

## THE CARDIGANS:

First Band On The Moon (Mercury)

Rating: \*\*\*\*

By Dan Epstein

If it seems a little soon for a new record from this Swedish combo, it's only because *Life*, the frothy lounge-pop concoction that made such a big impression on American hipsters during the first half of 1996, has already been out for over a year in Europe. Rather than sitting on it (and forcing American fans to shell out for import copies), the folks at Mercury have wisely decided to release *First Band On The Moon* in the States at the same time it hits the European racks; hell, at the rate the Cardigans are progressing, all you can do is try and keep up with them. For, while *First Band On The Moon* bears some superficial similarities to *Life*--specifically, the just-look-at-that-shine production and Nina Persson's huggable vocals--the new album is a huge step forward from its predecessor. Harder-edged (though it's hardly the new Sepultura record), and less obviously lounge-influenced, the record features a stunning array of guitar and keyboard sounds that nicely complement the late-'60s pop influences at the heart of the songs. "Your New Cuckoo," "Been It" and "Never Recover" all offer the kind of effortlessly catchy choruses that Cardigans fans have come to expect, although the lyrics (courtesy of Persson) are more notably pessimistic this time around; it's as if the band decided to subvert its "cute pop band" image by tossing lines like "Been It"'s "I've been your sister/I've been your mistress/Maybe I was your whore" into the mix. There are other nice touches elsewhere: the swirling psychedelia of "Losers"; the cheeky Black Sabbath references in "Heartbreaker"; and a goofy trip-hop version of Ozzy & Co.'s "Iron Man." All in all, *First Band On The Moon* is the best Cardigans record yet; what comes next, we can only guess.