

HELMET

Aftertaste (Interscope)

Rating: ****

By Sandy Masuo

Nearly 10 years ago, when Helmet first began hammering out its bristling, minimalist rock, it defied most metal conventions of the day. The clean-cut jock-rock crew led by Page Hamilton eschewed both the fashion fetishes of the hair-band school and the anti-fashion stance of the grunge faction. The bracing music combined a conservatory-bred sophistication with the gnarly starkness of AC/DC. Hamilton and company had stripped metal down to its most basic components--riveting riffage driven home by a relentless rhythmic attack.

After methodically exploring this primal terrain for two albums (*Strap It On* and *Meantime*), the band arrived at 1994's *Betty* on which they stretched the premise in some startling directions--from the bluesy twang of "Sam Hell" and the woozy swagger of "The Silver Hawaiian" to a devilish deconstruction of jazz guitarist Wes Montgomery's "Beautiful Love" and the shockingly poppy undertow of hit singles "Wilma's Rainbow" and "Milquetoast." Having gone out on a limb with such reckless experimental abandon, the band apparently felt compelled to get back to basics with *Aftertaste*.

There are some pop-inflected moments on *Aftertaste*--"Renovation" and "It's Easy To Get Bored" hinge on beefy power pop that's reminiscent of the Kinks--and Hamilton's signature no-frills vocals are more prominent in the mix, sometimes ("Exactly What You Wanted," "Insatiable") taking on a Trent Reznor-ish ranting edge. Ultimately, though, it's the raw, grinding tension of the music that most effectively conveys the angst-tinged content of such tracks as "Like I Care" and "(High) Visibility." Much of the album churns with the crisp sludginess that underpinned *Betty* and defined the earlier albums.

Certainly *Aftertaste* is every inch a Helmet album, but whether it represents musical ground gained or lost remains to be seen. For now it looks like a strictly lateral move.