

EVERCLEAR
Songs From An American Movie
Volume One: Learning How To Smile (Capitol)
Rating: 6 out of 7
By Bob Gulla

Over the course of a half-dozen years or so, Everclear has evolved from a rather crude but well-meaning post-punk rock band to ambitious neo-Beatles tunesmiths-- an evolution that's been as successful as it has been surprising. In the process, bandleader/songwriter Art Alexakis has become something of a modern-rock Everyman, a guy who speaks his mind and rises in stature every time he does so. Rare, indeed.

Songs From An American Movie, the band's fourth album for Capitol Records, finds Alexakis and Everclear concerned about erecting huge pop edifices--big-sounding, highly arranged, almost bubblegum pop symphonies. It's never been the band's strong suit; they've always excelled at penning homespun, three-chord rock songs. But they do a pretty swift job of pulling off the tunes in this larger context, creating a barrage of likable, highly melodic, and immediately accessible material easy enough to hum along to, pleasant enough to leave on the player all day. Songs like the horn-peppered blast "AM Radio," the first single "Wonderful," with its na-na-na-na chorus, and the swirling, Mantovani-esque closer "Annabella's Song," hardly resemble the angry, aging-punk persona featured on albums like *Sparkle And Fade*. But they do possess a certain potency, a hefty dose of unpretentious charm-- Alexakis's calling card--that serves the band well. It's a sizable risk, but one worth taking.

Of course, as with any risk there's a chance of failure, and Everclear is in constant danger of overstepping its bounds. Certainly on the dull, kitchen-sink version of Van Morrison's "Brown-Eyed Girl," and on the rather silly "Otis Redding," the band crosses the line. But for the most part, the risks pay off in the kinds of rewards Everclear deserves for keeping its music challenging and provocative. Look for *Volume 2* in this series, the hard rock installment, later in the fall. Chances are that one might make a bit more sense.

All recordings courtesy of Capitol Records. All songs written by A. Alexakis and Everclear; courtesy of Irving Music, Inc./Evergleam Music/Montalupis Music/Commongreen Music (BMI).

THE MIGHTY MIGHTY BOSSTONES
Pay Attention (Island)
Rating: 3 out of 7

By Rob O' Connor

LAUNCH's resident SKA nut is back in action. And boy are my arms tired! OK, the delivery's a little off these days, but that's no reason to think that the rest of the SKA NATION can take it easy! The purpose of modern-day SKA eludes me. But I figure if it keeps kids on the dance floor, having a wholesome good time and away from the crack and the pot, well then, let the kids have it. Besides, you get to wear funny clothes and act silly.

"Let Me Be" used to be this great Turtles tune about rugged individualism. Now it's a different song and has a really catchy horn section and an even catchier "oh-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh" chorus. If the whole album were nothing but this kind of bitchin' "hit single," I'd have to take these guys seriously. But, sure enough, it melts down somewhere in the middle when the cute factor overwhelms things. 51 minutes is a long time to ask people to PAY ATTENTION. Get it? (I crack me up.)

All recordings courtesy of Big Right/Island. All songs written by D. Barrett, J. Gittleman, The Mighty Mighty Bosstones; courtesy of EMI April Music, Inc./Bosstones Music (ASCAP).

A PERFECT CIRCLE
Mer De Noms (Virgin)
Rating: 7 out of 7
By Janiss Garza

In spite of its record label's attempts to claim otherwise, A Perfect Circle has quite a bit in common with frontman Maynard James Keenan's other band, Tool. But then again, the two bands aren't necessarily all that much alike. However, those who were entranced by Tool's finely honed orchestrations and vast aural landscapes will love the dozen songs on *Mer De Noms*. On the other hand, these 12 tracks are coming from a completely different mental space--there's more wonder and less ferocity. The debate could go round and round in, well, circles, forever, but none of it should cloud the fact that this is a near-perfect heavy rock disc.

"Judith," the album's first single, is the most passionate and probably the most straightforward number. A Perfect Circle's strength is generally more complex, as shown in the slow, spectral journeys of "Magdalena" or the combination of ethereal cries and primal echoes of "Renholder." Although the quintet is quite capable of creating challenging, textured arrangements with the traditional guitar-bass-drums lineup--note "The Hollow"--the addition of strings, percussion, and/or piano gives the group an added element that Tool actually

doesn't have. "3 Libras" is a downright pretty, albeit heady, number, as is the lush "Orestes."

Guitarist Billy Howerdel, who is responsible for writing the music on this disc, is a former guitar tech for Nine Inch Nails, Smashing Pumpkins and--yes--Tool, and while his songs certainly sound comfortable next to any of these groups, he has created something that's at least as intriguing as anything the others do. Keenan's vocals, capable of being both powerful and fragile, are a compelling enhancement to Howerdel's music. In fact, unless Tool manages to release an LP in 2000, this may very well be the heavy album of the year.

All recordings courtesy of Virgin Records. All songs written by B. Howerdel, M.J. Keenan; courtesy of Transfixed Music/Harry Merkin Music (ASCAP).

THE URGE
Too Much Stereo (Immortal/Virgin)
Rating: 5 out of 7
By Michael Lipton

Like many of the recent stylistic hybrids, ska/punk often translates to the worst of both worlds, diluting the energy of punk and completely losing the earthiness of even second-generation ska groups like the English Beat. Through time and perseverance (the group has been around since the late '80s), the Urge has, more often than not, managed to avoid those pitfalls. Its latest makes the best case yet for a band that, by assimilating a number of easily recognizable styles, has found a comfortable and solid voice.

Producer Cliff Magness (Quincy Jones, Hanson) has given the record a more even sound, played up the rich harmonies ("I Go Home") and apparently encouraged the band to explore dead-on --what some old fans might call shameless--pop ("Liar Liar" and "Say A Prayer"). Where previously, a rocker like "Four Letters And Two Words" would have had slash-and-burn guitars, the edge has been tamed, which helps make the 11 cuts hang together seamlessly. The title track, which employs "stereo" as an analogy for the distance between partners, stands out; ditto with the peppy commentary "Welcome To Gunville," while the ambitious "Warning Warning" shows off the band's ska roots.

All recordings courtesy of Immortal/Virgin Records. "Too Much Stereo" and "Four Letters And Two Words" written by The Urge; courtesy of Neat Guy Publishing (ASCAP). "What Do They Know" written by The Urge, C. Magness; courtesy of Neat Guy Publishing (ASCAP)/Blue Iron Gate Music (ASCAP), administered by EMI April Music, Inc.

12 RODS
Separation Anxieties (V2).
Rating: 5 out of 7
By Michael Lipton

Following up 12 Rods' 1998 debut, the Minneapolis band has returned bolstered by the surprisingly unobtrusive production and mentoring of Todd Rundgren, no stranger to mixing rock, electronics, and studio trickery. But rather than pushing the band toward more sonic experimentation, Rundgren has lightened the load, enabling the band to make a leaner, more concise collection of pop songs.

"Kaboom" sounds like the spittin' image of a track from the archives of Peter Holsapple and Chris Stamey's dB's--propulsive, energetic pop that's full of change-ups and as clever as it is well-conceived. From there, as on the debut, the influences are decidedly more British. Like XTC's latter releases, the dense, full instrumentation of "Astrogimp" seems intent on cramming far more information into one song than is necessary.

The light pop of "Radioactive" and the appropriately airy "I Think I'm Flying" are welcome changes of pace. But it's the wispy, space cabaret feel of "Your Secret's Safe With Me" and "Rock 'n' Roll Band" that will seep into your mind. Great stuff. "You Gotta Go" recalls the Rods' first record, catching your ear with interesting sounds and adding Crimson/Buford-like melodies--but is more finely tuned. And just to show they've got a sense of humor, the disc ends with "Glad It's Over."

All recordings courtesy of V2 Music. All songs courtesy of Music of V2 America, Inc., administered by BMG Songs, Inc. (ASCAP). "What Has Happened" and "Glad That It's Over" written by R. Olcott; "Marionette" written by R. Olcott, E. Olcott.

TONI BRAXTON
The Heat LaFace/Arista (2000)
Rating: 5 out of 7
By J.R. Reynolds

This set has a dual nature, with half consisting of radio-friendly ditties such as the wildly infectious but ultimately common "He Wasn't Man Enough." On the other side of the coin, the vocalist soars with "Just Be A Man About It," whose smoky delivery smolders with melancholy. Toni jumps on the commercial Latin bandwagon with "Spanish Guitar." "Speaking In Tongues" boasts a sweeping melody, while the artist demonstrates lyrical gymnastic skills on the delicate yet punchy "Maybe." "You've Been Wrong" teases listeners with a delightful bridge that features elements of the Stylistics's classic "Stop, Look, Listen (To Your Heart)," while "Never Just For The Ring" is just

the kind of tearjerker that made Toni Braxton queen of the lovelorn balladeers. This album may not be her best work, but given that it's been four years since her last project, it's more than worth the price of admission.

All recordings courtesy of LaFace/Arista Records. "He Wasn't Man Enough" written by R. Jerkins, F. Jerkins III, L. Daniels, H. Mason Jr.; courtesy of Rodney Jerkins Productions/EMI Blackwood Music Inc. (BMI)/Fred Jerkins Publishing/Ensign Music Corp. (BMI)/LaShawn Daniels, Inc./EMI April Music, Inc./First Avenue Music/BMG (ASCAP). "Just Be Man About It" written by T. Braxton, J. Austin, T. Bishop, B.M. Cox; courtesy of Braxton Music/October Eighth Music, Inc./Noontime Publishing (BMI)/Naked Under My Clothes Music/Chrysalis Music Group (ASCAP)/Black Baby, Inc./Noontime Music Publishing (SESAC). "Maybe" written by T. Braxton, K. Crouch, J. Smith, M. Jamison, S. Gause; courtesy of 2000 Braxtoni Music/Dango Music (BMI)/Keith Crouch Music/Gloria's Boy Music/SS Class Music (ASCAP).

EMINEM

The Marshall Mathers LP (Aftermath/Interscope)

Rating: 6 out of 7

By Billy Johnson Jr.

Eminem's clearly the Real Slim Shady. There's absolutely no confusion, despite the plea made on the lead-off single from his sophomore effort *The Marshall Mathers LP*. Though he reigns in a genre that's profited from sexually and violently explicit shock value, the rowdy blonde-haired emcee disses everyone from fellow Detroiters Insane Clown Posse ("Ken Kaniff" skit); Christina Aguilera, Tom Green, and Will Smith ("The Real Slim Shady"); and Puff Daddy and Jennifer Lopez ("I'm Back"). When Mr. Mathers exclaimed, "[I] Just Don't Give A F--k" on his commercial debut last year, he wasn't joking.

While a couple moments on *TMMLP* are especially disturbing (he threatens to kill his mother on "Kill You," and describes murdering his child's mother on "Kim"), his lyrical structure and overall momentum are among hip-hop's best. On "Bitch Please II," a remix of Snoop and Xzibit's hit from last summer, Eminem offers an impressive impersonation of Snoop's delivery that cannot be denied--and the beats match. Even the folk-feeling "Stan," a message to rap detractors that some fans take Eminem too seriously, keeps the funk in place.

The record, produced by Dr. Dre and Mark and Jeff Bass, who sculpted much of Em's early work, pipes in some rock sensibilities ("The Way I Am," "Kim") that, if released, could divert some of Kid Rock's attention to The Shady One. Imagine the controversy factor of *The Slim Shady LP* multiplied by three, as the loose-tongued rapper glides over an eclectic mix of scene-setting musical patterns.

*All recordings courtesy of Aftermath/Interscope Records. "The Real Slim Shady" written by M. Mathers, A. Young, M. Bradford; courtesy of Eight Mile Style/Ensign Music Corporation/Ain't Nothin' Going On But F****n' Music (BMI). "Criminal" and "Marshall Mathers" written by M. Mathers, Bass Brothers; courtesy of Eight Mile Style/Ensign Music Corporation (BMI).*

KELLY PRICE

Mirror Mirror (Def Soul/Def Jam)

Rating: 5 out of 7

By Dan LeRoy

Any self-respecting R&B diva has a voice that can knock you on your can, but how many can also tell you an actual story while they blast? Session singer extraordinaire Kelly Price (she's backed Aretha, Mariah, Puffy, and others, and was the voice on the Notorious B.I.G.'s "Mo Money, Mo Problems") can, and does, on her second album. The difference is in the details that drive bittersweet tunes like "You Should've Told Me" and, appropriately enough, "At Least (Little Things)." Nakedly honest enough to include her size as a possible reason a relationship went wrong, and using a few words to sketch out an image of isolation--"flippin' through channels" in a "lonely house/sittin' high up on a hill"--Price summons the stick-in-your-mind lines of classic soul.

Of course, it also doesn't hurt that she's better with a melody than many of her old employers, offering several sweet and sweeping ballads--like the superb title track--that hint at her gospel roots. And she wisely saves her vocal virtuosity for dramatic effect, employing it at opportune times like a mock his-and-hers battle with R. Kelly that has the brass to reference the national anthem and works beautifully.

Like just about every album released in the CD era, it's too long by at least four songs, and the more up-tempo stuff sounds kind of like an afterthought--although the bouncy, bass-heavy "Good Love" is a notable exception. But it's the presence of a diva with depth that makes this one worth your attention.

All recordings courtesy of Island/Def Soul. "Mirror Mirror" written by K. Price; courtesy of Universal Music Corp./Big Beautiful One Music (ASCAP). "As We Lay" written by L. Troutman, B. Beck; courtesy of Saja Music/Songs of Lastrada, on behalf of itself and Sony/ATV Songs LLC (BMI). "Love Sets You Free" written by D. Rich, K. Price, C. Thompson, A. Phillips, T. Riley; courtesy of EMI April Music, Inc./Philmore Music/Big Beautiful One Music/Sony/ATV Songs LLC/Ninth Street Tunnel Music (BMI).

NEXT

Welcome To Nextasy (Arista)

Rating: 7 out of 7
By Rosemary Jean-Louis

Normally blunt, ghetto "let's freak" songs are a turn-off. But there are some that can moan a horny plea and make it sound as smooth and romantic as Luther Vandross. Next, those three brothers from Minneapolis, mastered that technique and showed the world how it's done on their mind-in-the-gutter debut *Rated Next*.

Welcome To Nextasy picks up where they left off without being too repetitive or offensive. In fact, those ghetto raunchy lyrics sound even more ghetto fab. A little sample: "Call me whenever you feel freaky, I'm all you need," they coo on the ballad "Call Me." Okay, it's not Shakespeare, but Next's hushed harmonies and sensitive delivery make it as good as any Hallmark. The more overt line, "My star actress on the mattress," becomes equally enticing in the alluring "Let's Make A Movie."

In between this audio orgy lies some balance: Social commentary on "Beauty Queen," emotional betrayal on "Banned From TV," and simple "I love you, honey" cuts like "When We Kiss" and the destined-to-be-a-wedding-theme "My Everything" illustrate that, yes, sex-obsessed roughnecks *can* have depth.

All recordings courtesy of Arista Records. "Wifey" written by K. Gist, E. Berkeley, R. L. Huggar; courtesy of Divine Mill Music/WB Music Corp./Fingazgoal Entertainment (ASCAP)/Uh Oh Entertainment/Ensign Music Corp. (BMI). "Beauty Queen" written by K. Gist, E. Berkeley, C. Hitchcock, T. Barbarella, R. L. Huggar; courtesy of Divine Mill Music/WB Music Corp./Fingazgoal Entertainment/Funkdout Music/Lonelm Music (ASCAP)/Uh Oh Entertainment/Ensign Music Corp. (BMI). "Jerk" written by K. Gist, E. Berkeley, R.L. Huggar, C. Jackson; courtesy of Divine Mill Music/WB Music Corp./Fingazgoal Entertainment/Uh Oh Entertainment/Ensign Music Corp. (BMI)/50 Cent Music, Inc. (BMI).

JILL SCOTT
Who Is Jill Scott? (Hidden Beach/Epic)
Rating: 6 out of 7
By Billy Johnson, Jr.

Credit Jill Scott for the memorable chorus to The Roots' Grammy winning "You Got Me." She wrote it. Erykah Badu sang it. And even though the Philly native with soul music's prettiest voice in some time has been featured on a number of records and soundtracks, it's more important to note her stint in the Broadway production of *Rent*. It indicates she's drawing from a broader range of experience than the average R&B singer.

Many pop singers have profited from weak, cute sopranos, but Jill shows what happens when you back up style with a strong set of pipes. Her controlled vocalizing shines throughout her 73-minute debut, which delves deep into relationships, both happy and sad, using several techniques to make her point. There's the sister-girl spoken-word account of meeting her man's other woman in the grocery store on the musically sparse "Exclusively." On "Gettin' In The Way," an ode to her man's ex, she's just sassy enough: "I've been a lady up until now/Don't know how much more I can take/Queens shouldn't swing/If you know what I mean/But I'm about to take my earrings off/Get me some Vaseline."

But it's not all gloomy, thanks to Jazzy Jeff's (remember Will Smith's old pal?) production team A Touch Of Jazz, which brings the company name to life, molding simmering, smooth jazz structures that raise the bar for today's predictable R&B.

On the sexy "Love Rain," the informing "Watching Me," or the encouraging "Brotha," Jill brings that Mary J. Blige/Aretha Franklin brand of gut-felt emotion without the commercial edge. The timing couldn't have been better.

All recordings courtesy of Hidden Beach Records. "Gettin' In The Way" and "Love Rain" written by J. Scott, V. Davis; courtesy of Blues Baby Music/JATCAT Music Publishing (ASCAP)/Double Ohh Eight Music/Touched By Jazz/EMI April Music Inc. "Slowly, Surely" written by J. Scott, D. Henson, D. Thompson; courtesy of Blues Baby Music/JATCAT Music Publishing (ASCAP)/No Gravity/Touched By Jazz/EMI April Music Inc./Christopher Lambert Music (BMI).

BRITNEY SPEARS

Oops!...I Did It Again (Jive)

Rating: 4 out of 7

By Bob Gulla

There's a lot to poke fun at on the new Britney Spears recording, not the least of which is the way the record's producers almost completely overwhelm the popster's voice with effects and backing singers, and the way nearly every sound on the album is the invention of some computer whiz. (I know, welcome to the Age Of Technology. But to these admittedly aging ears, the absence of real drumming is maddening.)

Still, there's some positive energy coming from the grooves of *Oops*, Spears's second album. The former *Star Search* alum and Mouseketeer has, with ample help from lots of older men/computer whizzes, come up with a slick and danceable product that'll satisfy the nation's undeniable craving for sweets.

Of the missteps on the album, the bastardization of the Rolling Stones' "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" (message from Mick and Keef: "Thanks!") is excusable, a random dalliance that comes off a little sexy and a lot silly. The Mutt Lange/Shania Twain ditty that Britney covers (in the scariest corporate pop alliance of the '90s,) "Don't Let Me Be The Last To Know," sounds like a Shania outtake, weakly melodic and lacking in potency. But the pretty "Where Are You Now," the funky, Prince-like "Can't Make You Love Me," and the innocuous, album-ending pearl "Dear Diary" rescue the record from being a deep-water washout.

If you're reading this review and you don't already have this album by now, you most likely have no intention of buying it. This review is meant to tell you that, well, you're not missing much. Besides a pop culture phenomenon, that is.

All recordings courtesy of Jive Records. "Oops!...I Did It Again" and "Stronger" written by M. Martin, Rami; courtesy of Zomba Enterprises, Inc. (ASCAP). "Lucky" written by M. Martin, Rami, A. Kronlund; courtesy of Zomba Enterprises, Inc./Universal-MCA Music Publishing, a division of Universal Studios, Inc. (ASCAP).

SINEAD O'CONNOR

Faith And Courage (Atlantic)

Rating: 4 out of 7

By Rob O'Connor

If you're considering a career in the music business, do NOT worry about traits such as 'faith' and 'courage'--worry about getting your albums released while people still remember who you are. Just like Don Henley and Bruce Springsteen (both of whom speak of faith and courage in their own right), Sinéad takes years to make one album, and when it finally shows up, you can't blame people for being a little underwhelmed. Sure, it's nice, but this took HOW LONG?

Thankfully, she hasn't ruined her voice, and it's still the emotive vehicle that most effectively complimented Peter Gabriel on his 1992 album *US* (these slowpokes stick together, eh?). She's settled into an MOR groove that works for her introspective approach ("Jealous"). The trip-hop beats are mostly a producer's trick, meant to signify that she hasn't lost "touch" with the current music scene. But she could signify that herself just by making albums in a more timely manner.

All recordings courtesy of Atlantic Records. "No Man's Woman" written by S. O'Connor, S. Cutler, A. Preven; courtesy of Warner-Chappell Music, LTD./Scott Cutler Music/Famous Music (ASCAP)/Weetie-Pie Music/Ensign Music (BMI). "The Healing Room" written by S. O'Connor; courtesy of Warner-Chappell Music, LTD. "Daddy I'm

Fine" written by S. O'Connor, D. Stewart; courtesy of Warner-Chappell Music, LTD./BMG Music Publishing, LTD.

SAINT ETIENNE
Sound Of Water (Sub Pop)
Rating: 6 out of 7
By Ken Micallef

In an era of shrinking record companies and seemingly exhausted musical ideas, few pop music artists are able to build on their previous work; even fewer manage to compose compelling music and maintain an audience. Smashing Pumpkins and the Verve offer a solution: Give up the ghost while you still have some integrity intact. Oasis, are you listening?

With its latest, one of England's savviest pop consortiums goes further than anyone could have imagined. Saint Etienne has always bridged contrasting styles, meshing the sophistication of Brian Wilson and Bacharach with the populist pop of Dusty Springfield, Petula Clark, and the Pet Shop Boys. *Sound Of Water* is a coming-of-age record arriving smack dab at the turn of the century.

Brilliantly assimilating pop, Krautrock, synth pop, electronica, and exotica, *Sound Of Water* rides a narrow road between pure pop and avant-garde experimentation. The results are both surreal and serene: Music as ultimate summer hypnotic, as headphone sex, and soothing aural balm. "Late Morning" spins wordless vocals over an airy cloud of strings. "Just A Little Overcome" recalls *Pet Sounds* for sure, but without being slavish. As pop music currency, Wilson's sounds form a template St Etienne explores, as many have. But Sarah Cracknell's soft voice perfectly balances the simmering bits of synth oboe, acoustic guitar, and seesawing keyboard. Songs like "Boy Is Crying" and "Downey, CA" mix Dusty Springfield, Motown, and modern machine soul in layers of electric comfort sounds. "Aspects Of Lambert" extends a new hybrid--future pop with purpose--rife with Sean O'Hagen's keyboard doodles and again recalling the purely instrumental moments of *Pet Sounds*, but realized with computer sampler and sequencer. St Etienne surprise with this low-key wonder work, a wall of sunny sound encased in familiar jewels and misty pop memories.

All recordings courtesy of Sub Pop Records. All songs written by Cracknell, Stanley, Wiggs; courtesy of Momentum/Warner-Chappell.

DUSTY TRAILS
Dusty Trails (Atlantic)

Rating: 6 out of 7
By Ken Micallef

In the middle of a summer rife with teen pop trash, stolen nuclear secrets, and insane weather, Dusty Trails has made the perfect album to while away the hours in a hothouse of your own cerebral design.

Josephine Wiggs and Vivian Trimble rely on synths, erotic sounds, and a bevy of influences to make their lilting summer sambas. It's all so cool: the odder *Pet Sounds* of Brian Wilson, *La Decadence* of Divine Comedy and Serge Gainsbourg, the urbane sophistication of Stan Getz and Komeda, the vocal sweetness of Starland Vocal Band. Like acoustic jugglers with electronica hearts, Dusty Trails' songs purr with familiar sounds and serene moods. In fact, their music is all about mood. One song seamlessly rolls into the next, but the mood remains the same-- like hot fudge on cold ice cream, Farfisa organs over bossa nova beats, French sex on California beaches. They even include country, using Emmylou Harris on one track. Happy trails to you...

All recordings courtesy of Atlantic Records. All songs written by V. Trimble, J. Wiggs. "Spy In The Lounge" courtesy of EMI April Music, Inc./Love For Last Tango (ASCAP)/Naked Mole Rat Music/Ensign Music Corp./Gold Hill Music, Inc. (BMI); "Pearls On A String" courtesy of EMI April Music, Inc./Love For Last Tango (ASCAP)/Naked Mole Rat Music (BMI); "Dusty Trails Theme" courtesy of EMI April Music, Inc./Love For Last Tango (ASCAP)/Naked Mole Rat Music/Duchess Music Corp./MCA Music (BMI).

KINGS OF CONVENIENCE
Kings Of Convenience (Kindercore)
Rating: 6 Out Of 7
By Michael Lipton

With little more than two acoustic guitars and a pair of vocals, Norwegians Eirik Glambek Boe and Erlend Oye have crafted one of the most unique and captivating releases in recent memory. Beginning with the beguiling, childlike melody, and cleverly placed stops of "Toxic Girl"--not to mention its patently international tale -- the Kings turn an ear for simplicity into a series of gorgeous vignettes.

Lyricaly, they reveal just enough to set the scene -- but, with only a few lines of lyrics to each tune (and, as such, no "verses" or "choruses"), there's plenty left to the imagination. Musically, the guitars are never overused and there's never any superfluous strumming; in "Failure," Boe uses octaves on his nylon-stringed guitar as a bass/melody instrument, and check out the simple guitar interplay on "Days I Had With You." Like the vocal parts, each note has a very specific purpose. There's an airy and delicate matter-of-factness about "An English House" ("An English house could never be warm... single

glazed windows won't keep the draft away for long") reminiscent of the Incredible String Band, but the result is far less calculated -- like the tune was performed in front of a fireplace rather than in a studio.

Finally, "Surprise Ice," on which Boe enunciates like a male Nico, is a minor-keyed Simon & Garfunkel-sounding piece with a two-line chorus (the exception) that will draw you in with its warmth. Check out this wonderfully fresh and different approach to music.

All recordings courtesy of Kindercore Records. All songs written by Kings Of Convenience; courtesy of Kings Of Convenience.

ERIC CLAPTON & B.B. KING
Riding With The King (Duck/Reprise)
Rating: 5 out of 7
By Michael Lipton

With King keeping Clapton headed in the right direction--which would be away from wimpy acoustic ballads and reworkings of his "hits"--this is a solid, if not exceptional collaboration.

The tunes draw on B.B.'s extensive catalog--"Three O'Clock Blues," "Help The Poor" (featured on King's seminal *Live At The Regal*), shuffles like "Days Of Old," and classics like "Key To The Highway"--plus a couple of modern nuggets from Texas guitarist/songwriter firebrand Doyle Bramhall II. With the exception of the title track, a muscular and deliberate take on an early John Hiatt tune (with fine playing by Clapton and vocal asides by King), the straight-up blues numbers fare better than the rockers (Bramhall's original versions easily outshine these covers).

In addition to featuring King's exceptional voice, a crack rhythm section (Steve Gadd and Nathan East) keeps timeless tracks like "Ten Long Years" and "Days Of Old" right in pocket--simple and fluid yet rock-solid, and provides a foundation for two exceptional--but sometimes lazy--players (check out the guitar interplay on "Hold On I'm Coming"). In particular, King shines on his emotional "When My Heart Beats Like A Hammer," while Clapton takes control on "Worried Life Blues."

While there is no shortage of great blues reissues, this disc also serves as a reminder that teen titans like Kenny Wayne Shepherd might do better to drop the "blues" references from their resumes.

All recordings courtesy of Duck/Reprise Records. "Riding With The King" written by J. Hiatt; courtesy of Careers-BMG Music Publishing, Inc. (BMI). "Key To The Highway" written by W. Broonzy, C. Seger; courtesy of Universal Duchess Music Corp. (BMI). "Days Of Old" written by R. B. King, J. Bihari; courtesy of Careers-BMG Music Publishing, Inc./Powerforce Music (BMI).

JOAO GILBERTO
Joao Voz E Violao (Verve)
Rating: 5 out of 7
By Ken Micallef

One listen to Joao Gilberto's voice brings back all the fragrance and flavor of seminal Brazilian bossa nova. Along with his wife Astrud Gilberto, songwriter Antonio Carlos Jobim, and a few others, Gilberto founded bossa nova with his 1958 recording of "Chega De Saudade," which he records again here. With only his acoustic guitar for accompaniment, Gilberto retraces his steps with classic songs by Jobim like "Desafinado" and "Voci Vai Ver," and also includes newer material by Gilberto Gil, Caetano Veloso (who also produced the record), and Bororo, among others.

Gilberto whisper-sings gracefully, using his guitar to sculpt the music with swaying, pulsing rhythms. As tranquil as it all sounds, the music yearns for a pliant rhythm section and perhaps strings to flesh out fully what sounds like a private recording in some small club. Gilberto is still a master and his bossa nova a thing of touching beauty, but the music, though pristine in bare form, would blossom with life if fully produced and orchestrated.

All recordings courtesy of Verve Music Group. "Desde Que O Samba E Samba" written by C. Veloso; courtesy of Terra Enterprises, Inc. (BMI). "Desafinado" written by A. C. Jobim, N. Mendonca; courtesy of Corcovado Music Corp./Bendig Music Corp. (BMI). "Chega De Saudade" written by A. C. Jobim, V. DeMoraes; courtesy of Corcovado Music Corp./VM Enterprises Inc. (BMI).

ELVIN JONES
The Complete Blue Note Elvin Jones Sessions (Mosaic)
Rating: 6 out of 7
By Dave DiMartino

Deservedly acclaimed for his work with saxophonist John Coltrane's groundbreaking quartet of the early '60s, drummer Elvin Jones was by no means a slouch later, when recording on his own. As this superb eight-CD set fully documents, Jones established himself as an adventurous bandleader between 1968-73, not only for his exquisite taste in musicians, but for the richness and diversity of the instruments in his various combos. Beginning with a stellar instrumental trio showcasing comparatively underrated saxophonist Joe Farrell, Jones would take on further players such as young saxophonists Dave Liebman and Steve Grossman, add a guitar and keyboards from the

likes of Chick Corea and Jan Hammer, and play music that at times approached--but never fully reached--fusion. Yet the one quality that would come to dog that musical form--excess--is nowhere to be found on any of these eight discs, reined in by Jones's understated power, on display here every moment.

Three peak periods are documented on these discs: First is the trio consisting of Jones, bassist Jimmy Garrison (also of the Coltrane quartet) and Farrell, responsible for the 1968 sets *Puttin' It Together* and *The Ultimate Elvin Jones*. Typically the trio format is the hardest of all combos to pull off successfully in jazz, particularly when no chording instrument is involved, but Farrell is simply exceptional on both of these sessions, sounding as bold and certain as Sonny Rollins did with his famed trios of the previous decade. Second is the larger band that recorded Jones's unsung 1971 masterpiece *Genesis*; bolstered by the addition of saxophonists Liebman and Frank Foster (whose flute on such tracks as "P.P. Phoenix" is subtle but stunningly rich), as well as bassist/composer Gene Perla. The playing is superb, but the songs themselves--from Perla, Liebman and Foster--shine even more. Till now unavailable on CD, this session alone may be reason enough to own this box. Finally comes the quartet that recorded *Live At The Lighthouse* in 1972; with Perla and Jones solidly backing them, saxophonists Liebman and Grossman take turns soloing and provide ample evidence of why Miles Davis found them strong enough players to take on in his own band soon after.

Eight CDs of brilliantly played jazz, much of it not heard as widely as it might've been, *The Complete Blue Note Elvin Jones Sessions* is, in short, great stuff played by great players. Hear for yourself.

All recordings are available solely through Mosaic Records; 35 Melrose Place; Stamford, CT 06902; (203) 327-7111.

All recordings courtesy of Mosaic Records. "For All The Other Times" written by G. Perla; courtesy of Perla Music (ASCAP). "Reza" written by E. Lobo, R. Guerra; courtesy of Duchess Music Corp. (BMI). "Ascendant" written by J. Garrison; courtesy of EMI Unart Catalog, Inc. (BMI).

CHARLIE HUNTER
Charlie Hunter (Blue Note)
Rating: 6 out of 7
By Bob Gulla

Charlie Hunter didn't bother naming his latest album, even though he's got a half-dozen or so previous releases, including one called simply *The Charlie Hunter Trio*. It seems, and rightly so, that Hunter

doesn't feel words aptly convey the big ideas he's aiming at in his new and spicy jazz explorations. Indeed, Hunter and his playing need few descriptives; he's honestly becoming one of the scene's most inspired young bandleaders and guitarists, with a sense of adventure that finds him unafraid to grab hold of bold new ideas.

Charlie Hunter, featuring Hunter on eight-string, Leon Parker on percussion, and Peter Apfelbaum on tenor, is a virtual blueprint of new jazz. "Al Green" features Hunter and the talented Parker in a spare, sultry duet, as do the Latin-flecked "Epistrophy" and "Dersu (Slight Return)," which have Hunter managing both guitar and bass line chores on his eight-string. Elsewhere, the stomping "Cloud Splitter" and the percussive "Two For Bleu" center around the handy horn work of Apfelbaum and trombonist Josh Roseman.

The album swings accessibly, from edgy balladry to full-on acid jams, spearheaded by an ever more confident Hunter as he leads his spirited corps into the surprising, jubilant margins of mainstream jazz. So what if he doesn't bother naming it? He could've just called it *Excellent*.

All recordings courtesy of Blue Note Records. All songs written by C. Hunter; courtesy of CHT Publishing (ASCAP).

JAMES CARTER
Layin' In The Cut (Atlantic)
Rating: 5 out of 7
By Bob Gulla

Deep down in every sax player lies a funky alter ego ready to surface. Many straight-ahead players ignore it or repress it for the sake of purity. Others less intent on remaining true, open up and, occasionally, let it pour forth.

Talented young lion James Carter sure opens up on "Layin' In The Cut," his first-ever electric recording. Supported and encouraged by stellar accompaniment—guitarists Marc Ribot and Jef Lee Johnson, bassist Jamaaladeen Tacuma, and drummer G. Calvin Weston—Carter virtually explodes on the seven deep and loose jams featured here, venturing out to the edge and back on various chaotic cuts here, including the manic "Terminal B" and the daring "Drafadelic in D (sharp)." Ribot and Johnson, accustomed to the courageous fusion Carter's after, fit neatly into the equation, especially when the going gets a little frantic, as on the crackling "There's a Paddle" and the elastic title cut.

It's a pleasure to witness Carter engaging in the kind of whack swing he embraces here. And, on the album-ending, micro-note filled "GP"—the musical equivalent of an orgasmic climax—you know he's fully

enjoyed the electricity of it, the act of opening up and, man, just letting it flow.

All recordings courtesy of Atlantic Records. "Layin' In The Cut" and "Motown Mash," written by Carter, Johnson, Ribot, Tacuma, Weston; courtesy of Carte Noir (BMI)/Malinda Davora Music/Knockwurst Music/Jamaaldeen Music/Can Be Done Music (ASCAP). "GP" written by J. Carter; courtesy of Carte Noir (BMI).

KID ROCK
The History Of Rock (Lava-Atlantic)
Rating: 4 out of 7
By Rob O'Connor

Mostly a collection of tunes from Kid's out-of-print albums made when no one cared if he could smell the other white meat from a mile away, the cleverly titled *The History Of Rock* is a mishmash. The tunes have been either re-recorded or seriously remixed to reflect his septuple platinum-level budget.

The first single, the newly recorded "American Badass," underlined by Metallica's "Sad But True," is the album's centerpiece and rocks accordingly with a swagger earned by success. Kid should probably keep up with that metal-rap alchemy, since it puts his penchant for gratuitous cursing in the proper context. When he "mellows out" ("Paid," "Early Mornin' Stoned Pimp"), the Kid ain't exactly Millie Jackson. Kid Rock a soul balladeer? A sensitive soul? Well, who's he trying to kid? (Get it??) Duh.

All recordings courtesy of Atlantic Records. All songs courtesy of Thirty Two Mile Music/Warner-Tamerlane Publishing Corp. (BMI). "Prodigal Son" and "Paid" written by R. J. Ritchie; "Early Mornin' Stoned Pimp" written by R. J. Ritchie, M. Gross.

RICHARD ASHCROFT
Alone With Everybody (Virgin)
Rating: 7 out of 7
By Bob Gulla

Star-crossed and sullen artiste Richard Ashcroft, the one who constantly trips over his own feet on the way to stardom, has at last come up with the kind of album his fans all knew he could make. Its sad-sack title notwithstanding, *Alone With Everybody* is the best album Ashcroft has been a part of since the Verve's great, blustery *Northern Soul* album back in 1995. Though it was a pity to see that talented but misguided band split after *Urban Hymns*, watching (and hearing)

Ashcroft's spirit rise up from the ashes so quickly and so triumphantly adds an important and heartwarming chapter to the embattled songwriter's life.

Combining the genteel, orchestral aesthetics of the acclaimed *Urban Hymns* with a smooth, even more soulful sensibility, *Alone With Everybody* is more instantly memorable than any of Ashcroft's past work. Just about every tune here deserves mention--from the rich, opening "A Song For The Lovers" and the swooning, '70s pop-country "Brave New World," to the pushy/catchy piano gem "C'mon People (We're Making It Now)" and the delightful "I Get My Beat."

Avoiding another awkward "band" situation (he has been labeled difficult to work with), Ashcroft employed a rotating batch of musical accompaniment, which was, apparently, at his service. This enabled the temperamental songwriter to pursue directly the sounds he heard in his head. Those sounds--expansive, even majestic--portray Ashcroft as an even better writer than he had already proven himself to be.

It may be an overachievement, but who cares? *Alone With Everybody* is a major breakthrough, and one of the very best records of the year.

All recordings courtesy of Virgin Records. All songs written by R. Ashcroft; courtesy of EMI Music Publishing, Ltd. (PRS), administered by EMI Virgin Music, Inc. (ASCAP).

KING CRIMSON

The ConstruKction Of Light (Virgin)

Rating: 6 out of 7

By S.L. Duff

As if intended to make the ongoing saga of King Crimson more confusing, here's a little background on what these 21st Century musos are up to. The 1995 incarnation of the band introduced the "double trio" lineup: two guitars, two drummers, two stick/bassists--in short, two power trios combined. Since then, that lineup has mutated into a variety of trios and quartets going as ProjeKct One, ProjeKct Two, Three, and Four. ProjeKct X, featuring Crimson's only constant, guitarist Robert Fripp, along with long-time foil, guitarist Adrian Belew, joined by stick player Trey Gunn and drummer Pat Mastelotto, is also the new Crimson lineup. Confused? Good. That seems to be just the initial reaction Fripp and company are looking for.

The mighty granddaddy (and all-time best) of all progressive rock bands, King Crimson's 1969 debut caught everyone even remotely paying attention off guard. It opened with the epic "21st Century Schizoid Man," complete with unreal tempo and time changes and an impossibly distorted lead vocal, both unheard of elements on a rock

record of the time, both commonplace today. Now, three decades later, the umpteenth incarnation of Crimson opens up with an octave-dropped harmonized vocal, singing "ProzaKc Blues," its first pronouncement of the actual 21st Century. Far less heavy, dark, ominous--and, well, terrifying--than "Schizoid Man," "ProzaKc" is abstract blues, and while full of the sharply angled riffs that Crimson tosses about like party favors, it is positively soothing compared to the 30-year-old model. Whereas the early Crimson often opened with an opus of total annihilation, now they can afford to be more subtle, but don't worry, prog maniacs, they haven't sold out, they're just more cunning. Indeed, after being sucked into their vortex of polytonality and asymmetric meters, this new Crimson takes you on a ride that builds in both intensity and unpredictability.

The largely instrumental collection isn't for everyone, but that's true by design--it is, after all, a King Crimson album. And, whereas an esteemed rock crit bonebrain such as yours truly could pontificate with ease on the average post-metal hip-hop hybrid infused with wigger lyrics--contextualizing, dissecting, and ultimately berating the disposable sonics--with *ConstruKction*, I'll still be coming to grips with sections of it long after this review has been published. This isn't easy music, it's far from all aggro or uni-dimensional in terms of mood and sentiment; you get new things out of it with each listen. I played it for a friend who remarked, "This is what too much time and talent sound like."

Arguable, sure. But for those who want to peek over into the beyond not only to see it but to hear it, Crimson has been there, on and off, for the adventurous, for 31 years. The pinnacle of absolute Crimson-ness is reached with the imposing "Lark's Tongue In Aspic, Part Four." Part One goes all the way back to the album of the same name from '73, and the title in its ongoing incarnations has always indicated a wild ride of stubborn time changes, imposing tri-tones, and dizzying improv. Here, it's divided into four sections, all cue-able on your CD player. Nifty!

It would be nice to think that Crimson is picking up a new generation of curious listeners every 10 years or so, and maybe it actually did with its (slightly) more commercial fare of the '80s. At the mid-'90s show I attended, it was mostly a lot of old guys like me. Aw, well...maybe a double bill with Mr. Bungle would do the trick.

All recordings courtesy of Virgin Records. All songs written by A. Belew, R. Fripp, T. Gunn, P. Mastelotto; courtesy of BMG Music Publishing, LTD (PRS)/Poppy Due Music/Robert Stevens Music.

STEREOLAB

The First Of The Microbe Hunters (Elektra)

Rating: 4 out of 7

By Ken Micallef

Though past Stereolab albums like *Emperor Tomato Ketchup*, *Peng!*, and the recent *Cobra And Phases Group Play Voltage In The Milky Night* found the French post-rock stylists constantly expanding their universe, their latest simply treads water (or is that loops?).

Like an addendum to *...Milky Night*, *The First Of The Microbe Hunters* uses the same methods and techniques to replicate the same sounds. A chunky rock groove, whirring organs, and playful vibraphone fill "Outer Bongolia." The same rules are followed for "Household Names." "Barock-Plastik" is harder driving than some S-Lab music, but the oft-used "Sean O'Hagen instrumentation effect" (churgling drum machines, wah- wah guitars, steaming organs) still commands center stage. Gane/Sadier and Co. toy with buzzing systems music on "I Feel The Air (Of Another Planet)," offering a respite from the patented S-Lab sound psychosis, but *Microbe Hunters* is mostly business as usual.

All recordings courtesy of Elektra Records. All songs written by T. J. Gane, L. Sadier; courtesy of Island Music Publishing (BMI).

ECHOBOY

Volume One (Mute)

Rating: 4 out of 7

By Ken Micallef

Wall of Voodoo meets Flock of Seagulls? Gary Numan does Angelo Badalamenti? Or is it the Carpenters on a cliff with Cat Stevens? This oddball, disjointed little UK band can't decide who they are or where they want to be, but they do know what they like: echo, and lots of it.

Each one of these shoe-gazing sonic missives, including "55," "Crocodile Milk," and "Contact," is bathed in reams of echo, reverberating through their music like sonar off a whale's submerged skull. Some Echoboy songs approach a post-rock Tortoise-like consistency, with the loops piling up and droning convincingly. But too many songs, like the "Mexican Radio" sound-alike "Kit and Holly," simply annoy. "Model 352" bubbles and percolates like good mid-'90s electronica, but even High Llamas and the Orb were just aping Krautrockers Can and Neu!, and back then it was kinda interesting. Surprising acoustic guitars greet the intro of "Walking," then a hollow vocal choir covers them with marshmallows and cream. Bleecchh.

All recordings courtesy of Mute Records. All songs written by Echoboy; courtesy of Copyright Control Richard Warren 2000.

ESSRA MOHAWK (Rhino Handmade)

Rating: 6 out of 7

By Michael Lipton

The prerequisites for achieving "cult" status are not all desirable. While positives like a rich history, a high degree of originality, and a singular voice are required, "cult" also denotes a number of frustrating "near-misses" and a lack of mainstream success. Singer-songwriter Essra Mohawk fits the bill--and then some. Her songs have been recorded by the Shangri-Las and Vanilla Fudge (when she was but a teenager) and more recently, Cyndi Lauper, Tina Turner, and Lorrie Morgan. To date, Mohawk has released a scant eight LPs, but has indeed left her mark on rock history: Her debut, *Sandy's Album Is Here At Last* (Verve, 1968) was released on Frank Zappa's Bizarre Records (as a member of the original Mothers Of Invention, Mohawk was christened "Uncle Meat"), while *Primordial Lovers* (Reprise, 1970) made it into *Rolling Stone's* "Best 25 Albums Ever Made." It is this record and the follow-up, *Essra Mohawk* (Asylum, 1974), as well as a few previously unreleased cuts, that are included on this limited release from Rhino Handmade.

While *Primordial Lovers* has "aged" for more than three decades, don't expect music that sounds cliché or dated. True, the sound is indicative of an era, but the quality and power of her voice are ageless. If you're a newcomer, nothing in the above abbreviated resume will prepare you for the breathtaking (and breathless) contents of this disc. There are some obvious (and oft-mentioned) reference points: Laura Nyro and Joni Mitchell. But Mohawk (born Sandra Hurvitz) takes that basic recipe--a song, a voice, a piano, and various elements of a band--and soars to levels that have rarely been reached, before or after. She's every bit as recognizable as Nyro and Mitchell, only more versatile and challenging (another "cult" ingredient). "I Am The Breeze" is a perfect introduction. With a simple piano/oboe arrangement, it's Aaron Copeland meets a metaphysical Randy Newman with a vocal that floats through the tune like an acrobat. The easygoing "I'll Give It To You Anyway" introduces what Mohawk calls her "vocal collage"-- layering vocal parts (six or more) that build on and intertwine with one another.

If "I Have Been Here Before" has a familiar ring, it's because it was one of David Crosby's favorite songs and provided the inspiration for his "Deja Vu." Featuring Lee Underwood on guitar (who, at the time, was playing with Tim Buckley), it's one of the more ambitious tunes,

with Mohawk caressing notes and phrases with a silky and sultry agility that recalls jazz singers like Nina Simone and Flora Purim. Both "Spiral" and "It's Up To Me" feature the trio that would become the core of the Jerry Hahn Brotherhood. Both "Jabberwock Song" and "Image of YU" were recorded during the "Primordial" sessions and released as singles but did not appear on the LP. "New Skins For Old," the first cut from "Essra Mohawk," and "You Make Me Go To Pieces" have a loose swagger, with Mohawk careening and jumping octaves with a raunchy Bette Davis attitude. The cuts are meatier, with more to sink your teeth into, and she delivers the lyrics with more confidence and abandon. That LP also included some of her best tunes--"Openin' My Love Door," the emancipating "Full Fledged Woman," and "I Can Not Forget." Of course, the danger with re-releases and retrospectives is that they tend to put the emphasis on the past, not the present or the future.

Mohawk is still a vital artist. She continues to perform and released *Raindance* (Schoolkids) in 1995, and *Essie Mae Hawk Meets the Killer Groove Band* (available through her website, www.rockersusa.com/EssraMohawk) in 1999. Rhino Handmade releases, which have included efforts by Sweetwater, Tim Buckley, and David Peel and the Lower East Side, are available only from the Rhino Handmade Website at <http://www.rhinohandmade.com>.

All recordings courtesy of Rhino/Handmade. All songs written by E. Mohawk; courtesy of Axial Music (ASCAP).