably the four Yes members *least* inclined to curb their more florid impulses, this is album is really pretty tightly focused. If you're a Yes fan who felt like writing them off with *Drama*, 90125 or *Big Generator*, here's your gold-plated invitation to rejoin the fold.

Just remember that "A-W-B-H" is pronounced "Y-e-s".

### *Yesyears, 1991 4CD box*

Friends, as reluctant as you'll probably be to buy a \$50 or \$60 boxed set to *start* with, if you're at least at the stage where you're convinced you basically *like* Yes, then this is what you should buy. Their best moments are spread thinly enough over enough albums that to get even a sketchy career overview you're going to have to buy three or four CDs anyway, and buy that time you've spent as much as you would have for the set.

There are five reasons why I think *Yesyears* is clearly the way to go. Foremost, it does justice to the

band's entire career. I've mentioned its excerpts under many of the original albums, but I'll go through them again here:

from *Yes*: "Survival", "Every Little Thing" (Beatles cover!)

from *Time and a Word*: "Then" (actually, a BBC session of it), "Everydays" (Stephen Stills song, BBC session again), "Sweet Dreams", "No Opportunity Necessary, No Experience Needed" (Ritchie Havens'), and "Time and a Word"

from *The Yes Album*: "Starship Trooper", "Yours Is No Disgrace", "I've Seen All Good People"

from *Fragile*: "Long Distance Runaround", "The Fish (Schindleria Praematurus)", "Roundabout", "Heart of the Sunrise" (studio and live)

from *Close to the Edge*: "Close to the Edge", "And You and I" (live)

from *Tales from Topographic Oceans*: "Ritual - Nous Sommes Du Soleil"

from *Relayer*: "Sound Chaser", "Soon"

from *Going for the One*: "Wonderous Stories", "Awaken", "Going for the One"

from *Tormato*: "Don't Kill the Whale", "On the Silent Wings of Freedom"

from *Drama*: "Don't It Really Happen?", "Tempus Fugit"

from 90125: "Owner of a Lonely Heart", "Hold On", "Changes" (live), "It Can Happen" (a very cool early version)

from *Big Generator*: "Shoot High Aim Low", "Rhythm of Love", "Love Will Find a Way"

This is a superb cross-section of the Yes canon.

The second reason is that it more or less supersedes all the other Yes compilations. If you factor out the songs included on *Yesyears*, *Yessongs* is reduced to five tracks (only two of which are really songs), *Yesterdays* to three (plus a longer version of "America"), and *Yesshows* to a song and a half, and *Classic Yes*, *Yesstory* and *The Very Best* vanish completely.

The third reason is that it has a bunch of interesting non-album stuff: a cover of the West Side Story song "Something's Coming", the single version of "America" (together these two make up for not including the "full" version of "America", which contains fragments of "Something's Coming"), a bass-only rendition of "Amazing Grace", an unreleased 1978 song called "Money" (*not* a cover of anything), the b-side of "Don't Kill the Whale" ("Abilene"), the great 1981 Squire/White single "Run with the Fox", a 1976 cover of the Beatles' "I'm Down", and my very favorite Yes song, the pre-90125 Rabin-just-joined demo "Make It Easy".

The fourth reason is that once you have this box you have very close to all the Yes you'll ever need (well, official Yes, anyway, not counting *AWBH*). I'd go

ahead and get 90125 if I were you, and I'd get *Tales from Topographic Oceans* if I were *me*, and buying *Tormato* wouldn't be insane, either, but the rest of the albums are rendered, in my not-very-dedicated-Yes-fan opinion, purely optional.

The last reason, and you shouldn't underestimate this, is that the box itself shows signs of a lot of careful work. With only a couple puzzling exceptions, the studio tracks are in chronological order, *the way God meant compilations to be arranged*. All four CDs are packed to capacity (for a total of 46 tracks, and just under five hours playing time). The box comes with a wonderful LP-sized 30-page booklet that tells the history of the band, provides a full discography and gives detailed track credits for everything on these disks. And, most importantly, the back cover of the book is a foldout of Pete Frame's Yes Family Tree, one of the most remarkable diagrams in the admittedly short history of rock diagramming. Frame painstakingly lays out all nine discrete Yes incarnations, and then proceeds to link in all the *other* bands that everybody who was ever in Yes was ever in, and some of the bands that people who were *in* bands with people who were in Yes were in. It's an incredibly tangled web, and in the ends links up just about every significant original progressive band somehow. I'd pay the price of a CD for this chart alone.

But wait, you also get this seventeen-piece Tupperware mantra set, the stainless-steel fruit trimmer, and a year's subscription to *Astrology Bimonthly*...

### **Union, 1991 CD**

After the bizarre mitosis Yes underwent to end up as both Yes and ABWH, a bout of familial affection suddenly swept through the members of both factions, with the result that Jon Anderson, Bill Bruford, Steve Howe, Tony Kaye, Trevor Rabin, Chris Squire, Rick Wakeman and Alan White all piled in a van for the biggest-Yes-ever tour. This "reunion" album, released in preparation from the tour, is *not* actually a Yes super-ensemble effort. In fact, it's nine ABWH tracks, four *Big Generator*-lineup Yes songs, and one Steve Howe solo piece. Anderson's presence on everything is the only vaguely uniting factor, and Yes with Anderson singing is hardly a novelty.

Marketing ploy nature aside, the album is actually pretty good. The ABWH tracks are more sophisticated, the Yes tracks catchier, but together they make for a nicely balanced album that I like even better than the *first* ABWH record, and *much* better than *Big Generator*. In fact, I think it's my second favorite Yes album, after only 90125! Plus, it appears to have been remaindered by the barge-load, so you can probably find a copy dirt-

cheap. Get it. It's not often that a cynical marketing ploy does anything this good for the world.

## **various**

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### ***Symphonic Music of Yes, 1993 CD***

"The music of Yes, performed by the London Philharmonic Orchestra, with Steve Howe, Bill Bruford, Jon Anderson, Tim Harries and David Palmer, the English Chamber Orchestra and the London Community Gospel Choir, produced and engineered by Alan Parsons". If you need any more explanation than that, you should have your imagination checked. This is either the most sickening thing released since disco died, Yes members collaborating in the process of having some of their most memorable songs reduced to Muzak in the hands of b-level orchestras probably suited for little else, or else it's the most amazing transfiguration-via-reductio-ad-absurdum, Yes' bombastic flights of fancy finally finding their *proper* musical setting. I can't decide.

The songs done here, in case that makes the slightest bit of difference to you, are: "Roundabout", "Close to the Edge", "Wonderous Stories", "I've Seen All Good People", "Mood for a Day", "Owner of a Lonely Heart", "Survival", "Heart of the Sunrise", "Soon" and "Starship Trooper".

## **Asia**

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### ***Asia, 1982 CD***

When Steve Howe and Geoff Downes left Yes after *Drama*, they formed Asia, roping Carl Palmer and John Wetton into the enterprise for that proper progressive-supergroup appeal. Rather than making prog-rock though, as the world undoubtably expected, Asia decided to make a run for the early-Eighties over-produced American-driving-music FM cheese-rock crown usually perched unsteadily on Journey's lumpy head. I *hated* Asia when this album was new, but ten years later "Heat of the Moment", "Only Time Will Tell", "Sole Survivor" and "Wildest Dreams" began to seem very nostalgic, the sounds of a certain impressionable period in my life, and something I should have at my disposal whenever a whim to recapture that time occurred to me.

Sure enough, I don't hate these songs any more. The album, on the other hand, is even more the way I thought it would be than I thought it would be. This might as well be the *definition* of "over-produced".

Every noise on this album is filtered through a chain of reverbs and aural exciters that would have given Evil Knieval (is that how his name is spelled? and if not, where would you look such a thing up?) pause. This stuff makes Survivor and Styx and Loverboy sound like garage bands.

My favorite detail here is actually a misheard lyric. Somewhere on "Only Time Will Tell" Wetton sings "your insincerity", and I always hear it as "you're instants early". The notion of someone who is always just the tiniest bit early, just the smallest amount off, and the idea that this persistent microscopic tardiness could grow to seem even more monstrous than being *very* late—I don't know, there's a cool idea lurking in there somewhere. It's like "seconds out", which I always think of as a stealth bomber just a few seconds away from its target, not anything to do with duelers' assistants.

## King Crimson

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### *Discipline*, 1981 LP

King Crimson is another pivotal figure in the progressive-rock movement, but I find them a bit too abstruse and oblique for my own tastes. Too much over-thought conceptual noodling, and not enough melody. It makes interesting background music, but I can't say I *like* it very much. The band has been through several incarnations, with guitarist Robert Fripp the only consistent member. This one has Bill Bruford drumming, Tony Levin on bass (who would also play bass on *ABWH*), and Adrian Belew on vocals and extra guitar, though in my opinion the *last* thing King Crimson needed was a *second* guitarist who doesn't know any power chords.

## Saga

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### *Worlds Apart*, 1982 CD

Saga had a great early-Eighties New Wave synth-pop hit called "On the Loose" that I'd always wanted. This album eventually turned up in the \$5.99 bin, and I think I bought it the same week I got Nena's 99 *Luftballons*. "On the Loose" is a classic, all robotic drums and sequenced-sounding keyboard-riffs and synth-basses. "Wind Him Up", the lesser follow-up single, has its charm as well.

The rest of the album turned out to be kind of perplexing. Saga can't seem to decide whether they want to be Men Without Hats or Pallas when they grow

up. "Amnesia", "The Interview" and "No Stranger" all have promising neo-progressive potential, and Rupert Hine produced the album. I got this right at a point of particular vulnerability to neo-prog, and it seemed like Saga might be something worth pursuing.

### *Images at Twilight*, 1987 CD

Bzzz! "Promising" was definitely the wrong word. This album is *awful*. It is neo-progressive, more-or-less, but it manages to showcase exactly the features that make the "90% is crap" rule, which applies to all other genres, apply to neo-progressive as well. Embarrassingly oversung vocals, pointless synthesizer doodling, high-school-profundity lyrics, this album has one of almost everything bad. The only way I could make it to the end was by holding my thumb on the forward-scan button for most of its length.

### *The Works*, 1991 2CD

In between getting *Worlds Apart* and *Images at Twilight*, I actually bought this German Saga double best-of. With twenty-eight tracks, from eight Saga albums, you'd think that this would have given me a good enough idea of the band's true nature to proceed or not proceed with confidence. In practice, that didn't happen. Just listening to the two discs in the order they come in doesn't provide a coherent picture of anything. Saga seems even more inexplicable than they did on just *Worlds Apart*. There are sporadic parts I really like ("Only Time Will Tell", "The Flyer", "Scratching the Surface", their cover of Peter Gabriel's "Solsbury Hill"), and there are parts that are awful, but very few of the awful parts are awful in clearly representative ways (and there's only *one* track from *Images at Twilight*). Also, the compilation makes *no* attempt to proceed in an order that has any relationship to the source albums, and I didn't have the patience to reorder the tracks myself.

Now, having *Worlds Apart* and *Images at Twilight* as reference points, and having paid a little more attention to the years of the songs on this collection, I feel reasonably confident that I understand what I think of Saga: an early-Eighties synth-pop band that developed progressive tendencies which began as promising and quickly turned appalling. That's what you could synthesize from my comments on the other two albums themselves, of course, but the other material from the early, mid- and late Eighties here bears out the analysis. The three "new" 1991 songs here show a decided improvement over the 1985-1989 time frame, but not enough to earn Saga another chance from me. The Germans can keep 'em.

## Propaganda

### *Secret Wish*, 1985 CD

Propaganda, on the other hand, who actually *are* German, I am less content to relegate to their homeland. In fact this, their only real album (a remix-collection followed it, and keyboardist Michael Mertens formed a new, unrelated band many years later with the same name), is one of my very favorites, an album I am drawn to almost hypnotically.

If you can imagine combining Depeche Mode, Berlin, Jean Michel Jarre and a miscellaneous grab-bag of dead German classical composers, loading them up with synthesizers, and instructing them to make, blind, a soundtrack for a revival of German Expressionist film, then you're on the way to imagining Propaganda. The music on *Secret Wish* is haunting, disturbing, orchestral, robotic, danceable, intricate, scary, thickly accented, and mesmerizing. When Luddites sneer that all this technology hasn't made music any better, this is one of the examples that leaps into my mind as a masterpiece that would never have happened without electronics.

The album opens with "Dream Within a Dream", a slow, surging song whose heavy, physical, repetitive bass and ethereal synth-trumpet leads clash on a field of undulating synth-string fills. "Is all that we see and seem just a dream within a dream?", asks singer Claudia Brücken, which sets her off on a meandering psycho-philosophical lyrical excursion that eventually simply gives way to the inexorable flow of the music. Rattling bongo drums ricochet off the steady programmed main rhythm, like digressions unable to derail a train of thought. The drum and bass onslaught continues unabated on "The Murder of Love", a driving dance-remixer's wet dream that at one point breaks into a very surprising few bars of cheesy lounge jazz.

"Jewel", a pounding instrumental, leads into the related "Duel", my favorite song on the album. Lighter, musically, with sparkling orchestra stabs and a snappy drum pattern, the song's style belies the sinister lyrics ("The first cut won't hurt at all. / The second only makes you wonder. / The third will have you on your knees. / You'll start bleeding, I start screaming."). "P-Machinery" is in a similar style, with a similarly dark text ("Another truth, installed by the machine"). A great synth-brass post-chorus hook drives the song, which sounds at times a little bit like "She Blinded Me with Science".

"Sorry for Laughing", the next song, sounds like a cover, and the CD, at least, lists it as having been written by two people who certainly aren't in the band ("Paul Haig and Malcolm Ross", two names that sound like they *should* be familiar to me, but I can't place

them). It *sounds* like a Propaganda-ish reworking of a non-Propaganda-ish song, but who knows if that's really the case.

"Dr. Mabuse" is the *most* sinister song on this album, which is saying something. With chants of "Selling your soul" and "Never look back", chaotic dialog snippets, sproingy synthesized bass runs, rumbling percussion, dramatic string sweeps and some drum-processing that sounds momentarily like the Art of Noise (I wonder who did it first?), Propaganda gives a vaguely Faustian narrative a bizarrely modern feel. *This* is what the new soundtrack to *Metropolis* should have sounded like. "The Chase", in turn, has the movie's love theme, as well as the part that sounds most like Berlin. The last track, "The Last Word/Strength to Dream", is a short, panoramic keyboard instrumental that leads to the sounds of a storm (perhaps the film ends in one?), a reprise of the main theme from "Dream Within a Dream", and an echo of the words the album opens with.

The guest-list on this album is fascinating. Steve Howe, David Sylvian, Trevor Horn and Ian Mosley are all credited as having appeared, as well as some other people, though I admit I have no idea what any of them did on the record, and the notes don't elaborate.

The *packaging*, even, is quite striking. The front of the LP is a large picture of a very uncomfortable-looking wire-mesh vest that I'd have to guess is S&M paraphernalia. Small pictures of the four band members are inset in the bottom corners. On the back is a picture, *from the back*, of somebody actually *wearing* the vest, which looks even more uncomfortable in use than it does sitting upright on its own. Below it, the band is pictured again, all of them screaming in abject terror (a gesture which I'm afraid makes the one on the left look rather silly). The liner is covered with obdurately cryptic passages from Roland Barthes and some other similarly convoluted writers. There is also one small picture of Claudia Brücken with the vest on, and she doesn't actually look *that* uncomfortable, which puts unpleasant ideas in my mind about what *her* hobbies might be.

The CD, mysteriously, screws up the packaging badly. Besides calling the album *A Secret Wish*, rather than just *Secret Wish*, it lists the tracks on the back in the wrong order, including one track which does not, as best I can tell, appear here ("Frozen Faces"), in place of one that does ("The Last Word"). The tracks are also listed with times that have no relation to the *actual* track times, and which add up to a total length more than ten minutes longer than the album's real total. All I can imagine is that these are the listings from a *different version* of the album than the one my CD contains. The liner has all the unfathomable texts, but omits the striking back-cover art in exchange for a bunch of

normal-looking band photos that don't make nearly as much sense with the spirit of the album. Probably the liner, too, was meant for the other record. I'd love to hear it.

## Claudia Brücken

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### *Love: And a Million Other Things, 1991 CD*

After a few years of silence, Claudia Brücken reappeared as a solo artist. This album is unbearable monotonous Euro-house dance-sludge, without, in my opinion, a single redeeming characteristic. Sure, I wanted it to be another Propaganda album, which was dumb, since Claudia wasn't really a key songwriter or instrumentalist in the band, and I admit that it is a type of music that I don't care for *in general*, but even with those caveats I feel obliged to pronounce the album lifeless and sadly undistinguished.

## November Group

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### *Work That Dream, 1985 EP*

November Group is actually from Boston, but this EP was recorded in Frankfurt, with a suspicious number of players with Germanic names, and the band seems to be after an aesthetic much like Propaganda's. Orchestral synthesizers and near-industrial percussion surround singers An Prim and Kearney Kirby (actually, those two are the band in full; the other players are listed separately as "Musicians"), who lack only a German accent. The band's style is a blend of dance energy and socialist worker-rhetoric ("Work That Dream", "Put Your Back to It"), and while it has stiff rhythms that are the same sort that Propaganda seems fond of, the music here doesn't have nearly the density of that on *Secret Wish*. I think it *wishes* it did. At least, listening to the two albums in close succession, I wish it did. A couple of the five songs on this EP are quite decent ("Work That Dream" and the lithe "Arrows Up to Heaven"), and the fact that a Boston band made this decidedly un-Boston-like record is notable, but in the shadow of Propaganda I find most of the praises I *might* have applied to November Group get diverted on their way to the keyboard.

# Appendix A: The Sea Of Cheese

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from the Primus album *Sailing the Seas of Cheese*

## Introduction

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The inevitable result of organizing this book into categories is that there is some music that simply defies categorization. My solution, of course (*I've* read Bertrand Russell...), is to make a category of uncategorizable music, and this appendix is it. Just as the *rest* of the book's organization more or less represents my impression of the sorts of music that I like, this appendix is for the music I like that *isn't* the kind of music I usually like. Some of it is instrumental, which isn't normally what I mean by music. Other artists here simply don't fit into any of the categories I've divided the book up into, no matter how I massage them. Some of them, in fact, largely *defy* categorization. And that's cool. Here, have some assorted music.

## Primus

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### *Sailing the Seas of Cheese*, 1991 CD

Primus' rise to popularity remains absolutely unfathomable to me. They have a number of things in their favor, to be sure:

Their "breakthrough" single, "Jerry Was a Race Car Driver", is catchy in a demented sort of way, and the video for it showed an enviable mosh-pit.

Bassist Les Claypool plays like a mad genius. Drummer Tim Alexander's technical skills are awesome, as well, and guitarist Larry LaLonde can at least hold his own.

They have a certain irreverent wit (which is sort of like saying that *Tom Jones* is "involved").

They look weird.

Even after you assemble these components, however, you are left with no way in the world to avoid the realization that Primus doesn't make *music* in the normal sense of the word. There are lots of noises on their albums, but the noises don't often assemble into recognizable songs. You wouldn't call what Claypool does "singing", precisely, and it's hard to escape the feeling that he uses a fretless bass because he has no intention at all of sticking to conventional notes. If you play Primus too loud, and somebody complains about

the "racket", you will have no grounds for objecting to their use of the term. Primus is noisy, cacophonous, grating, unpleasant, discordant, chaotic, twisted and incomprehensible.

Now, those aren't necessarily *bad* things, and I can readily understand the band developing a cult following. They *are* unique, after all. What I can't understand is the *size* of the cult. The album after this one, *Pork Soda*, debuted in the Billboard top ten, and as best I can tell doesn't even have the *one* semi-accessible song that *Sailing the Seas of Cheese* has. The mental picture of your average music fan sauntering into a record store, picking up a Janet Jackson album or something by Bryan Adams, considering it, and then saying "Nah, I think I'll get that new Primus tape" makes my mind boggle. I'd be less surprised to find one of those eco-friendly records of wolf-howls or whale-songs on the best-seller racks. I haven't found stacks of Primus CDs in used bins, either, so either most of the people who bought them *liked* them, or they hated them so much that they rammed them down the disposal on the spot.

Or maybe, like me, they found Primus strangely fascinating, and decided to hang onto their album.

### *Miscellaneous Debris*, 1992 CD5

The idea of Primus doing covers, which is the premise of this five-song EP, was so far-fetched that I bought it in an instant. The target list is: Peter Gabriel's "Intruder", XTC's "Making Plans for Nigel", the Residents' "Sinister Exaggerator", the Meters' "Tippi Toes", and Pink Floyd's "Have a Cigar".

Much to my surprise, Primus plays these songs straight. Or, relatively straight, anyway. Straight compared to the deconstruction of them that I was *expecting*. I don't know the originals of the Residents or Meters tracks, but the other three bear striking resemblances to their sources. Claypool stays pretty close to actual notes of the standard scale, and though none of these songs are serious vocal workouts, he is discernibly singing them, as much as he is able. LaLonde at times sounds like he is peering over somebody's shoulder at the sheet music, and only barely keeping up, but it does sound like he's *trying* to. Alexander is the only one who sounds like he's actually up for reproducing the material "correctly".

This leaves me even more confused than *Sailing the Seas of Cheese* did. It's not odd enough to make up for being not very good, and it's not good enough to make up for being not very odd.

## Frank Zappa

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### *Thing-Fish*, 1986 CD

Zappa, hordes of people will be happy to inform you, was a bona-fide American musical maestro of all-world and all-time proportions, more fit to be discussed along with Coltrane, Mozart and Elvis than the other mundane practitioners of Seventies and Eighties rock music. To give the rest of you some feeble solace, I'll admit that most of his music sounds like over-intellectualized directionless music-school homework to me.

Still, I ought to know *something* about him, right? So I got this album at random. *Thing-Fish* is the recording of a (mythical? I hope?) Broadway musical about a plot to dump a special chemical in the water supply of large cities that kills most blacks and homosexuals, and makes the rest of them hideously ugly. There are musical moments in it, but as far as I can tell, the only reason it exists is to have Ike Willis read Zappa's meticulously mispronounced script aloud in exaggeratedly careful diction for an hour and a half. Dale and Terry Bozzio play musical-goers who get incorporated in the drama, and are subjected to a number of rather explicit perversions without, frankly, a whole lot of motivation.

I've listened to *Thing-Fish* all the way through. Twice. The first time, it was hilarious. The second time, it was amusing. Perhaps some day I'll listen to it again.

### *Meets the Mothers of Prevention*, 1986 CD

After eight scatterbrained tracks that range from synclavier doodles to corny blues, this album finally gets to the one Frank Zappa track that I truly adore, "Porn Wars". This is a twelve-minute sampler collage of testimony from the 1985 PMRC-instigated Senate hearings on obscenity in rock music, and it's filled with hilarious snippets of dead-pan pornographic recitations juxtaposed with Tipper Gore's not-very-well-informed comments, stupid things said by Fritz Hollings, more of Ike Willis' bizarre "m"-filled *Thing-Fish* accent, and a few Senators complaining about Zappa's own testimony (but not enough of *that* to decide whether he deserved it or not). It's a ridiculously biased portrait of the event, of course, but it's relentlessly amusing for its sheer persistence.

In retrospect, I think, the stridency of the campaign against Tipper's labeling effort seems misplaced. Labels came, they're here, they get distributed in a suspect manner to rap and heavy-metal releases, and the occasional Kmart periodically opts not to stock some

especially offensive title that they might otherwise sell to 12-year-olds who would probably be a lot less shocked by it than their parents. This, on some level, is unjust, but frankly, who the fuck buys heavy-metal at Kmart? Movie ratings didn't kill free speech, and neither did record-labeling, and probably a whole host of things to come won't, either.

## John Moran

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### *The Manson Family: An Opera*, 1992 CD

An opera about Charles Manson. Sound like a questionable idea? Well, it makes for a questionable opera, too, but a pretty neat record. Moran takes great liberties with the story, tossing out whatever parts didn't suit him, and keeping just enough structure to hang vignettes and characterizations on. Like *Thing-Fish*, this is another album that I find entertaining to experience, though not in the way I normally experience music. I actually like it quite a bit better than *Thing-Fish*, as I can actually *tell* with this one that conscious effort has gone into its composition and organization, in addition to just writing the words. The recurring piano line "Night Highway", its companion viola, the strange cartoonish introductions to each of the three acts, details like these hold the work together as a artistic whole whose aural dimension feels integral, not improvised and extraneous. Except for the viola and some bass, Moran performs everything himself, which also helps. There's even a fascinating song buried the middle, called "'Good Morning!' ...it's The Beatles", that sounds disturbingly like what I imagine the Beatles must have sounded like *to Manson*. If this whole record had to exist simply to set up this warped Beatles non-parody, I think that would be justification enough.

I should note that I got this CD at the "Worst Possible CD" surprise party that Georgia threw for me on my 25th birthday, and it's one of the few such acquisitions to make this book.

## Laurie Anderson

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### *Big Science*, 1982 CD

A studio habitué like Kate Bush or Jane Siberry, Laurie exhibits, at least on this debut album (which is really just selections from her epic *United States I-IV*), a severe reticence to make actual pop songs, with a corresponding fondness for oblique spoken narratives and minimal repetitious music like Philip Glass covering "Mimi on the Beach" (which would be, I

guess, “Mimi and Einstein on the Beach”, a thought that frightens and fascinates me). The players, however, especially percussionist David Van Tieghem, are superb, and play their parts meticulously, and Laurie’s twisted storytelling logic holds the album together as a conceptual piece, even where there aren’t really songs.

The album is also anchored by two long, sketchy narratives that do fade in and out of being songs. “Big Science” and “O Superman” both find Laurie tentatively singing the odd word or phrase here and there, and while she handles this gingerly and without really any particular flair, the combination of her earnest efforts with the spoken lyrics and pulsing, skeletal music is fascinating both for what it is and for the great musical shapes that it hints at the borders of. I haven’t had the courage to buy the whole multi-CD *United States*, but this sampling is certainly worth having on historical grounds, and seems to hold up much better under repeated play than I would have expected from a mostly-spoken record.

#### *Mister Heartbreak*, 1984 CD

Either Laurie Anderson’s debut won her a lot of celebrity fans very quickly, or she knew a bunch of famous people already, because her second album, *Mister Heartbreak*, is packed with talented guests, including Adrian Belew, William S. Burroughs, Anton Fier, Peter Gabriel, Bill Laswell, Nile Rodgers, David Van Tieghem and Phoebe Snow. Their collective presence gives this album a musical facility that the first one lacked, and a few of these tracks, notably “Sharkey’s Day” and the Gabriel collaboration “Excellent Birds” (which he released on one of his albums, too), are undeniably songs. Laurie herself doesn’t seem to have quite adapted to this change, and she mostly sticks to her stories, little changed for their new environs. I, hoping to hear her sing some more (I *like* singing), find her implacability disappointing, and for me this album has neither *Big Science*’s simple charm, nor the musical capitulation I was hoping for. I don’t find it that much fun to listen to, Belew’s squalling guitar on “Sharkey’s Day” notwithstanding, and I’ve sat out the rest of her career so far.

## Philip Glass

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#### *Songs from Liquid Days*, 1986 LP

Philip Glass is another major figure in contemporary music who I figured I should know something about. His minimalist epics, like *Einstein on the Beach*, were a bit on the intimidating side, but this

album of actual *songs*, with vocals and everything, seemed like a good opening.

Rather than write lyrics himself, Glass recruited David Byrne and Suzanne Vega to write the words to a couple songs each, and Paul Simon and Laurie Anderson to do the other two, and then got Bernard Fowler, Janice Pendarvis, Linda Ronstadt, Douglas Perry and the Roches to sing them. The results are rather strange. Laurie Anderson’s words to “Forgetting” are the only ones that seem even vaguely appropriate to the music to me. Philip is unexpectedly upbeat for the occasion, and more than one of these songs comes up a mere drum-track short of dance-worthiness. The *perceived* distance between serious minimalist modern-art music and commercial synth-pop is much greater than the real distance, I think. The attitude and production of this album and, say, a Yaz record, are worlds apart, but the core music itself really isn’t.

I find I prefer mine *with* the drums, but if you crank it up loud enough and do a little imagining, this record conceals some reasonably plausible grooves.

## Jean Michel Jarre

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#### *Oxygene*, 1976 LP

Mom and I discovered Jean Michel Jarre playing in a para-military surplus clothing store called Manœuvres down on Greenville Avenue in Dallas when I was in high school, or maybe junior-high. He remains, in my opinion, the quintessential new-age hyper-synthesizer wizard, better than Tomita or Kitaro or Vangelis or any of those people. He’s also about the only French artist in this book, I’m pretty sure.

I don’t have a lot to *say* about these albums. You either *like* spacey mid-Seventies reverb-and-echo-crazy multiple-synthesizer beep-a-thons or you don’t. Jarre has at least a couple compilations, and you’d be well-advised to start with one of those, as one album of this stuff may be more than enough to satisfy you. I was *really* into Jarre for a few months after we discovered him, so that’s why I have several. *Oxygene* was the first one I got, and it remains the “normal” Jean Michel Jarre album in my mind.

#### *Equinoxe*, 1978 LP

*Equinoxe* is a lot like *Oxygene*. At one time I could have easily told the two apart, just by recognizing the individual musical themes on each, but those days are long gone. Now my best bet would be scrutinizing the timbral range. *Equinoxe* shows some signs of having been done two years later on in the development of



synthesizers, and although the buzzy analog “synth” sounds still dominate, there’s a noticeable minority movement of softer and more bell-like tones creeping in that give this album a slightly wider sonic palette than *Oxygene*.

### ***Les Chants Magnetique*, 1981 CD**

This is the definitive old-style JMJ album, and if you need a specific album to start with, this is the one. It’s got his best melodies, his first serious percussion programming, real sampled instruments (ah, another synthesist gets his first Fairlight!), and a great cover photo with the globe superimposed on his eyeball. Much of the album may be too fast and energetic for new-age meditation, but that’s what you have Enya for.

Also, there’s a rumba at the end. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.

### ***Zoolook*, 1984 CD**

*Zoolook* is the *new* Jean Michel Jarre. A *very* different record from the earlier ones, this one is an intense combination of processed recorded voices (in Aboriginal, Afghan, Arabic, Balinese, Burundi, Chad, Chinese, English, Eskimo, French, Gabonese, German, Hungarian, Indian, Japanese, Madagascan, Malayan, Pigmy, Quechua, Russian, Sioux, Spanish, Swedish, Tibetan and Turkish), Jarre’s keyboards, Adrian Belew’s guitar, bass, drums, and even Laurie Anderson doing vocals on one song (“Diva”, a sort of “Let X=X”-like performance mostly composed of isolated syllables). It’s sort of the rock national anthem from the Tower of Babel. Almost the entire record is eminently danceable, and *none* of it is relaxing and atmospheric like *Oxygene* or *Equinoxe*. This is the one album where I think Jarre rises above his own customary personality and makes something independently remarkable. Forget rap pirating, *this* is what samplers are for.

### ***Rendez-vous*, 1986 LP**

*Zoolook* must have really taken it out of Jarre, as *Rendez-vous* is painfully bland by comparison. Returning to staid synthesizer arrangements as if he *hadn’t* discovered a vibrant new musical universe just two years before, he doesn’t even manage to recapture the charm of his pre-*Zoolook* synthetic outings. I’m touched by the inclusion of “Last Rendez-vous”, which was to be the first piece of music performed in space (by Challenger astronaut and saxophonist Ron McNair, except that this is the mission that Challenger chose to explode on), but the music just does nothing for me, and I haven’t had the heart to buy another Jarre record since.

## **Vangelis**

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### ***Albedo 0.39*, 1976 LP**

Vangelis was okay, but I didn’t like him as much as Jarre, and he was doing very similar things, so this is as far as I got. The coolest thing on this album is the guy reading random astronomical data about the Earth during the title track.

## **Tangerine Dream**

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### ***Stratosfear*, 1976 LP**

Tangerine Dream was okay, too, but I didn’t like them as much as Jarre, either, and again, at least to my limited ability for differentiating between albums of wordless synthesizer music, it’s the same sort of stuff. Soundtrack filler.

## **Mark Isham**

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### ***Castalia*, 1988 LP**

I don’t really like this album at all, but I keep it because I read a great article in either *Electronic Musician* or *Music Technology* about the tour Isham put together for it, in which they explained how guitarist David Torn didn’t want to worry about having to mic an actual acoustic guitar on stage in order to play the one part required of it, and so *sampled* the guitar, and played the sampler via a Yamaha G-10 guitar synth, which is one of those ones where all the strings are the same gauge so that the actual strings make the *wrong* noises if you listen to them instead of to the MIDI-driven output. The idea of using a \$10,000 guitar-controller to drive a \$15,000 sampler through a multi-thousand dollar bank of processing gear, just to avoid having to set up a \$150 microphone for a \$250 acoustic guitar struck me as inspired, and the idea that if all the electronics suddenly shut off the guitar actually being played would be making completely unrelated sounds, that just made the vision all the more perfectly surreal.

## **The Michael Nyman Band**

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Michael Nyman is one of my few ventures into territory where I feel I am clearly way of out my depth. I actually have to go into the *Classical* room to buy his CDs! This is a frightening experience, as I am

confronted with a weird alternate universe where most of the most popular artists have been dead an embarrassingly long time, and nobody thinks it at all strange that there are dozens of different recordings of the *same piece* on sale, with no obvious way to discern what is intended to be distinct about each of them, if indeed something even is.

I wouldn't know about Nyman at all except that he is the resident soundtrack-composer for film-director Peter Greenaway, who is not only my *favorite* director, but is the *only* director whose auteurial presence I feel in his films even without his actually appearing in them. After seeing *The Falls*; *The Draughtsman's Contract*; *Belly of an Architect*; *A Zed and Two Noughts*; *Drowning by Numbers*; *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*; and *Prospero's Books*, enough of Nyman's music had seeped into me that it occurred to me that I might enjoy hearing his music even when I *wasn't* actually watching a Greenaway film. This guess turned out to be correct.

Nyman's style is distinctive, and describing it accurately would require a much more sophisticated classical-music lexicon than I absorbed from a semester of music-history in college (Bach to the present!). He appears to be almost as fascinated with delving into classical source material and producing new works out of its ears like parlor-trick quarters as Greenaway is fascinated with classical painting techniques in his film creation. Nyman makes extensive use of repetition in his compositions, but there's nothing minimal about it. What appears on first listening to be strict sequence-able (if not sequenced) patterning turns out to actually be human-played music that revisits themes incessantly, but rarely without modifying, mutating or otherwise altering them on each pass. The problem with most classical music, I told my mother by way of explanation when giving her *The Essential Michael Nyman Band* one Christmas, is that it's so *old*. This is *new* classical music; music that extends the classical tradition into the present, rather than subverting or escaping it like Cage or Glass or Reich.

#### ***Drowning by Numbers*, 1988 CD**

*Drowning by Numbers* may well be my very favorite movie, vying for that honor with *Harold and Maude*, another film whose music is integral. The soundtrack, disembodied, isn't nearly as significant to me as the movie, but I love the film so much that I am willing to extract any piece that can be detached and examine it on its own to see what it reveals. The liner notes, explaining the process of the score's composition, are fascinating, and shows that if I ever meet Michael Nyman I should not try to discuss Mozart with him, as I will either stand there with my mouth open and no

sound coming out, or I will say something, and either course of action would be regrettable. It's clear from his notes that Nyman made a concerted effort to mirror the obsessiveness and listing fascination of the film in the score, and while I would never have explicitly identified any of the specific examples of this that he points out, the music has the desired overall effect, and complements the rest of the movie perfectly. Buying the soundtrack is optional, really, but you *should* see the film. *Drowning by Numbers* is a particularly good one to see as it is distinctly Greenaway-ian, but is much lighter-hearted than *A Zed and Two Noughts* or *The Cook etc.*, both of which are extremely visceral and disturbing ways to introduce yourself to Peter Greenaway. After seeing it you may think me somewhat warped for calling it "light-hearted", but after seeing the other two you'll know what I mean.

#### ***The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, 1989 CD**

This soundtrack is dominated by two pieces. The first, "Memorial", is the funeral-procession music that appears in fragments throughout the film, and then in its entirety during the buildup to the final scene, which I won't ruin for you. The second, "Misereré", is the complete choral version of the plaintive song that the kitchen-boy soprano sings bits of throughout the film. There is an instrumental version of "Misereré", and two other pieces, but to me they serve mostly to space the two essential movements out so that the total elapsed time from the beginning of one to the end of the other reaches the magical forty-minute mark that assures that the quantity-conscious music-buying public will not riot in the streets upon discovering that they've been made to pay list price for a mere half-hour or less of musical consumer-product.

#### ***The Essential Michael Nyman Band*, 1992 CD**

Here's the one to get if you're curious about Nyman's music, or liked it in the films and just want a sampling to have around. This collection has three pieces from *The Draughtsman's Contract*, two short selections from *A Zed and Two Noughts*, about ten minutes from *Drowning by Numbers*, "Memorial" and "Misereré Paraphrase" from *The Cook etc.*, two pieces from something called *Water Dances* that I'm not familiar with, and one from *Prospero's Books*. It's a great selection, and a great introduction both to Nyman's style and to the nature of his collaboration with Greenaway. Plus, it's classical music, and thus legal for gift-giving to people of any age. I keep a stack of them handy.

## Tirez Tirez

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### *Set the Timer, 1986 12"*

Tirez Tirez is a pop band, not a classical music ensemble, but other than that detail, they share a lot with Michael Nyman. If you can imagine an academically-trained semi-minimal classical composer fronting Gene Loves Jezebel, that's sort of what Tirez Tirez is like. Mikel Rouse (who actually *is* a classical composer in another life) *is* Tirez Tirez, and does everything on this single except play bass (an odd exception, I think—you'd imagine that someone who can play guitar and keyboards and drums and sing would be able to manage a plausible bass line as well, but I guess not). "Set the Timer" is a hypnotic, cyclical song, and was one of the ones that kept me sane during the summer after my freshman year of college (see Pop Art for details). Rouse's falsetto is enchanting, and insistent repetition gives the sketchy lyrics flashes of unexplained import. The repetitiveness of the song is boosted by the fact that the A side of this 12" has the song twice, with only minor mix-balance differences between the two versions. The b-side, "Uptight", finds him singing in his normal, lower voice, sounding a little like Jon Astley or Timbuk 3.

### *Social Responsibility, 1987 LP*

The first Tirez Tirez album I found (there is an earlier one), this 1987 release is entirely songs from the same recording session that produced "Set the Timer". It's *not* on the same label, however, which perhaps explains the delay. It also doesn't have "Set the Timer", though "Uptight" does make it onto the album. Initially, I was a bit disappointed by the absence not only of "Set the Timer" itself, but of any songs precisely like "Set the Timer". I *liked* the falsetto Rouse used for that song, and the harmony effect that combining it with his normal voice produced, but the falsetto is virtually nowhere to be found on these nine songs.

If you can overlook that detail, though, the album is quite impressive. It's tightly patterned, which will probably bother some people (*badly*), but I find its carefully symmetrical construction fascinating, and none of these songs really push their welcome. None of them quite equal "Set the Timer", but they cluster on the quality scale around "Uptight", not that far below. I particularly like the stiff snare of "My Mistake", the folky acoustic guitar of "Wake Up", and the demented vocal and percussion harangue of "See My Problem" (which as a *little* falsetto on backing vocals).

I can understand why this album wasn't a big hit. Rouse makes very few concessions to his audience, and

if you don't like the first four measures of a song you might as well skip it, because not only is it not going to get "better", but it isn't even going to *change* appreciably. The very uncommonness of this dedication to playing out focused musical ideas, on the other hand, is what I like about *Social Responsibility*. Also, I like the title, and the cover photograph (of a chemical diagram on a billboard in the middle of a field, with the silhouette of a bull's head showing over the top from the other side of the billboard) is marvelous.

### *Against All Flags, 1988 CD*

For the next Tirez Tirez album, Rouse recruited a drummer, a keyboard player, and an electric guitarist, and restricted his own participation to acoustic guitar and multiple vocals. Whether this is inherently inimical to my appreciation of his music, or whether *this* band just doesn't do it for me (or whether this set of songs just isn't as much to my liking as the last bunch), *Against All Flags* starts out feeling flat and empty compared to *Social Responsibility*, and the first three songs don't capture my interest at all.

"The Receiver" and "Never Begin" are improvements, with some nice keyboard ambiance on the former and vocal harmonies on the latter (which sounds a little like a half-speed "Set the Timer"), but things don't pick up in earnest until the second side. The bouncy "Unless I Miss My Guess" and the slower, meditative "When Pilots Came" lead nicely up to the title track, which is my favorite Tirez Tirez song of all. "Against All Flags" takes the repetition (have you ever noticed that there aren't really any satisfactory synonyms for "repeat", forcing any extended discussion of repetition to be repetitious itself? do you suppose it's intentional?) that characterizes all Tirez Tirez work and gives it its definitive explication. Rouse uses exactly *one* vocal melody (and *one* matching harmony) for every line of the song except the final line of the chorus, where all the amassed tension of the repetition resolves itself orgasmically in a deceptively simple cadence. It's truly beautiful, and the chorus' tag line "Remember I'm neutral / I'm against all flags" really appeals to me as well.

"Right as Rain" and "See the Living" finish out the album in strong form. I still think I would have *preferred* another Rouse-only effort like *Social Responsibility*. Just programmed drums would have made a big difference, I think. Bill Tesar is competent, but the mechanical insistence of the drum machine on *Social Responsibility* fit with the style perfectly, and Tesar can't (or doesn't) reproduce it. It doesn't appear that I'll ever get to find out what Rouse thought about the two

approaches, though, as there are no subsequent Tirez Tirez albums to reveal his vote.

## Penguin Cafe Orchestra

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### *Penguin Cafe Orchestra, 1981 LP*

Penguin Cafe Orchestra is a strange ensemble consisting of multi-instrumentalist, composer and producer Simon Jeffes, and assorted accomplices. There's a violinist and a cellist, but other than that the assemblage bears little resemblance to an orchestra. Instead, they make agreeable, if mild and often somewhat silly, acoustic soundtrack-y music with titles like "Cutting Branches for a Temporary Shelter", "Pythagoras' Trousers", "Salty Bean Fumble" and "The Ecstasy of Dancing Fleas". I bought the record years ago because I kept seeing the group's section in the record bins and was dying of curiosity wondering what kind of music they made, and I've kept it both because somebody else is bound to have the same question I did, and now I can answer it, and also because in their own small way Penguin Cafe Orchestra comes up with some charming little bits, and if I ever make a pastoral PBS nature-film short this is ready-made accompaniment. They actually appear on the soundtrack to David Parker and Nadia Tess' endearing film *Malcolm*, too.

## Rondo' Veneziano

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### *Rondo' Veneziano, 1980 LP*

Imagine an Italian disco *Hooked on Classics*. Now, imagine that it turned out *good*. No? Well, try again. Still no?

Okay, you're just going to have to take my word for it. All I can tell you about Rondo' Veneziano is that this record is from Italy, and that my then-girlfriend Hilary got it for me for Christmas our senior year in high school, having walked into Italian art-bookstore Rizzoli while they happened to be playing it. The cover has a drawing of two Renaissance-era musicians (a flute player and a cellist) playing on the outside of a *Battlestar Galactica*-like spaceship, evidently not phased by the lack of gravity holding them to the surface of the ship, the lack of oxygen for them to breath, the near-absolute-zero temperature, the unlivable lack of atmospheric pressure, and the not inconsequential lack of any sort of sound-transmitting medium to give their determined playing the slightest significance or use.

The same sort of oblivious disregard that the cover illustration exhibits is evident in the music, too. Anybody could have told the perpetrators of this album that the last thing the world needed was an album of cheesy drum-machine-enlivened classical-sounding music of no particular origin. Happy people would find it cloying, and unhappy people would find it unbearable. Pop fans would frown at the lack of lyrics and the profusion of flute solos, and classical fans wouldn't even put the album *on*. Add to that the fact that I really can't decide whether the instruments here are even *real* or not (they probably have to be, given the state of the art in synthesis as of 1980, but the dynamics are *so* uniform that I give the alternative serious consideration), and you have an album whose intended appeal is singularly unclear. I'm not sure that I can think of any scenario *other* than walking into a Rizzoli and hearing it that would stand the slightest chance of selling a copy. I certainly don't expect *you* to buy one based on my description.

## Zamfir, Master of the Pan Flute

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### *Georghe Zamfir, Vol. 2, 1990 CD*

Yeah, you've heard the late-night television commercials, and if you'd been invited to my Worst Possible CD birthday party, you too might have brought an album by the infamous Zamfir, Master of the Pan Flute. Probably you wouldn't even have listened to it first, and you wouldn't even seriously expect that *I* would, after you left. The joke of presenting it would have been enough.

Well, I *have* listened to this CD, and I feel obligated to report my finding: Zamfir *is* the Master of the Pan Flute. You may laugh all you want, but *never* have I heard a title as richly deserved as Zamfir's. The things this man can do with a pan flute are genuinely astounding. The music, miscellaneous Romanian folk tunes, dances and suites, may not exactly be your market niche, but they aren't mine either, and I sit in helpless awe listening to Zamfir's unparalleled control, speed and expressiveness. My rule after the party was that I had to try to listen to at least three songs from each album, no matter how awful they were, and most of the things I got came off the *second* the third track ended (Wayne Newton didn't last thirty seconds). Zamfir I listened to *all the way through*, and then a few days later I listened to it *again*! Counting now, as I write this review, I've listened to it *three times*! One Zamfir album is plenty, mind you, and even listening to a friend's once would probably be sufficient exposure to fill in this gap in your cultural education, but if you

haven't evaluated the value of Zamfir's claim on the title of Master of the Pan Flute for yourself, I don't think you should be allowed to joke about it.

# Appendix B: Lists

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I've alluded to these many times in the text, so here are the actual year-end best-music lists I made for the years 1988-1993. Each of these was made at the end of the year in question, with eligibility limited to music both released and purchased by me that calendar year. I began annotating these lists in 1991, so I've included those notes as well. I could supply all sorts of caveats about how my tastes have changed since 1988, but the whole point of printing these is to be forthright about what I really liked *at the time*.

"Belated Mentions" are for albums that, the year I *bought* them, I liked enough that I thought they might have made the top ten in their release year if I'd know about them then. The other categories should be self-explanatory.

## 1988

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### Albums

1. **They Might Be Giants:** *Lincoln*
2. **Pixies:** *Surfer Rosa*
3. **The Divinyls:** *Temperamental*
4. **Living Color:** *Vivid*
5. **Big Country:** *Peace in Our Time*
6. **Game Theory:** *Two Steps From the Middle Ages*
7. **The Adventures:** *The Sea of Love*
8. **The Bears:** *Rise and Shine*
9. **Clannad:** *Sirius*
10. **The Icicle Works:** *Blind*

### Songs

1. **They Might Be Giants:** "Ana Ng"
2. **Grace Pool:** "Awake with the Rain"
3. **Game Theory:** "Throwing the Election"
4. **Big Country:** "Peace in Our Time"
5. **Living Color:** "Open Letter to a Landlord"
6. **The Bears:** "Aches and Pains"
7. **Clannad:** "Stepping Stone"
8. **Pixies:** "Gigantic"
9. **The Divinyls:** "Back to the Wall"
10. (tie) **The Divinyls:** "Temperamental"
10. (tie) **Siouxsie and the Banshees:** "Killing Jar"

## 1989

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### Albums

1. Marillion: *Seasons End*
2. IQ: *Are You Sitting mfortably?*
3. New Model Army: *Thunder and Consolation*
4. The Connells: *Fun and Games*
5. Kate Bush: *The Sensual World*
6. Rush: *Presto*
7. Boris Grebenshikov: *Radio Silence*
8. Jane Siberry: *Bound by the Beauty*
9. The Blue Nile: *Hats*
10. The Posies: *Failure*

### Songs

1. Marillion: "The King of Sunset Town"
2. IQ: "War Heroes"
3. Billy Joel: "We Didn't Start the Fire"
4. New Model Army: "Green and Grey"
5. The Connells: "Something to Say"
6. Guadalcanal Diary: "Always Saturday"
7. Kate Bush: "Love and Anger"
8. Boris Grebenshikov: "Radio Silence"
9. Rush: "The Pass"
10. Camper van Beethoven: "(I Was Born in a) Laundromat"

## 1990

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### Albums

1. The Connells: *One Simple Word*
2. The Beautiful South: *Choke*
3. The Beautiful South: *Welcome to the Beautiful South*
4. Iron Maiden: *No Prayer For the Dying*
5. Megadeth: *Rust in Peace*
6. Living Color: *Time's Up*
7. The Waterboys: *Room to Roam*
8. Grace Pool: *Where We Live*
9. Queensrÿche: *Empire*
10. Pixies: *Bossanova*

### Songs

1. The Connells: "Set the Stage"
2. The Beautiful South: "Let Love Speak Up Itself"
3. The Connells: "Stone Cold Yesterday"
4. Grace Pool: "Paint the Ending"
5. The Waterboys: "A Life of Sundays"
6. Iron Maiden: "Tailgunner"
7. Too Much Joy: "Making Fun of Bums"
8. Megadeth: "Holy Wars... The Punishment Due"
9. Public Enemy: "Welcome to the Terrordome"
10. Pixies: "Dig For Fire"

## 1991

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### Albums

#### 1. T'Pau: *The Promise*

Simply the record I liked listening to the most.

#### 2. Big Country: *No Place Like Home*

My all-time favorite band retrenches successfully without bagpipe sounds or Mark Brzezicki. This is my vote for the most courageous album of the year, in a much subtler and more personal way than, say, U2's *Achtung Baby*.

#### 3. Marillion: *Holidays in Eden*

My second favorite band continues to mature gracefully. Fish's second solo album *Internal Exile* has some spellbinding moments, but Marillion's music without Fish's grandiose schemes continues to work better than the reverse.

#### 4. School of Fish: *School of Fish*

A near-perfect album that for me shows the difference between eloquent rock melancholy and Manchester lethargy.

#### 5. Talk Talk: *Laughing Stock*

The only innovative record I heard all year. Compared to Talk Talk, everybody else sounds practically alike.

#### 6. Nirvana: *Nevermind*

I still think aliens were responsible for Nirvana passing Paula Abdul on the charts, but the album can survive on its own merits.

#### 7. The Bags: *Night of the Corn People & Waiting for Maloney*

Boston's best band's farewell album.

#### 8. The Screaming Jets: *All For One*

The catchiest heavy metal record ever.

#### 9. Too Much Joy: *Cereal Killers*

"Irresistible puppy-dog charm" someone described Too Much Joy as having, and I haven't thought of any way to improve on the phrase. I'm not sure you could be any less pretentious than Too Much Joy and still make records. My favorite lyric of the year may be: "We ain't seen much, but we don't starve. We drive around in our moms' cars."

#### 10. Metal Church: *The Human Factor*

There were more important heavy metal records this year, but I liked this one better.

### Songs

#### 1.tie) Anthrax/Public Enemy: "Bring the Noise"

#### 1. (tie) Jesus Jones: "Right Here, Right Now"

Anthrax/PE shook rock the hardest, but "Right Here, Right Now" will always *be* 1991 in my mind.

#### 3. Fishbone: "Sunless Saturdays"

If any band ever makes a whole album that sounds like this song I could probably throw away most of the rest of my collection.

#### 4. Nirvana: "Smells Like Teen Spirit"

#### 5. Big Country: "We're Not In Kansas"

#### 6. Marillion: "Cover My Eyes (Pain and Heaven)"

#### 7. T'Pau: "The Promise"

#### 8. The Bags: "L. Frank Baum"

#### 9. School of Fish: "Three Strange Days"

#### 10. Too Much Joy: "Crush Story"

4-10 pretty much follow from the album list.

### New Artist

#### School of Fish

#### Cover Song (tie)

#### School of Fish: "Father Figure" (George Michael)

Available on a "promotional use only" CD5 recorded live in LA. I had the good fortune to see this live twice. To be honest, somebody had to tell me it was a cover.

#### Kate Bush: "Candle in the Wind" (Elton John)

Way better than anything on *Two Rooms*, Kate's "Rocket Man" included. Available only on the UK single of "Rocket Man".

### Belated Mentions

#### Beth Nielsen Chapman: *Beth Nielsen Chapman* (1990)

I know I must be getting older, because I now own and adore an album that Star Market plays without having a Muzak version made.

#### Slayer: *Seasons in the Abyss* (1990)

Slayer and Beth Nielsen Chapman balance each other out nicely, I think.

#### Del Amitri: *Waking Hours* (1989)

Possibly the most thoughtfully cynical record I know of.



**The Comsat Angels: *Chasing Shadows* (1986)**

One of those rare records that make you feel like it's 5:00 am and you're the only person awake in the world.

**1992**

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**Albums****1. Tori Amos: *Little Earthquakes***

No new album has ever made as much of an impression on me as this one. In many ways, Tori Amos *was* 1992 in music for me. This gets my "masterpiece" stamp and goes straight onto my Best Albums Ever list.

**2. Soul Asylum: *Grave Dancers Union***

In the rare moments when Tori Amos doesn't monopolize my memory of 1992, I will recall that it was the year I discovered Soul Asylum. If this album doesn't sell as many copies as *Nevermind* or *Ten*, I'm sure I don't know why.

**3. The Comsat Angels: *My Mind's Eye***

The year's best lie is the note "Not for sale in the United States of America" on the back of this CD. The howls of huge wounded beasts wouldn't carry in outer space, much less echo, but this is what I imagine they would sound like if they did.

**4. Buffalo Tom: *Let Me Come Over***

Another band that was new to me this year. "Beautifully understated and awesomely simple", I would say if they asked me for a cover-sticker blurb.

**5. Black Sabbath: *Dehumanizer***

The "lean years" of Tony Iommi's virtually-solo Black Sabbath came to a crashing end this year with the return of Geezer Butler, Vinny Appice and Ronnie James Dio, who pick up right where *The Mob Rules* left off.

**6. Del Amitri: *Change Everything***

Any song on this album could be on 1989's *Waking Hours*, and vice versa, and if Del Amitri makes a hundred more albums just like this I'll still think each new one is a classic. When I say that melancholy is the most beautiful emotion, this is what I mean.

**7. Megadeth: *Countdown to Extinction***

Not the flashiest Megadeth album, but perhaps the most mature, and in my current opinion the best.

**8. Melissa Etheridge: *Never Enough***

Take the VH1 out of Bonnie Raitt and you'd get something like this. If you were lucky.

**9. Think Tree: *Like the Idea***

The year's most innovative record. Machines are good. Mayhem is good. Cows, porcupines, rattlesnakes.

**10. (tie) Manic Street Preachers: *Generation Terrorists***

Great power-pop or musical-punk or something.

**10. (tie) Too Much Joy: *Mutiny***

The world's best liner notes. The music is pretty good, too.

**Songs****1. Tori Amos: "Silent All These Years"**

The one song that absolutely will not leave my head.

**2. Fiona: "Life on the Moon"**

Fiona is a guilty pleasure of mine, but I can put this song on repeat and listen to it over and over and over and over...

**3. Soul Asylum: "Black Gold"**

America.

**4. The Comsat Angels: "Driving"**

A song about escape that becomes the escape itself.

**5. Black Sabbath: "Computer God"**

The inverse of Kate Bush's "Deeper Understanding".

**6. Manic Street Preachers: "Stay Beautiful"**

This used single was definitely the best \$0.99 impulse buy of the year.

**7. Too Much Joy: "Stay at Home"**

A party rock anthem for the next generation.

**8. Buffalo Tom: "Taillights Fade"**

Sadness, triumph, dinosaurs; what more could you ask for?

**9. Del Amitri: "Always the Last to Know"**

Unbelievably, Justin Currie finds yet another *original* failed-relationship angle to hang a beautiful pop song on.

**10. (tie) Kimm Rogers: "Will Work for Food"**

Where Jesus Jones' "Right Here, Right Now" captured the mood of 1991, I think this one was the mood of the world in 1992.

**10. (tie) XTC: "Ballad of Peter Pumpkinhead"**

The converse of Megadeth's "Symphony of Destruction".

**Songs (Tori Amos version)**

If nobody but Tori Amos had put out any music this year, I still would have thought it was a great yeain music, and my top ten list would have looked like this:

**1. Tori Amos: "Silent All These Years"****2. Tori Amos: "Sweet Dreams"****3. Tori Amos: "Tear in Your Hand"****4. Tori Amos: "Happy Phantom"****5. Tori Amos: "Crucify"****6. Tori Amos: "Little Earthquakes"****7. Tori Amos: "Winter"****8. Tori Amos: "Precious Things"****9. Tori Amos: "China"****10. Tori Amos: "Flying Dutchman"****Cover Songs****Tori Amos: "Smells Like Teen Spirit" (Nirvana)**

Tori translates Nirvana into a completely different musical genre without changing the song's emotional intensity. This is the sincere version of Aztec Camera doing Van Halen's "Jump".

**The Wonder Stuff: "That's Entertainment" (The Jam)**

A faithful updating of a modern classic. I put this in the same category as Megadeth's version of "Anarchy in the UK": this is what the song would have sounded like if the original had been recorded when the cover was.

**Compilations****Celtic Frost: *Parched with Thirst Am I and Dying***

Why is it that Slayer have become megastars, but when I say "Celtic Frost" the only reaction I usually get is a reminder that "Celtic" is pronounced "Keltic"? With material from all five CDs, remixes, b-sides, two previously unreleased tracks and two new (1991) songs, this is what collections should be: a good introduction to the band but something you won't throw away once you've gone back and bought all their albums.

**The Icicle Works: *The Best of/ Best Kept Secrets***

Another excellent compilation, the first half of this 2 CD set covers a representative selection from The Icicle Works' four Beggars Banquet albums (including a new remix of "Understanding Jane", one of my absolute favorites) and a couple unreleased songs. The second CD contributes 16 b-sides, live versions and covers. The Icicle Works were grea

**Nirvana: *Incesticide***

More great Nirvana songs, including "Dive", which would have been on my Top Ten list for sure if I'd known about in 1990, when it originally came out.

**Remix****Sisters of Mercy: "Temple of Love (1992): Touched By the Hand of Ofra Haza"**

This was my favorite Sisters of Mercy song to begin with, and this remix gives it the fully histrionic now-traditional Sisters' touch that it deserves.

**Belated Mentions****Runrig: *Once In A Lifetime* (1988)**

The third of my big discoveries this year, a Scottish rock/traditional band I ran across in the gift shop of the Clan Donald Centre on the Isle of Skye. Now if only Runrig and Big Country would tour the US...

**The Icicle Works: *Permanent Damage* (1991)**

Another record I had to go to the UK to find, this was the last Icicle Works album, made during their short tenure on CBS with a completely different supporting cast than the rest of the albums. Nonetheless, Ian McNabb wrote the songs, and I am reminded strongly of Big Star's *Third/Sister Lovers*.

**Fates Warning: *Parallels* (1991)**

Sure, they sound like Queensrÿche circa *Rage for Order*, but that's a compliment in my book, and progressive metal is a genre that can stand several more entrants before it gets crowded.

**Shona Laing: *South* (?)**

1983? 1987? There's no date on this CD, and none of my reference books list it, but it's a great synth-pop album all the same. Something like a cross between Berlin, Jane Siberry and Patty Smyth, left to mellow in New Zealand for a few years.

**Baby Animals: *Baby Animals* (1991)**

If the Pretenders had arrived in the mainstream via Aerosmith and Sydney rather than the Clash and Akron, this is how they might have sounded. "Painless" continues to grow on me.

## 1993

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### Albums

#### 1. Cyndi Lauper: *Full of Stars*

The year's most impressive surprise, and a clear choice for first place in my mind, Cyndi Lauper's first new album in four years takes her from being a charming pop singer with a great voice and good taste in songs to being on par with such human angels as Kate, Tori, Jane, Sarah and Happy. "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" is a distant, almost irrelevant, memory.

#### 2. Big Country: *The Buffalo Skinners*

Big Country is my favorite band; this is their sixth album. After years of self-produced b-sides proving that the band *could* make music without any outside assistance, this album finally finds them with the courage to produce a whole album themselves. Listening to *The Buffalo Skinners*, I can easily imagine that this is what the other five records were *supposed* to sound like.

#### 3. Kate Bush: *The Red Shoes*

Three of my four favorite artists had new albums this year, and here's the second. Breaking another of this list's long silences, Kate's new album is probably her most accessible, most varied and most commercial, but it is also irrepressibly, unmistakably, brilliantly Kate.

#### 4. The Loud Family: *Plants & Birds & Rocks & Things*

Don't let the name fool you, the Loud Family is Game Theory, and Game Theory is the third of my four favorite artists to be heard from in 1993. Scott Miller switches band-names and recruits yet another new lineup, and then proceeds to make the follow-up to Game Theory's classic *Lolita Nation* as if nothing has changed.

#### 5. Jane Siberry: *When I Was a Boy*

Jane Siberry needed an acoustic album and a four-year hiatus to clear her mind, but she finally figures out how to follow *The Speckless Sky* and *The Walking*. Quiet, sublime.

#### 6. Manic Street Preachers: *Gold Against the Soul*

Punk is alive, well, spitting and *in tune*. If the Sex Pistols had known how to play and sing, they still probably wouldn't have sounded this good. Every time I look at last year's top-ten list, I can't believe I didn't put their first album higher than tenth. A year from now I'll probably wonder why this one only got sixth.

#### 7. Living Colour: *Stain*

After a second album that seemed to me to go in far too many directions at once, Living Colour recaptures their original drive and makes my favorite metal album since the Sisters of Mercy's *Vision Thing*.

#### 8. Aimee Mann: *Whatever*

Following yet another long silence, hers *not* self-imposed, former 'til tuesday lead singer Aimee Mann produces a confident, mature solo debut that sounds as if she'd been making an album a year ever since *Everything's Different Now*, each one better than the last.

#### 9. The Bobs: *Shut Up and Sing*

The Bobs first four albums established them firmly as the world's greatest a cappella rock band, but are largely interchangeable. *Shut Up and Sing* finds them showing their first signs of post-formation musical development, as well as at least five of their best songs yet. Drums and no covers, no less.

#### 10. (tie) Fugazi: *In on the Kill Taker*

#### 10. (tie) IQ: *Ever*

I didn't want to have any ties this year, but I couldn't resist the opportunity to pair the last true defenders of straight-edge hardcore with my second favorite progressive-rock band. Heedless of grunge, techno, and everything else, Fugazi continue to make austere, furiously-uncompromising, angular music. IQ re-enlists original vocalist Peter Nichols, and makes an album somewhere in between *The Wake* and *Are You Sitting Comfortably?*, which is as brilliantly conceived and executed as it is poorly distributed. Maybe Dischord and Giant Electric Pea could work out a deal.

### Songs

#### 1. Manic Street Preachers: "La Tristesse Durera (Scream to a Sigh)"

This year's nominee for Infinite Repeat.

#### 2. American Music Club: "Johnny Mathis' Feet"

The year's best name-drop.

#### 3. Kate Bush: "Moments of Pleasure"

The simplest, quietest song on *The Red Shoes*, and for me the most affecting.

**4. Melissa Ferrick: "Honest Eyes"**

If you are making a debut album and want to catch people's attention *very* quickly, start it like this.

**5. Tribe: "Supercollider"**

I'm a sucker for Big Science, and it's about time somebody other than Rush wrote a song about it.

**6. Big Country: "Never Take Your Place"**

To complement an album that captures the intensity of b-sides, what better than another b-side, this one from the second disc of the "Alone" CD-single set?

**7. Happy Rhodes: "Mother Sea"**

This was the year that I discovered Happy Rhodes. The fact that she put out a new album during it, and that it contains this exquisitely beautiful song—those are largely side issues.

**8. Ian McNabb: "Great Dreams of Heaven"**

Ex-Icicle Works leader Ian McNabb's debut solo album is a much mellower, more-controlled record than his old band's last few, but his songwriting talent has suffered no damage in the transition.

**9. Sarah McLachlan: "Hold On"**

The stand-out track from Sarah's third album (which will be a 1994 release everywhere but Canada). It appeared in the US this year in advance of the album on the *No Alternatives* compilation.

**10. Vai: "Down Deep Into the Pain"**

The only thing MTV sold me this year. The video for this song left me speechless and wishing that record stores around here didn't close at midnight.

**New Artists****Melissa Ferrick**

Musical rebus: Melissa Etheridge minus Bonnie Raitt plus early Sinéad O'Connor, with traces of Tracy Chapman and Lone Justice. Are you sure this isn't a *fifth* album?

**Liz Phair**

Imagine Slayer as an intelligent young woman with a fascination for gender issues, a pile of well-worn Let's Active records and absolutely no concern for what anybody's parents will think, especially her own.

**Compilations/Reissues****Game Theory: *Distortion of Glory***

Just reissuing Game Theory's *recent* back catalog on CD made Alias about the coolest label around. Combining the early EPs *Pointed Accounts of People You Know* and *Distortion* on a single CD with their heretofore impossible-to-find debut *Blaze of Glory* makes Alias personal heroes of mine.

**Richard Thompson: *Watching the Dark***

A breathtaking career-overview of a breathtaking career.

**Remix****Big Country: "We're Not in Kansas"**

My favorite song from 1991's *No Place Like Home* gets redone with a vengeance on *The Buffalo Skinners*.

**Live Albums****The Jam: *Live Jam***

Every time I listen to this, Paul Weller's dissolution of the Jam comes to seem more and more like rock music's most terrible betrayal.

**Thin White Rope: *The One That Got Away***

What else can you say about a band who includes a thank you to everybody who ever said their music sounded like goats? Listening to this album, it seems a wonder to me that *anybody* got away.

**Cover Songs****Big Country: "(Don't Fear) the Reaper" (Blue Öyster Cult)**

Covering this and Black Sabbath's "Paranoid", among other things, on the CD-singles for "Ships", Big Country evidently will stop at nothing to please me. I fully expect to find them covering "More than a Feeling" and "By-Tor and the Snow Dog" on their next single.

**Soul Asylum: "Sexual Healing" (Marvin Gaye)**

How to turn an insipid soul hit into a haunting AIDS-awareness anthem in less than five minutes. The clearest explication since Cyndi Lauper's version of "What's Going On".

## Various-Artist Compilations

### *Big Times in a Small Town*

In which we find out that Christine Lavin has a *lot* of cool friends.

### *The World is a Wonderful Place*

To go along with *Watching the Dark*, a spellbinding album of *other* people doing Richard Thompson songs.

I'm tempted to mention them here, but that would be cheating.

## Belated Mentions

### Sloan: *Smeared* (1992)

A band that sounds like every other group in existence, but for only about ten seconds each.

### EMF: *Schubert Dip* (1991)

When "Unbelievable" came out, I thought it was the most annoying song ever recorded. A couple years later I'm chagrined to admit that the album is among the most energetic I've ever heard, and I'm even warming to the song.

### The Knack: *Serious Fun* (1991)

Back in 1979, the Knack were the definitive witty skinny-tie power-pop Beatles-rip-off band. For this unanticipated comeback record they traded every bit of lyrical facility for better music, and came up with the greatest album of cliché-ridden American driving music since *Boston*.

### Shoes: *Stolen Wishes* (1989)

Imagine if Devo were sincere, and kind of lonely.

### Jon Astley: *The Compleat Angler* (1988)

A vitriolic, self-deprecating critical rebuttal to what, I guess, must have been bad reviews of his great first album.

## Postscript

1993 was, easily, the best year for me for new music since I've been conscious enough to have a considered opinion. There were over thirty new albums by artists who appeared on my prior year-end lists, just for a start, and enough new discoveries to make it a great year even without incumbents. If every artist cited in these lists were to suddenly cease to exist, I could make new lists from this year's remainders without a moment's hesitation, and though my album and song lists this year have the least number of erlapping artists since I began doing this, I still have a tall stack of albums that I can't believe I'm not mentioning.

## 1994

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### Albums

#### 1. The Loud Family – *The Tape of Only Linda*

Less sprawling and structurally more restrained than *Plants & Birds & Rocks & Things*, this album strips away the noise collages, conceptual interjections and production experiments, and forces you to concentrate on the songs themselves. There are ten of them, they are about the best-written, best-played, and best-produced power pop you'll ever hear, and this is Scott Miller's loudest, rawest album by a wide margin. I can't stop playing it. The long pause between "You'll be in bed by ten" and "Think again", in "Baby Hard to Be Around", is my favorite musical moment of the year.

#### 2. Tori Amos – *Under the Pink*

My clear vote so far for artist of the decade proves that she has at least *two* albums in her as good as 1992's *Little Earthquakes*. This one is more cryptic, more ambitious, more diverse and more assured, and Tori and her piano produce the most organic human-machine interaction of any sort that I've ever witnessed. Only the fact that I *expected* this album to be this good keeps it from being my #1.

#### 3. Smart Brown Handbag – *Silverlake*

As if obscurity wasn't easy enough to come by through the normal tactics of no press, not touring, and nonexistent distribution, ex-Pop Art leader David Steinhart increased his chances at it by a sort of artistic evasive action that involved a long silence, two solo records, and then starting over with what has to be the least inspiring band name in history. That I came across this album at all is due to a series of improbable accidents too complicated to relate, but it is worth whatever search it requires. Edgier, musically, than Pop Art, and simpler and better focused than David's Costello-ish solo albums, this is the my favorite musical setting yet for his careful story-scene lyrics.

#### 4. Love Spit Love – *Love Spit Love*

Richard Butler finally put the Psychedelic Furs out of their misery, but instead of retiring in long-delayed penance for his complicity in the worst artistic betrayal-of-spirit I know of (making a cheerier version of "Pretty in Pink" to go along with a movie that completely missed its point), he recruits a new band who assist him in fielding possibly the most astonishing comeback until Salinger decides to publish again. Never mind that this album can make you forget that *Mirror Moves* and *Midnight to Midnight* ever happened, it can make you forget that *Talk Talk Talk* ever happened! That Butler has learned to sing this well since "India" must be counted one of the most remarkable things to transpire in the last fourteen years.

#### 5. Ian McNabb – *Head Like a Rock*

Cruelly underrated ex-Icicle Works leader Ian McNabb follows his precise, restrained solo debut, and years of meticulously erratic Icicle Works records, by hiring Crazy Horse, unplugging the click tracks, and making the year's most expansive, redemptive, big-hearted rock and roll record.

#### 6. American Music Club – *San Francisco*

Just another brilliant album from just another of the greatest living songwriters, AMC leader Mark Eitzel. People have been describing this as the band's first *cheerful* album, which makes sense unless you actually pay close attention to it, or to the other albums.

#### 7. Laurie Anderson – *Bright Red / Tightrope*

I admit to having no idea what this album is really about, and due to its late release to having listened to it relatively few times compared to rest of this list, but it's fascinating and unnerving, and musical, and Laurie Anderson, and I plan to listen to it a *lot* more, and those are enough to earn it a place. It should also get Brian Eno a nomination for the year's best production.

#### 8. Crowded House – *Together Alone*

I was no more than a casual Crowded House fan before this year, but I bought this album on a whim to see what there was to the critical accolades given it *last* year when it originally came out abroad. I expected "pleasant"; I got "spellbinding". Why the New Zealand Board of Tourism would do anything but mail out copies of this album from now on, I do not know.

### 9. Marillion — *Brave*

The fact that this may be my least favorite album by Marillion is sufficient to push it down to nine, but no farther. *They've* done better, but not many other bands have.

### 10. Nine Inch Nails — *The Downward Spiral*

I don't really like Trent Reznor, I'd avoided Nine Inch Nails assiduously before this, I'm sick of hearing the singles, and it pains me a little to cite an album already so thoroughly lauded by others, but this is too atmospherically riveting for me to leave it off. The noisy parts are certainly noisy, but the moments that make this album are the menacing spaces *between* the noises, when the coiled power idles with palpable barely-checked electricity. It's also the year's best synth-pop album, something it does its best to conceal.

## Songs

### 1. The Wonder Stuff — "Room 512, All the News That's Fit to Print"

I've been hoping for this song to appear on CD ever since I first heard it in the Wonder Stuff's 1992 documentary *Welcome to the Cheap Seats*, where Miles Hunt and Malcom Treece perform it squatting in a sunlit New York alleyway. Not knowing its title, I'd adopted the policy of buying all Wonder Stuff singles in case one of the b-sides was it, and this campaign paid off just in time. RIP, a sometimes-great band.

### 2. Michael Been — "To Feel This Way (second mix)"

The epic, unbilled finale to Been's solo debut. The album as a whole is less overtly cinematic than most of the work of his former band, The Call, tended to be, but this alternate mix of the last track is as grand as any of the old songs ever were.

### 3. The Grays — "Both Belong" / "Not Long for This World"

Yes, technically these are two different songs, and it's not like they're even adjacent on the album, but you have to hear them both to get at the synthesized Grays song in my mind, simultaneously sparkling and howling, like an entire hurricane frozen at once.

### 4. Wolfstone — "Holy Ground"

I have more Sicilian ancestry than Scottish, but I wouldn't know Sicilian ethnic music from a Pizza Hut commercial. Wolfstone are the current standard bearers of true, stirring, careening Celtic Rock, and it's hard to imagine a prouder flag carried by a smaller company.

### 5. The Go-Go's — "The Whole World Lost Its Head"

In 1981 the Go-Go's were "my sister's music" to me, which, in case you were never a 14-year-old boy with a 12-year-old sister, wasn't *precisely* a compliment. Who'd have predicted that thirteen years later the Go-Go's would sing "punk rock isn't dead" in a new song, and I'd agree with them?

### 6. Smart Brown Handbag — "Unholy Union"

The pure, small, simple, barbed conclusion of *Silverlake*. A welcome reminder in times when even Billy Bragg seems to have forgotten that one electric guitar and one voice are plenty to make rock and roll with, and my favorite breakup song since Richard Shindell's "Are You Happy Now?".

### 7. Crowded House — "Locked Out"

The song that led me to become a sudden Crowded House devotee after years of unexamined indifference.

### 8. Jennifer Trynin — "One Year Down"

### 9. Laurie Sargent — "Something with the Moon"

Two sterling songs from two impressively crafted albums by two first-rate Boston songwriters who make me wonder what amazing music limps into the world on tiny labels and parental loans in *other* cities.

### 10. Anne Hills — "Follow That Road"

No, *I* wouldn't have expected a song that consists entirely of directions to a house in the country to be this moving, either.

## New Artist

### The Grays

Calling the Grays "new" is somewhat misleading given the members' previous experience, and somewhat hollow given that they've already broken up, but if they don't count I don't have a vote for this category this year.



## Compilation/Reissue

### The Go-Go's — *Return to the Valley of the Go-Go's*

From “Johnny Are You Queer?” covered in somebody’s closet to “The Whole World Lost Its Head” via two disks of early rehearsal tapes, singles, album tracks, b-sides and live recordings, this is a portable campaign for a full-scale Go-Go’s critical reappraisal.

## Various-Artist Compilations

### Girl

A remarkably varied troll through the Boston music world, held together both by the compilation rationale that all the songs were written by women, and by a surprisingly high standard of quality for *any* collection, much less a local one.

### Follow That Road

In which we find out that Christine Lavin has even more cool friends this year than last.

## Live Albums

### Big Country — *Without the Aid of a Safety Net*

My favorite band finally makes a live album. The intensity crescendo from the acoustic calm of “Harvest Home” and “Peace in Our Time” to the electric catharsis of “Long Way Home” and “Lost Patrol” conveys the Big Country live experience as well as any recording could hope to.

### The Icicle Works — *BBC Live in Concert*

A brief, blistering BBC set from one of the bands that make Eighties-nostalgia a bearable cultural trend for me.

## Remix

### Kate Bush — “Shoedance (The Red Shoes Dance Mix)”

The only remix I actively liked this year, a kinetic reworking of the title track from last year’s album.

## Cover Songs

### Bob Mould — “The Turning of the Tide”

If your stereo has an Intensity knob, you could probably produce this *Beat the Retreat* cover from Richard Thompson’s original with a single firm twist.

### The Bobs — “Bird on a Wire”

Leonard Cohen as a cappella surf-punk-pop.

### Robert Palmer — “Girl U Want”

I’m not usually a Robert Palmer fan, but this was too deliciously overblown to pass up.

### Tori Amos — “A Case of You”

### Sarah McLachlan — “Blue”

Two of my favorite singers choose to do haunting covers of songs from the same 1971 Joni Mitchell album in the same year.

## Belated Mentions

### Anacrusis — *Screams and Whispers* (1993)

The masterpiece Celtic Frost never made.

### For Love Not Lisa — *Merge* (1993)

The only band I’ve ever thought sounded like Nirvana without the quiet parts, but not because they didn’t *understand* the quiet parts.

### Thought Industry — *Mods Carve the Pig: Assassins, Toads and God’s Flesh* (1993)

The aural equivalent of jamming your head into an unshielded jet engine in lieu of a hair dryer. I’m not necessarily saying you’d *enjoy* it, but you’re unlikely to have had the experience before.

### Y Kant Tori Read — *Y Kant Tori Read* (1988)

Though it’s routinely dismissed by Tori and just about everybody else, most of whom haven’t actually heard it, I actually think this is a marvelous album. Listeners expecting “Me and a Gun” austerity will be disappointed, but anybody who agrees with me that Pat Benetar’s *Seven the Hard Way* is her claim to pop immortality ought to see if they can track down a copy.

### Primitons — *Happy All the Time* (1987)

One of the only things to get repeated play on my *turntable* this year, this is intoxicating harmony-drenched power-pop of even higher octane than the Primitons’ Mitch Easter-produced 1985 debut EP, which until I found this was all I knew of them. Too bad the cover makes you expect Norwegian art-disco.

## Postscript

The Nineties continue to be a stupefyingly good decade for music, in my opinion. For me 1994 was a year characterized by songwriting integrity, simplicity and musical professionalism. Of course, *outside* of my listening room there continued to be large amounts of unprincipled noise, pointless complication and willful low-fi incompetence, as well as the usual litany of retro retreads (both conscious and unconscious), soulless technique, cliché recycling and cynical novelty exploitation, but 90% of everything seems like crap even in the best of times, and the amount of great music I discovered this year was bounded only by the time I have for listening to it. Paring the year's acquisitions down to just this report was acutely painful, and I take that as a good sign. If you can make top ten lists without being forced to leave out something you almost can't stand not mentioning, then you aren't trying hard enough.

Cool decade. Enjoy the second half.

## Desert Island Disks

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### My current top ten

Tori Amos: *Little Earthquakes*  
 Big Country: *Steeltown*  
 Kate Bush: *Hounds of Love*  
 Del Amitri: *Waking Hours*  
 Game Theory: *Lolita Nation*  
 Ickle Works: *If You Want to Defeat Your Enemy Sing His Song*  
 Marillion: *Misplaced Childhood*  
 New Model Army: *Thunder and Consolation*  
 Jane Siberry: *The Speckless Sky*  
 Talk Talk: *Spirit of Eden*

### Ten more I'd miss badly

Black Sabbath: *Born Again*  
 Boston: *Don't Look Back*  
 Fugazi: *Repeater*  
 IQ: *Are You Sitting Comfortably?*  
 The Jam: *Snap!*  
 Cyndi Lauper: *Hat Full of Stars*  
 Pop Art: *Snap Crackle Pop Art*  
 Propaganda: *Secret Wish*  
 Runrig: *Amazing Things*  
 The Sex Pistols: *Never Mind the Bollocks*

# Afterwords

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And finally:

The Vulture Moose, for ten years in a dark pocket.

## Writing the book

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When I decided to write this book, I figured it would take me a lot of work, and a long time, but that it wouldn't actually be that *difficult*. My collection determined the content, the content mostly determined its own structure, and all I really had to do was fill in the blanks. Quite a *few* blanks, of course, but I could talk about music all day, and I could write all day, and

there didn't seem to be any reason to suspect that those two things wouldn't go together.

I was mostly right, at least so far. It took me from 1/1/93 to 2/21/94 to write the first draft, from 2/28/94 to 4/19/94 to edit it (on paper), from 4/20/94 to 5/2/94 to transfer all the editing marks back into the computer, a full day to spell-check it, and a little while longer to fiddle with the format, and now, well-under a year-and-a-half after the idea occurred to me, I have a book of sorts. It's not clear whether I'm *done* now, or have just begun. Whichever, at my current rates of acquisition and writing, it will take at least three months of every coming year just to keep the book up-to-date, so I don't anticipate complacency setting in any too quickly. The year I start grumbling that there isn't any good music made any more is the year I shut up about it and take up golf. I sincerely hope that day never comes, because I sunburn easily, and I hate wearing white pants.

There are few interesting practical discoveries I made along the way that I'll share with you in case you want to write one of these books yourself, which I encourage. That was the first one, actually: I encourage you to write one of these yourself. I both enjoy having done it and enjoyed doing it.

Secondly, be prepared for large doses of self-imposed humility. Even if you think of yourself as a good, creative writer, if you write over a thousand record reviews you will say many sparkling, witty things, and you will say most of them eight times each before you realize you've been repeating yourself. After a thorough scouring with Search and Replace, I'm *still* convinced I've used the bit about lab-frogs' legs twitching after they've died at least three times. And if you think anecdote-repetition is bad, wait until you see how many *words* you repeat. Check out how many times I've ended up using some form of the word "marvelous", which for the past sixteen months I've been spelling with an extra "l" (spell-checking, particularly a manuscript you think you've already proofread yourself, is even uglier: "a cappella" has two "p"s; it's "berserk", "repertoire" and "barbiturate"; "evidently" does not need an extra "al"; and I don't even want to talk about my troubles with "-ible"/"-able"/"-ceed"/"-cede", and "neccessary" and "successful").

Thirdly, save often, print often, and if people aren't making fun of you for how much backing up you're doing, then you aren't doing enough.

## What did I learn?

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In the introduction I said I was setting out to do four things: revisit my collection for my own benefit, attempt to organize this mass of music in some way,

share my enthusiasm, and hopefully introduce somebody, somewhere, to some cool music. The last two of these efforts you'll have to rule on yourself. As for the other two, I'm pretty happy with how things turned out. In going through all these records, I've discovered a *ton* of things that I hadn't realized before, from personnel interconnections to albums I'd sadly neglected and others I'd played way too much, and I already find myself using the book constantly to remind myself what I know and think about records.

I think the organization worked out pretty well, too. The ten chapters I ended up with make a lot more sense than the 13-15 I had during the early stages of the project, and I haven't been tempted to mess with them much in quite a while. My CD cabinet is now organized in the order that things appear in the book, and while this means that Georgia can't find anything any more, I'm liking it.

Beyond the goals I knew I had, there are a couple interesting things that *this book isn't*, but that *a book could* be. This isn't a critical analysis of the art form of rock music, its place in society, its value as a communications medium, or anything like that. I haven't tried to define Art, I haven't attempted to distinguish that from Culture, and I haven't used the word "post-modern" even once, until now. There are scholarly books to be written (and many that already have been) about Rock as Art, but I don't intend to be the one writing them.

There's another potentially-interesting book lurking inside this one inside-out. Where this is a book about music that mentions a number of interesting social and philosophical observations in passing, there's a complementary book that could be written *about* society and philosophy, mentioning *music* along the way. Greil Marcus writes books like that. And, I suppose, someday so may I.

Not just yet, though. Because the thing that writing this book has done *most* for me, is it has made me want to *make* music, to *participate* in the world I've been describing. My guitar is very dusty, and has a broken E-string that I haven't replaced since I began writing this book, and it's high time I found out whether my distortion pedals still work and my left hand can still form bar-chords. My next goal is, one of these editions, to get to review myself.

Though to be perfectly frank with you, I'm pretty worried about what I might say.

And lest Elvis Costello have the last word, even in absentia, I leave you with this thought:

*All dancing is about architecture.*

