

## **SMASHING PUMPKINS**

MACHINA/The Machines Of God (Virgin)

Rating: 6 out of 7

By Chris Morris

Billy Corgan & Co. wussed out big-time with *Adore*; its mopey songs and keyboard-dominated textures failed to play off the group's big-guitar assets, so key to the artistic and commercial success of *Siamese Dream* and *Mellon Collie And The Infinite Sadness*. Evidently realizing their mistake, Chi-town's finest rebound with a roaring ripper on *MACHINA*.

Most of the songs here are performed with a loud ferocity that will lead Corgan's lyric "let me die for rock 'n' roll" to become one of the most-quoted psycho-artistic statements of the double-zero. Big bad killers like "The Everlasting Gaze," "Heavy Metal Machine," and "The Imploding Voice" and tuff rock balladry like "Rain Drops And Sun Showers" and "Blue Skies Bring Tears" are just the strongest moves on a 15-song, 73-minute entry that exhibits scarcely a weak second.

Moment for moment, it may be the Pumpkins' most complete and fully realized record, and it's also a compelling testament to the enduring power of a cranked-up amp.

*All recordings written by B. Corgan, courtesy of Virgin Records and Faust's Haus Music.*

## **LAMBCHOP**

Nixon (Merge)

Rating: 5 out of 7

By Michael Lipton

What began as a simple gathering of friends in the early '90s has quietly become one of the South's best-kept secrets. A world away from the rest of Nashville's mainstream and "insurgent" music scene, Kurt Wagner crafts delicate, often inscrutable compositions about the myriad inconsequential things that make up our lives.

The dozen-plus players who comprise Lambchop have perfected a pastoral, sometimes Salvation Army sound that takes elements of new southern gothic artists like Smoke and Vic Chesnutt (no coincidence, since Lambchop served as Chesnutt's back-up band on 1999's *The Salesman And Bernadette*), and juxtaposes them over the type of strings

that might normally accompany Bacharach or even grassy Brit pop.

The opener, "The Old Gold Shoe," steps into Chesnutt territory with both feet, with Wagner evoking the Georgian's pleasant snarl over a sparse, half-speed track that builds to an odd sense of grandeur. True to form "Grampus" changes the pace to a quirky pop number that might pass for Edwyn Collins. Other unexpected oddities include "Up With People" (named for the group of Nixon-era young repubs who championed clean living) with a cameo by the Bobby Jones Gospel Singers, and "What Else Could It Be" which features Wagner's completely twisted falsetto.

If all this has only served to confuse the issue, try visualizing a gathering of reconstruction-era miscreants playing futuristic lounge music on a rundown porch in the deep South. Get it now?

*All recordings courtesy of Merge Records. "Up With People" and "Grampus" written by K. Wagner, courtesy Pathetic Hindsight Music, (BMI) administered by Bug Music. "The Book I Haven't Read" written by K. Wagner, C. Mayfield, courtesy of Pathetic Hindsight Music, (BMI) administered by Bug Music/MMM Music (BMI).*

## **APOLLO FOUR FORTY**

Getting High On Your Own Supply (550 Music)

Rating: 2 out of 7

*By Bob Gulla*

There was a time when electronic music existed in its own very distant but parallel universe to our own, when geeky techno brainiacs hid in a room from midnight to sunrise and gave ambient shape to their intriguing brainwaves. Today, with the breakthroughs of electronic acts like the Prodigy and Chemical Brothers, electronic music has, for better or worse, edged ever closer to mainstream pop. Today, many new techno acts simply substitute synthesized instrumentation for organic guitars, bass, and drums, giving rise to a new school of electronic "musicians" more interested in fabricating a faux-rock sound based almost entirely on gimmicks. It's odious.

Apollo Four Forty cobbles together mindless but easily identified bits of classic rock guitar, a big backbeat, and some dippy vocal tracks in creating a sad, almost pathetic, amalgam of rock and electronica. Where ingenious electronic rock extracts clever rock samples and twists them into barely identifiable but engaging themes, A440 leaves its

samples intact, its cleverness stowed away, and its subtlety locked in a closet. They crib chord progressions from Led Zeppelin, the Clash, and the Who, among others, and lump them clumsily on top of indelicate rhythm tracks with little--if any--ingenuity. In fact, if it weren't for "Stop The Rock" the opening track with an excellent psyche-organ track, and the slinky title tune, this one would already be de-filed for good.

*All recordings courtesy of Sony Music, Inc. and Reverb America Music, administered by Universal-Songs of PolyGram Int'l, Inc. (BMI). "Stop The Rock" written by Noko, I. Hoxley, T. Gray, H. Gray; "Heart Go Boom" written by P. Colbourne, K. Goodman, I. Hoxley, Noko, T. Gray, H. Gray; "Stadium Parking Lot" written by Noko, I. Hoxley, P. Colbourne, T. Gray, H. Gray.*

## **TREMBLING BLUE STARS**

Broken By Whispers (Sub Pop)

Rating: 5 out of 7

*By Michael Lipton*

*Broken By Whispers* marks the third (and first domestic) release by Robert Wratten's Trembling Blue Stars. The record is not only predictably gorgeous--TBS discs regularly inspire music writers to reach for uncommon levels of praise--it continues the painful (and public) love affair between Wratten and Annemari Davies, the vocalist in Wratten's criminally underappreciated former group the Field Mice.

The Brits have a special acumen for reveling in love and wallowing in despair (are they that much different?) and, as of late, Wratten has been doing some world-class wallowing. The upside (at least for listeners) is that TBS material documents the flotsam from their relationship in shimmering, Brit-pop fashion--and that, to pour salt in the wound, Davies continues to sing on his records. This time around, there's a bit of hope (or at least resolution) in songs like "She Just Couldn't Stay," "Sleep," and the gentle "Sometimes I Still Feel The Bruise," written as a post-relationship letter in a style reminiscent of Aussie Paul Kelly. Ironically, the chorus is bolstered by Davies, whose voice is an instrument so effective it becomes almost invisible. The crisp acoustic rhythms are punctuated with the expected shimmering guitars as well as pastoral cellos, organ, and, in "Back To You," carefully applied random noise. If Wratten wasn't able to communicate the peaks and valleys of his

emotions on every imaginable level, his all-consuming melodrama might be comedic. While this trait--inescapable for Celts and nearly unknown in the U.S.--has made for some tragic tales, it's also inspired some of the U.K.'s most timeless music.

*All recordings written by R. Wratten, courtesy of Sub Pop Records and Copyright Control.*

## **D'ANGELO**

Voodoo (Virgin)

Rating: 6 out of 7

*By Billy Johnson Jr.*

There's not one radio "hit single" to be found on this album, and that's a good thing. Instead, Voodoo lives up to its title's definition with 13 extended mixes of hypnotic, rhythm & blues jam sessions that are the antithesis of today's simplistic pop R&B. There's no denying the live bass guitar, trumpets, and handclaps throughout. D'Angelo's humming vocals even have a raw, unpolished edge that adds to the project's authenticity.

Every song warrants attention. Behind the hype of "Untitled"'s buck-naked video is an incredibly sincere tribute to the Artist, in his own slow, rock guitar-ed fashion. "One Mo Gin" and an untainted husky remake of Roberta Flack's "Feel Like Makin' Luv," will also keep the women smiling. Despite its whisper-y sexy skats and lady-friendly vibe, Voodoo's depth exceeds pulling honeys. The rumbling hip-hop grooved "Devil's Pie," mid-tempo grind "GreatDayInDaMornin'," and angelic "Africa" with its tribal tone, offer much-needed encouragement. Plus, the shortest song on the album is five minutes long; all are fashioned as extended remixes complete with climactic grand finales.

Though nothing on Voodoo encompasses the magnetism of his 1995 debut single "Brown Sugar" or remake of smokey ballad "Lady," Voodoo is unquestionably a respectable follow-up.

*All recordings courtesy of Virgin Records. "Left & Right" written by D'Angelo, R. Noble, C. Smith, K. Fareed, courtesy of Universal-PolyGram International Publishing, Inc./Ah-Choo Publishing/Funky Noble Productions/Famous Music Corporation (ASCAP)/Wu Tang Publishing, administered by Careers-BMG Music Publishing, Inc. (BMI)/ Zomba Enterprises Inc. (ASCAP). "Untitled (How Does It Feel)" written by D'Angelo, R. Saadiq, courtesy of Universal-PolyGram International Publishing, Inc./Ah-Choo Publishing/Tony! Toni! Tone! (ASCAP). "Chicken Grease" written by D'Angelo, J. Poyser, A. Thompson, courtesy of*

*Universal-PolyGram International Publishing, Inc./Ah-Choo Publishing/Ja Ja Po (ASCAP)/Grand Negaz Music, administered by Careers-BMG Music Publishing, Inc. (BMI).*

## **GUY**

III (MCA)

Rating: 3 out of 7

*By Rosemary Jean-Louis*

Much has changed since Teddy, Aaron, and Damon lit up our house parties back in the day. We're grown, we pay bills, and we listen to classic R&B on our office computers. Meanwhile the next generation grinds to Dru Hill or scores their slow jams using MP3. With many reputed delays, the reunion album tagged *Guy III* comes as a blatant capitalization on Gen X hunger for yesteryear, and this lackluster production doesn't offer anything substantial for the mature stomachs. The slow jams are there and Aaron Hall carries them all. Harmonies are barely audible. "Tell Me No," "Not A Day," and the somewhat mushy "Rescue Me" are likeable enough, but they don't hold much water amid overly produced uptempo cuts that contain a Left Eye soundalike. The disc also contains tracks about cyber sex ("Love Online") and anywhere sex ("Do It") thinly veiled excuses to justify the production of kinky music videos. Riley produces a party pleaser in "Spend Time," which uses the Mary Jane Girls' "All Night Long" hook, but to no avail. *Guy III* indicates that some good groups are best left on classic R&B. Since Riley has Blackstreet and both Halls have solo careers, they should just accept change and move on.

*All recordings courtesy of MCA Records. "We're Comin'" written by T. Riley, W. Hogges, E. Williams, courtesy of Zomba Enterprises, Inc./Donril Music/Smokin' Sounds, Ltd./Do Key Wet Publishing (administered by Zomba Enterprises, Inc.)/WB Music Corp./Dowhatigotta Music (ASCAP). "Love Online" written by T. Riley, L. Sylvers III, L. Sylvers IV, R. Hopkins Jr., A. Williams, J. Williams, courtesy of Zomba Enterprises, Inc./Donril Music (administered by Zomba Enterprises, Inc.)/Notting Dale Songs, Inc./Shuttletech Corporation (ASCAP). "Why You Wanna Keep Me From My Baby" written by T. Riley, T. Rich, courtesy of Zomba Enterprises, Inc./Donril Music (administered by Zomba Enterprises, Inc.) (ASCAP)/Blue Butter Songs, Inc. (BMI).*

## **JUVENILE**

Tha G Code (Cash Money/Universal)

Rating: 4 out of 7

By Jon Wallace

As a reminder that 1999 belonged to Cash Money Records, the label's most popular Hot Boy has released his third album just in time for the millennium. In true Cash Money fashion, only five out of the 16 songs are Juvey solos. The rest are duets with other members of the Cash Money camp.

Mannie Fresh (also in true Cash Money fashion) produced the whole album so the music definitely has that dirty south bounce to it. As for Juvey's approach, nothing has changed from the last album. *Tha G-Code* includes similar lyrics about life, crime, and women in New Orleans' Magnolia projects. He does switch his flow a little on cuts like the first release "U Understand"; "Catch Your Cut" where he trades stutter-step flows with B.G.; and "Lil' Boys" where Juvenile opens every line with an infectious "you lil' boys."

Another cut to check is "March N--ga Step" which sounds like a remix of his 1998 flagship hit "Ha." Juvenile uses the same beat and the same flow. The only difference is that he does not punctuate each sentence with "ha." Juvenile gives you what you expect, and that seems to work for this album.

*All recordings written by Juvenile, courtesy of Universal Records and Money Mack Music (BMI).*

## **DEAD PREZ**

Let's Get Free (Loud)

Rating: 5 out of 7

By Dan LeRoy

Harkening back to the Afrocentrism that infused hip-hop a decade ago, this young twosome will be a revelation to those turned off by the materialistic rap that's been ascendant in the post-Puffy era. M-1 and stic.man waste no time setting the agenda: "Wolves," a two-minute denunciation of white imperialism, segues into the hard, basic beats of "African," where the pair chant "I'm an African/and I know what's happenin'." From there, Dead Prez touch all the usual bases, attacking schools, the police, and Uncle Toms, while preaching self-improvement on "Discipline" and "Be Healthy." The pair is often too heavy-handed, covering points handled more eloquently by other rappers, as well as the authors who get frequent namechecks. But that simplicity is also a strength--unlike most post Wu-Tang hip-hop that willfully

spurts unintelligible rhymes and rhyme schemes. So, give Dead Prez credit for getting in your face with their clearly articulated verses and ideas. Despite the political tough talk, there's also a sensuous Eastern vibe snaking its way through several tracks, most overtly on the I-love-you-for-your-smarts "Mind Sex." And the group's musical inventiveness reaches full flower on the awesome "Hip Hop," which feeds off a magnificently wobbly synth-bass line and a drum loop referencing the Dirty South, while the duo ruthlessly tear down hip-hop's street mystique.

*All recordings courtesy of LOUD Records. "Hip-Hop" written by C. Gavin, L. Alford, V. Williams, A. Mair, courtesy of Ghetto Martial Arts Music/The War of Art Music (BMI)/Hyposilver Music/Donkor Music (ASCAP). "Mind Sex" and "Animal In Man" written by C. Gavin, L. Alford, courtesy of Ghetto Martial Arts Music/The War of Art Music (BMI).*

## **OASIS**

Standing On The Shoulder Of Giants (Epic)

Rating: 6 out of 7

*By Chris Morris*

The two-and-a-half years since the release of *Be Here Now*, Oasis's vast-sounding but somewhat hollow last studio album, have been kind to the creative juices of *les freres* Gallagher. Guess marriage and parenthood is doing Noel and Liam some good.

While the sound on their new opus is typically cavernous and Beatle-derived (for instance, dig the "Hey Jude"-like climax of "Little James" or the Harrisonian guitar licks of "Roll It Over"), there's a fresh emotional content to the best songs here, which bear comparison to such great early numbers as "Live Forever," "Don't Look Back in Anger," and "Wonderwall." Especially fine are such Noel showcases as "Where Did It All Go Wrong?" and "Sunday Morning Call," and Liam's gospelized finale "Roll It Over." Even an accusatory tune like "Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is" has an empathic edge. Hate to use the word "maturity," but the Gallaghers have made a very poised and grown-up record.

*All recordings written by Noel Gallagher, courtesy of Epic Records and Sony/ATV Songs LLC (BMI).*

## **MICHAEL HUTCHENCE**

Michael Hutchence (V2)

Rating: 6 out of 7

By Bob Gulla

After 20 years as the bare-chested arena-rock frontman of Aussie dance-pop-eteers INXS, Michael Hutchence cashed in his chips and exited, trading his mortal musical heroism for immortality. But not before he administered one more dose of rock-solid white-boy funk, this time without the surround-sound of his longtime band.

Many posthumous albums are cobbled together from rather flimsy pieces: a few vocal tracks, a page of lyrics, a hummed melody. Not this one. *Michael Hutchence* was largely complete before the artist's death two years ago, then polished by longtime collaborators Andy Gill and Danny Saber. Both obviously paid meticulous attention to Hutchence's original intentions and whopping creative spirit; the album feels as cohesive and as rumbly sensuous as anything he's ever done.

Songs like "A Straight Line" and "Let Me Show You" smoke in the inimitably funky way that the best INXS material did, while other tracks like "All I'm Saying" and "Possibilities" smolder with a more introspective soulfulness. Without a doubt, *Michael Hutchence* is as good a farewell to this extraordinary talent as any eulogizer could have given. As he did in life, Hutchence continues to let his music speak for itself.

*All recordings courtesy of V2 Records. "A Straight Line" and "Get On The Inside" written by A. Gill, M. Hutchence, courtesy of Copyright Control. "Baby It's Alright" written by M. Hutchence, D. Saber, courtesy of Copyright Control/EMI Blackwood Music, Inc./One Eye Egyptian Music (BMI).*

## **CLINTON**

Disco & The Halfway To Discontent (Luaka Bop/Astralwerks)

Rating: 5 out of 7

By Michael Lipton

Recording two projects for David Byrne's Luaka Bop label, London's Cornershop managed to meld its eclectic mix of Eastern and Western influences into at least one memorable U.S. release (*When I Was Born For The 7th Time*). Clinton (no relation to George or Bill), featuring Cornershop singer/songwriter/bassist Tjinder Singh and guitarist Benedict Ayres, deconstructs the former band's sometimes-jumbled mix and breaks it down to a simple formula.



The result is considerably sparser and less influenced by Singh's Punjabi/Sikh roots. If Singh previously was concerned with racism, he's now focused on the politics of the dancefloor. The hypnotic opener, "People Power In The Disco Hour," revolves around a simple keyboard bass/drum groove and delivers a message repeated throughout the disc: "Disco is a halfway to a full discontent." Of course, evidenced on tracks like "Good S---," Clinton never loses sight of the fact that halfway is often better than nothing: The squishy "Buttoned Down Disco" resurfaces at the end of the disc as "Fila Brazillia Disco Frisco Mix" and there's plenty of retro effects throughout. If there's a single to be had, the poppy, syncopated "The Hot For May Sound" is a natural to match the success of Cornershop's 1997 hit "Brimful Of Asha." Unfortunately, "G.T. Road," an hypnotic instrumental driven by a looped track of tablas, is the sole Eastern-influenced cut.

*All recordings written by T. Singh, courtesy of Luaka Bop/Astralwerks Records and Wiiiija Music, administered by Momentum Music Ltd.*

## **DEATHRAY**

Deathray (Capricorn)

Rating: 5 out of 7

*By Rob O'Connor*

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that pop music works best when the hooks stick in your head and your toe taps in excitement (not impatience), when it makes you sing along no matter how poorly you sing, and when it makes you bob your head like a dork and you simply don't care. The name Deathray may elicit visions of metal-guitar-wielding maniacs screeching about injustice and Satan, but rest assured, this is a pop band with a firm grasp of melody and harmony.

Featuring Greg Brown and Victor Damiani who were once two parts of Cake, Deathray come across much like Fountains Of Wayne in their insistent, British Invasion approach. Touches of psychedelia shimmer via tremoloed guitars, but mostly this is tuneage that's as sharp and enthusiastic as first love. My girlfriend says it sounds like the Pernice Brothers on Prozac and you don't mess with her. Trust me, you don't.

*All recordings courtesy of Capricorn Records. "Now That I Am Blind" and "Only Lies" written by D. Gumbiner, courtesy of De Sade Songs & Waltzes Music. "Check It Over" written by G. Brown, D. Gumbiner, courtesy of Chumpion Music/De Sade Songs & Waltzes Music.*

## **DAVE HOLLAND QUINTET**

Prime Directive (ECM)

Rating: 6 out of 7

*By Ken Micallef*

Leading one of the best and most burning jazz groups in the world, bassist/leader extraordinaire Dave Holland continues in the free-funk-jazz vein that marked 1998's excellent *Points Of View*.

Like the classic proving-ground groups of the '60s, which no longer exist due to lack of any jazz "circuit," Holland's quintet is an exceptionally fine-tuned and well-oiled unit, playing with great dynamic range and improvisational virtuosity. Not that their technique overshadows the music, though. Each member contributes tunes, but the band is so joined at the hip that they all sound as if they were written by the same composer. Melodies dart, double, and duel courtesy of trombonist Robin Eubanks, vibraphonist Steve Nelson, and saxophonist Chris Potter, while drummer Billy Kilson lays down what are basically refined funk beats. The band can swing, but in a linear fashion that is more James Brown-funk than Miles Davis-bop.

This is jazz grounded in the past but without the retro trappings, integrating contemporary rhythms with bop-laced melodies.

*All recordings written by D. Holland courtesy of ECM Records and Lojac Music (BMI).*

## **CHET BAKER, JOHN BARRY, CHRIS BOTTI**

Playing By Heart (Decca)

Rating: 6 out of 7

*By Ken Micallef*

No, this isn't a grave-robbing fiasco wherein some hotshot record producer matches an old Chet Baker trumpet solo to new John Barry soundtrack. This is more than the typical soundtrack offering designed for mass teen consumption. In a sensible, very simpatico move, soundtrack composer John Barry (*Out Of Africa, Midnight Cowboy, Thunderball*) is here joined by smooth jazz trumpeter Chris Botti for the score of the film *Playing By Heart*. Along with Barry's trademark bittersweet melodies and majestically

soaring strings, tracks by erratic legend Chet Baker are subtly inserted, so well integrated within Barry's poignant moods that you wonder why this hadn't been done before. Barry's music instantly alerts your memory to some distant imaginary plane, replacing the mundane with the sublime and the sentimental. With Botti as his faux Baker stand in, *Playing By Heart* recalls an empty jazz club at 4 a.m., or even such classic albums as Miles Davis' *Miles Ahead* and John Coltrane's *Ballads*. Chet Baker is represented by three standards: "Tenderly," "You Go To My Head," and "These Foolish Things." But if you turn down the lights and forget the credits the songs melt into each other with ease.

*All recordings written by J. Barry, courtesy of Decca Records and Intermedia Music, administered by Universal-Songs of PolyGram International, Inc./Miramax Film Music/Sony/ATV Songs LLC (BMI).*

## **MARK TURNER**

Ballad Session (Warner Bros.)

Rating: 6 out of 7

*By Tim Sheridan*

There are two schools of thought when it comes to ballad projects for young jazz players. The first posits that ballads are a flat-out play for cash, appealing to a broader pop audience. The second (and more rational) views ballads as challenging a form as free-jazz or be-bop. Consider the remarkable ballad work done by John Coltrane and Charlie Parker. (Call them sell-outs at your own peril). Fine ballad playing requires musical sensitivity, technical control, and an artist's soul.

That's what you get on this excellent disc from the young and gifted Mark Turner. Through an eclectic playlist that includes works by Gershwin, Carla Bley, and Herbie Hancock, Turner displays a true gift for emotion that never becomes overly sentimental. This is particularly evident on his reading of the gem "Some Other Time," in which his sax lines explore the melody in the true storyteller tradition. He is aided throughout by such equally gifted players as Kurt Rosenwinkel on guitar and Brian Blade on drums. A fine disc.

*All recordings courtesy of Warner Bros. "I Loves You Porgy" written by G. Gershwin, I. Gershwin, D. Heyward, courtesy of George Gershwin Music/Ira Gershwin Music/DuBose & Dorothy Heyward Memorial Fund Publishing (ASCAP). "Nefertiti" written by W. Shorter, courtesy of Miyako Music, administered by Irving Music (BMI). "Some Other Time"*

*written by L. Bernstein, B. Comden, A. Green, courtesy of Universal-PolyGram International Publishing, Inc. (ASCAP).*

## **KURT ROSENWINKEL**

The Enemies Of Energy (Verve)

Rating 6 out of 7

*By Ken Micallef*

Guitarist Kurt Rosenwinkel is a chameleon, an original thinker, and possibly a procrastinator. Rosenwinkel's sleepy, cerebral logic informs every song on *The Enemies Of Energy*, a record whose quirky melodies and unhurried performances remain after the lights are off. Whether plying the gypsy romance of "Dream Of The Old," time tripping the funk fantastic on "Synthetics," high-flying the Latin grooves of "Cubism," or aping his obvious influence Wayne Shorter on "Number Ten," Rosenwinkel composes music with airy, eerie weight. Recorded over five years ago, Rosenwinkel (a veteran of bands led by Paul Motian and Gary Burton) is accompanied by players who are currently reaping rewards in the jazz world, including drummer Jeff Ballard (Chick Corea), keyboardist Scott Kinsey (Tribal Tech), bassist Ben Street, and popular tenor saxophonist Mark Turner. A welcome nonconformist, Rosenwinkel sings in a Neil Young squeal on the all acoustic "Polish Song," then just as quickly switches gears for the free-flying Spanish-guitar-meets-Weather-Report seance "Point of View." But it all works, connected by Rosenwinkel's understated guitar and coolheaded direction.

*All recordings written by K. Rosenwinkel, courtesy of Verve Records and Zbigniew (SESAC).*

## **THE CURE**

Bloodflowers (Elektra)

Rating: 6 out of 7

*By Bob Gulla*

Unlike most other respectable '80s rock icons like Bono and Morrissey, Robert Smith has maintained a fabulously high level of creativity and aesthetic quality. Over the course of 20 or so albums, Smith has managed to avoid the pitfalls of egotism and self-parody, while fixing on what it means to write and record important, uncompromised music. Indeed, *Bloodflowers*, the band's first studio effort since 1996, is

a satisfying, passionate, uncomplicated record that never overreaches, and almost always pays off an attentive listen.

The stage is set on the second track. "Watching Me Fall," a color-streaked, 11-minute epic, has all the trademarks of a great Cure song, from a captivating lyrical motif to subtle build-up to lush climax, capped off by Smith's gripping guitar playing, one of the more overlooked reasons for the band's longtime success. Elsewhere, "Where The Birds Always Sing" resonates with Smith's richly echoing guitar chords and a sturdier-than-usual backbeat. As is his tendency, Smith allows the songs here to progress through several instrumental verses before interrupting vocally and the tactic works beautifully. It gives the listener a chance to understand the melodic core of each song before actually hearing Smith's lyrics.

The sound of *Bloodflowers* is wholly organic, with little electronic intervention or any other technical gadgetry. Newish drummer Jason Cooper hogs plenty of the spotlight during the band's longer instrumental passages on tunes like "39" and "Out Of This World," while Roger O'Donnell's keyboards take a slight, uncharacteristic backseat. The fact is, this is the biggest rock record the Cure has made in 10 years. And, in light of all the dross that passes for "rock" these days, it's a mighty welcome one.

*All recordings written by R. Smith, S. Gallup, R. O'Donnell, P. Bamonte, J. Cooper, courtesy of Elektra Records and Fiction Song, Inc., administered by BMG Songs, Inc. (ASCAP).*

## **STEELY DAN**

Two Against Nature (label?)

Rating: 5 out of 7

*By Mac Randall*

The last album Walter Becker and Donald Fagen recorded together under the name Steely Dan came out 20 years ago. But unless you pay close attention to some of the words--the reference to upscale New York grocery store Dean and DeLuca, for example, or the branding of one character as "the software king"--you might very well assume that *Two Against Nature* was a much more immediate followup to 1980's *Gaucho*. Fagen's slyly sarcastic voice doesn't sound like it's aged a bit, and from both a musical and production standpoint, the vibe here is more 1978 than 2000. (That's meant as a compliment, though Walt and Don might not think so.)

On the songwriting front, Becker and Fagen have picked up exactly where they left off, employing slick white-funk rhythms, sophisticated jazz-derived chord changes, and supremely witty lyrics. The melodies aren't as intricate as those on *Gauche*, but they're still pretty complex, particularly "Gaslighting Abbie," "Janie Runaway," and "Negative Girl." And the subject matter will also be familiar to longtime Dan fans: the damage done by drugs, the bitterness of aging, the frustrating allure of younger women (this last tackled hilariously on "Cousin Dupree"). As always, the coupling of almost unrelentingly perky music with words that are alternately cynical and forlorn creates an oddly subversive effect.

What all this means is that Steely Dan's latest, far from being an embarrassment as so many latter-day reunions are, stands up surprisingly well against their classic work of the '70s. Personally, I wish the playing wasn't quite so smooth all the time, that Fagen and Becker would rock out just a little more, as they did (relatively speaking) back in the days of "Reelin' In The Years" and "Bodhisattva." But that was long ago, I know, and they're crabby old men now, so I oughtn't complain. Those who've been waiting two decades for this baby should be happy enough as it is; after all, how many other albums of this or any year will include the words "grok," "isotope," and "panatella"?

*All recordings written by W. Becker, D. Fagan, courtesy of Giant/Reprise Records and Freejunket Music/Zeon Music (ASCAP), administered by Len Freedman Music, Inc.*

## **LOU REED**

*Ecstasy* (Reprise)

Rating: 4 out of 7

*By Mac Randall*

Some people view Lou Reed as a living legend, one of rock 'n' roll's true icons. Other people think he's a godawful hack whose influence is way out of proportion to his actual talents. From *Berlin* to *The Blue Mask*, from *Metal Machine Music* to *Magic And Loss*, the man's body of work has provided plenty of ammunition for both of these factions over the years, and his latest opus is certainly no exception.

On the plus side, *Ecstasy* sounds great and it flat-out rocks in many places, with that primal four-on-the-floor push at which Reed has always excelled. The droll opener "Paranoia Key Of E" and the more vicious "Future Farmers Of America" are particular standouts. Beefy horns and wry

strings (provided in part by paramour Laurie Anderson) add textural interest, and it's pleasing to report that, unlike his last studio release, there are precisely zero songs about egg creams. (Goofy lyrics do abound, however; the line where Lou ponders the possibility of being "in a kilt in Edinburgh doing a modern dance" is my favorite.) Sex and drugs are still major subjects--with regular excursions into depression, jealousy, violence (physical and otherwise), and domestic turmoil--and Reed covers them with considerable emotional range, alternately obnoxious and playful, bitter and wistful.

Unfortunately, such a range can't really be conveyed successfully by a non-voice. The fact is that Reed developed a distinctive sing/speak style to camouflage his inability to carry a tune, and that style leaves him sounding emotionally detached far too often. On songs like "Tatters" and "Turning Time Around," which seem to touch on highly personal matters, the monotonous delivery is hard for a listener to get beyond. Yet when Reed tries to turn up the volume and add a soulful melisma or two, it can be painful; "Big Sky" and "Baton Rouge" testify to a kind of premature rigor mortis of the vocal cords, stiff, inflexible, littered with train wrecks.

During *Ecstasy's* climactic track, "Like A Possum," 18 minutes of fuzz-guitar frenzy and plainly ridiculous ranting, Reed barks out, "I got a hole in my heart the size of a truck." It's a telling line, and it sums up the album's principal flaw, one more glaring than a lack of vocal prowess. For despite the wit, intelligence, drive, and tremendous guitar tones so evident in these grooves, there's not much heart to be found here, and what little there is could very well be just a put-on. Love him or hate him, Lou Reed remains a cool character, in every sense.

*All recordings written by L. Reed, courtesy of Warner Bros. and Lou Reed Music, Inc. (BMI), administered by EMI Blackwood Music, Inc.*

## **ALEX CHILTON**

Set (Bar None)

Rating: 4 out of 7

By Rob O'Connor

Once the leader of Big Star--a band that sold four records in their day and are now considered by some to be as important as Brownsville Station and Led Zeppelin--Alex

Chilton doesn't make records very often anymore. And when he does, he doesn't try too hard and makes them quickly.

This "set" of covers was recorded in one day and features the "soul" voice he used as a teenager for the Box Tops' "The Letter" and not the helium-high voice of his later work. There's also no sign of the "power pop" he engineered. Instead, he prefers the ol'-time R&B of his youth and traditional tunes that go back even further.

This casual "front porch" approach is basically fun, friendly, and no great shakes. But it does make for a great story about the "resilience of the human spirit" that I'm sure better writers much smarter than me will exploit for their own personal gain and professional one-upmanship. I just think it's a neat album of covers.

*All recordings courtesy of Bar/None Records. "I've Never Found A Girl" written by B. Jones, E. Floyd, A. Isbel, courtesy of Irving Music Inc. (BMI). "Hook Me Up" written by J. Watson, courtesy of Alvert Music/Booty Ooty Music (BMI). "Oogum Boogum" written by A. J. Smith, courtesy of Bonneyview Music Corp. (ASCAP).*

## **THE VAULT**

### **THE STOOGES**

1970: The Complete Funhouse Sessions (Rhino Handmade)

Rating: 6 out of 7

By S.L. Duff

This just might be the all-time most unusual box set concept to ever hit the collective collector consciousness. Available on-line only through Rhino Handmade, this 3000-numbered limited-edition, seven-CD set contains every take, every false start, every engineer slate, every lead-singer-to-producer comment, virtually every recorded moment that comprised the making of the Stooges' 1970 classic *Funhouse*. You get to be the fly on the wall as the Stooges' masterful second album gets recorded at Elektra Studios in Los Angeles. The events of roughly a week's time equal about seven hours of rolling tape, and you hear it as it happened.

*Funhouse* is unusual in that producer Don Gallucci, having seen the Stooges' live show several times, decided from the get-go that the way to capture the Stooges' particular brand of sonic hoodoo was to record them live in the studio. Gallucci went so far as to set up a P.A. in the studio for Iggy Pop to sing through. The P.A. was microphoned, making it nearly the first deliberately distorted vocal recording on a rock record, predating Reznor and the like by a quarter



century. So, unlike the typical rock record, in which several basic rhythm section takes would be recorded for each song until one was selected as the keeper, at which time the solo and vocal overdubs would complete that one selected track, every *Funhouse* take of every song is essentially complete--a final performance with solos and lead vocals. You have to pretty much go back to the 1950's heyday of Sun Studios to hear other rock records of any value that were created this way.

This raises the pragmatic question: Who in their right mind is going to listen to 15 takes of "Down On The Street," much less 28 takes (!) of "Loose?" The answer: musicians that have been influenced by these recordings, recording enthusiasts, and Stooges freaks. There should be at least 3,000 mofos that fit those categories, no problem. Frankly, on paper, the idea of all these takes of the same seven songs (and a forgotten number called "Lost In The Future" which the Stooges apparently discarded immediately following these sessions) may not sound that appealing, but it is honestly a refreshing and exhilarating listen. I navigated several long drives with only "TV Eye" and "Funhouse" playing on the car stereo, and I sang along with track 9 with even more energy than track 2.

There is a decent amount of variation from take to take, due to the open structure of the songs. The Stooges took the basic formula of their debut--simple, machine-like riffs that repeated with slight variations between verse and chorus--and expanded it into a kind of trailer park version of late-'60s James Brown. In a very real way, like James, the Stooges seemed intent on freeing music from the shackles of chord progressions and song structures, opting instead for a free-flowing, loose (if you will) approach steered by the vocal cues of Iggy. "Bring it down," "lemme in," he yells in "Funhouse," a one-riff, one-chord marathon that has nowhere to go melodically and harmonically, so it relies on dynamic/volume/intensity variations, hung on the shoulders of Iggy's movements through the vamp. It's similar in every way to "Sex Machine."

The fact that we've got a raw hard rock band kicking ass on open, heavy funk-based jams was only part of the equation. Add to that a somewhat left field love for Coltrane/Ayler/Coleman-inspired free jazz and the participation of tenor saxophonist Steven Mackay on three selections ("1970," "Funhouse," and "Freak" {a.k.a. "L.A. Blues"}), and another dimension of moods and sounds arise. As Iggy howls "I feel awl-rite," Mackay takes off to parts unknown, ripping harmonics out of his horn while Iggy,

obviously feelin' it, hollers back to Mackay: "Bloooooowww!" These jams also represent the mountaintop from which guitarist Ron Asheton launched his finest lead guitar explorations, stomping on overworked fuzz and wah pedals to punctuate his points. Asheton would soon be demoted to bassist when James Williamson took over the guitar position and guided the Stooges into somewhat more traditional hard rock fare. Though the *Search And Destroy*-era Stooges were still as on-edge and theatrically dangerous as ever, they would never again be as musically unique and focused. For his part, Asheton deserves some overdue credit. While we're slappin' brothas on the back, let's get the facts straight and place drummer Scott Asheton and bassist Dave Alexander alongside the great rock rhythm sections. Take after endless take on this set, these two drill out time with the consistency of a Detroit assembly line. Heavy, machine-like, but never mechanical, their tempos never waver, and even as they lighten the attack in order to "bring it down," they never lose focus or intensity.

In the end, a lot of critics and historians have flapped many a jaw about the crudity and the primitive approach of the Stooges, as if Neanderthal man had hunched forth from his cave and created these majestic works of beauty by mere instinct. It didn't happen that way. The Stooges, as a group, clearly had decided to make something that was different in every way from everything else around them, and although the world wouldn't immediately acknowledge this in any sort of positive way for several years after its creation, the Stooges succeeded. As to "crude," "primitive," "garage," or whatever lame tag gets attached to the legend, this set confirms that which should never have been in question. The fact is, the Stooges were and remain better than your band, your mother's band, your brother's band, and the 8 million bands that have groped around in their shadow, all trying to come up with something as perfect as "TV Eye" and failing. The Stooges are nothing short of an American treasure, and *Funhouse* was the pinnacle of their magic. This box set confirms that, and puts the sessions themselves in context with a small handful of other live-in-the-studio masterworks, such as Coltrane's *Giant Steps* or Elvis's sessions at Sun. Or, to put it another way: "Out of my mind on Saturday night. 1970 rollin' in sight."

*All recordings written by I. Pop, R. Asheton, S. Asheton, D. Alexander, courtesy of Rhino Records and Bug Music (BMI)/James Osterberg Music/Stooge Staff Music (BMI).*

