

LAUNCH No. 12
THE HANG
Vibreaker Reviews

VIBE 1:

U2

Pop (Island)

Rating: ***

By Billy Altman

While no one's ever accused U2 of being a Stryper in wolf's clothing, the group's new album Pop may well be the one that finally capsizes the arkful of questions that the band's nebulously articulated religious beliefs have always begged. As previewed by the "I was a teenage Village People zombie" video for the collection's first single, "Discotheque," as well as their tour-announcing press conference at a K-Mart in New York City, Bono and his mates continue to self-consciously mock every last aspect of commercial/materialistic/heathen rock iconography--something they've obviously felt compelled to do ever since they achieved superstar status with 1987's *The Joshua Tree*. At this stage of their career, however, it's difficult to understand the point of such gimmicky shenanigans, which seem to be more about amusing themselves than sharing whatever sense of humor they think they've developed. Given the gravity of the lyrics peeking out from under the jungle rhythms and electronic bleats on these songs--God and/or Jesus is referenced on virtually every track--you'd think they'd be much more aware of vanity's role as one of the Seven Deadly Sins.

Then again, that's a huge part of the problem with Pop. While there are some undeniably strong songs here--specifically, "If God Will Send His Angels," "Staring At The Sun" and "Last Night On Earth," a trio of tunes that follow each other at the one-quarter mark of the album's hour-long running time--the overall tone of Pop is relentlessly heavy-handed, and embarrassingly self-serving as well. When Bono sings "Me [and] you, stuck together with God's glue," or "It's who you know that gets you through the gates of the Playboy Mansion," it's hard to feel like you're not being preached to. And much as U2 likes to bemoan the fact that (in their words), "they put Jesus in show business, now it's hard to get in the door," they're fooling themselves if they think that just because they've thrown a blanket of irony over it all, they're not doing just that. As it is written: The road to you-know-where is paved with good intentions.

VERUCA SALT

Eight Arms To Hold You (Minty Fresh/Outpost)

Rating: **

By Jim DeRogatis

Seemingly overnight back in 1994, Veruca Salt rocketed from playing its first trepidatious gigs at Chicago's Lounge Ax to storming the modern-rock charts with "American Thighs," and no one was more surprised than Veruca

Salt. Louise Post (a graduate of Barnard) and Nina Gordon (ditto of Tufts) were razor-sharp and extremely driven, but their music held more promise than precision, and much of the fun in songs such as "Seether" and "25" was the sound of young musicians surprising themselves with their newfound ability to rock out--something you can't really plan or over-intellectualize.

Now, Veruca Salt is back with a second album produced by Bob Rock (of Motley Crue and Metallica Fame), and Post and Gordon are talking a lot in interviews about how determined they were to make "a big rock record" (as if ol' Bob does any other type). The result comes complete with overwrought Pat Benatar (or is that No Doubt?)-type power ballads ("Benjamin" and "Loneliness Is Worse"), a reverb-drenched arena-rock sound and plenty of slick and newly-strengthened harmonies. Plus, there's lots of inside jokes, including the album title (the alternate name for Help!--in other words, Veruca Salt wants to be as big as the Beatles) and the "Gosh, it's come true!" rock-star fantasy, "With David Bowie."

Carefully crafted to fit the demands of modern-rock radio, lip-gloss rockers such as "Volcano Girls" and "Don't Make Me Prove It" continue the self-references: The former comes complete with a lyrical nod to "Seether" a la the Beatles' "Glass Onion," but it lacks the earlier song's giddy sense of self-discovery, not to mention the killer hooks. In fact, Veruca Salt only recaptures the old magic when Post lets her guard down toward the end of the album and rages unchecked on the one-two punch of "Stoneface" and "Venus Man Trap." These tunes were inspired by Post's romantic split with Loud Lucy frontman Christian Lane who dumped her to keep company with Alanis Morissette. And who can blame him? Eight Arms to Hold You is only marginally better than the contrived schlock that Alanis delivers, but Canada's gal wonder is almost certainly a lot more fun at the movies.

SNEAKER PIMPS

Becoming X (Virgin)

Rating: ****

By Tristram Lozaw

The Sneaker Pimps like to think of themselves as a Brit trip-hop band with a difference: songs. The kind of songs "that can be sung with a guitar, on the toilet." Not sure how they fit on there with the drum machine, but the Sneaker Pimps' boast is basically on target. Stoked with themes of modern culture's manipulations, the Pimps' crafty dub-hop tunes become tag-team matches featuring the stark box beats of Tricky, creepy sweetness of the Cranes and bad-girl appeal of Garbage.

The Sneaker Pimps' name, lifted from the Beastie Boys' term for guys hired to buy them hard-to-find high-tops, suggests some sophomoric hi-jinks, but the mysterious sophistication of the CD's title, and its possible meanings, fits the band's music better.

As a reference to rave-style highs, Becoming X reflects the lysergic dream of dance floor funk threading through the spooky grooves of "Low Place Like Home," "Walking Zero" and the title cut. As a sexy come-on, the

deep-bottom roll of "Spin Spin Sugar" and the Flood (U2, Depeche Mode) mix of "Wasted Early Sunday Morning" become calls to sleaziness, with singer Kelli Dayton starring as the wet dream. Meanwhile, "Post Modern Sleaze" sounds eerily down-home in its bluesy acoustic grit, adding earthiness to Dayton's allure.

The pounding edginess of "Tesko Suicide," the single that created a blitz of worship in the British press last year, makes it a standout here as well. While balancing grim humor with emotional reaffirmation, the song weaves a fantasy about being able to buy suicide kits at the supermarket: "You've got nothing to shout about, you're over and out."

The heavy reliance on pedestrian trip-hop beats gets a bit unnerving after repeat listens, and too much has been made of the Pimps' supposed "postmodern" eclectic appeal. But in *Becoming X* we have what could be a leap forward in the melding of song and dance in a decade that could use more of both.

SPACE

Spiders (Universal)

Rating: ***1/2

By Ken Barnes

Now that the Great Worm Of Rock has--for all intents and purposes--devoured its own tail, and the mass of popular music comprises recycled forms from the past, two kinds of pillagers have emerged. There are the faithful devotees of a specific style or act (Rancid=Clash, Oasis=Beatles, No Doubt=a sickly cross between Berlin and Missing Persons) and then there are the magpie eclectics who plunder musical riffs, styles and curiosities across artists, eras and genres almost at random (Beck, Kula Shaker).

Anyone who values stylistic coherence (at least within the scope of a single song) is bound to find this second sort of musical grab bag irksome. Others will find it exhilarating. Space falls somewhere in the middle. Spiders, the band's debut album, traps a truly bewildering variety of styles within its web of sound (props to the Seeds). Sometimes they mesh, sometimes they rub up against each other and cause irritation.

The calling card single, "Female Of The Species," is more unified than most of the band's material, mixing a Martin Denny topical/tropical vibe and some loungy crooning in the verse. Then there's the Burt Bacharach-style bridge that suddenly illuminates the song like a sun-break in Seattle--a hook so good you can put up with the rest of the tune just to hear it again. Earlier UK single "Neighbourhood" combines a pseudo-reggae sound with filigrees of surf guitar and an Arabic drone in fairly effective fashion. "Major Pager" is an ominous, edgy pop tune with menacing Johnny Rottenesque trilled "r"'s, while "Me & You Vs The World" (silly spoken passages aside) could almost pass for a Kinks song, right down to the affected Caribbean/Liverpudlian vocal style.

Of course, there are combinations that just don't work: "Mister Psycho"'s sinister, psychotic sing-song vocal, plus whistling; "Money"'s filtered vocal, dreary hip-hop/industrial crunch, florid strings and

treated crooning; "Dark Clouds"'s mannered, "swinging" vocal (not unlike Bowie in his most cloying "Life On Mars" phase) married to rock guitars and a mildly funky beat; and "Charlie M"'s dancehall talk-overs, muted '40s-style horns and Blue Swede ooga-chucka background chant. Other songs are drowned in ponderous Sabbath riffs or synth-funk.

While all this messy style-mongering mars Spiders, the bizarre, funny and often borderline libelous lyrics are a plus; they're definitely worth a listen and a read-through. All in all, the album is fascinating and repellent at the same time--just like the title.

VIBE 2:

SPEARHEAD

Chocolate Supa Highway (Capitol)

Rating: ****

By Bill Holdship

A recent Sunday L.A. Times feature profiled current Berkeley hip-hop star DJ Shadow and included a huge photo with the caption: "If everybody knows who I am, then it's no fun." Y'see, the kid prizes his "anonymity." Which, of course, is why he consented to a full-page photo in the most widely-read edition of one of the nation's most widely-read newspapers. We live in a very contrary world...

Likewise, while I'm no censorship advocate, you've gotta wonder as to why a major segment of the rap community continues to perpetuate a negative stereotype of inner-city youth. When one of the genre's biggest stars ends up dead before he hits 25, you have to wonder if this pop artform is now more part of the proverbial problem than the solution. As rap archetype/Last Poets founder Abiodun Oyewolfe said last year: "If we don't get rappers saying something positive, then what we've got is something negative that's dragging us down."

Actually, Spearhead leader Michael Franti has been using the hip-hop medium to say something positive as far back as his stint with the early '90s Bay Area sensation, Disposable Heroes Of Hip-hoprisy. Franti does address some of those aforementioned racial stereotypes in "Chocolate Supa Highway," the title track to Spearhead's sophomore effort ("One nigga, two niggas, three niggas, four/Robbing your house, the liquor store"), but he also looks at positive ways in which worldwide hip-hop communication has affected his generation.

Franti draws his influences from a litany of baby boomer sources and sounds, including Marvin Gaye and Barry White (especially on the track "Keep Me Lifted"). "The Payback" (note the James Brown-ish title) is pure Philly soul with a touch of acoustic folk (!), while "Rebel Music" channels a Bob Marley soundalike. "Why Oh Why," the LP's first single and a bitter look at the game of basketball, quotes from Grandmaster Flash's landmark "The Message," and this reviewer was absolutely blown away when Joan Baez's legendary voice came wailing out of the speakers during "Wayfaring

Stranger." (Turns out that the voice actually belongs to Joan Osborne, but, hey, the effect is pretty much the same.)

Despite a continuously professed love for what they term "herb" (see the orgasmic "Ganja Babe"--hey, they toured last summer with Cypress Hill, so whaddaya want?), Speahead's politics make so much more sense than other modern music rabble-rousers like, say, Rage Against The Machine, who preach "communism" while recording for a billion-dollar, capitalistic, Japanese-owned conglomerate called Sony. Like I said, such a contrary world...

DRU HILL

Dru Hill (Island Black Music)

Rating: ***1/2

By Amy Linden

If you were to take all of the male vocal groups currently recording and lay them end to end, you could surround the planet two times over with crooning, yearning, down-on-bended-knee-for-your-sweet-love men. There are so many vocal groups out there right now that only their mamas (and possibly their accountants) can tell them apart. The reason, of course, is that vocal acts are very popular--and with imitation being the easiest form of A&R, record labels scramble to put out something that will duplicate whatever came (and sold) before.

Enter into this profitable but utterly predictable fray Dru Hill (the name derives from Baltimore's Druid Hill Park), who are enjoying their moment of fame courtesy of the solid singles "Tell Me" and "In My Bed." What is Dru Hill's contribution to this already over-populated genre? Well, to be perfectly honest, not a whole hell of a lot. That's not to say they aren't talented. I mean, in what qualifies as the most back-ass compliment known to man, Dru Hill can sing, OK? On the dramatic "Nothing To Hide," they give it their all, piling muscular four-part harmonies on top of a taut rhythm track, while "Tell Me" all but vibrates with neediness. It's all good, but like so many groups that have come and gone before them, Dru Hill does little to distinguish themselves from the pack. They sound like Jodeci, but without the leering, dangerous horniness or Blackstreet sans the production genius of Teddy Riley. In other words, Dru Hill are everything you've come to love and expect from big bucks, hugely commercial black music. Which, depending on your tolerance for formula, may or may not be a good thing.

RAHSAAN PATTERSON

Rahsaan Patterson (MCA)

Rating: ****

By J.R. Reynolds

With a keen sense of song that combines memorable hooks with infectious rhythms, Rahsaan Patterson's debut album reflects this R&B artist's talent-soaked abilities. Spicy production work enthralls the listener without overtaking the artist's gritty creative flow. Melodies are what drive this vocalist's album--that, and genuine emotion. And while it's imprudent to

make predictions, it's a good bet that this soul vocalist should enjoy a healthy recording career.

One of the reasons for Rahsaan's unique appeal is his use of nontraditional pop instruments. On "Come Over," the artist employs the Hindu sitar, which Glenn McKinney plucks to perfection. The stringed instrument offers the easy-flowing ballad a diverting ethnic dimension beyond Rahsaan's own African-American heritage, making a good song better.

"Spend The Night" demonstrates Rahsaan's ability to seduce listeners with his urgently expressive vocals, and the song is laced with sultry rhythm play driven by demure strings and restrained keyboard lines. But perhaps the artist's great secret for creating admirers is his chameleon-like ability to alter his vocal delivery to project his deepest musical essence. Case in point is "Where You Are," which weaves an airy romantic tapestry that, unlike "Spend The Night"'s bedroom sensuality, projects a good-time-at-the-park-with-your-beau kind of feeling. Another track, "Stop By," uses funky guitar play to wah-wah its way along one's ear, provoking an involuntary neck groove and some toe-tapping syncopation.

INCOGNITO

Beneath The Surface (Verve/Forecast)

Rating: ****

By Josef Woodard

In the musical world according to Incognito, it's the '70s all over again: echoes of Earth, Wind & Fire, Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye are coming back to haunt with the irony-free sound of soulful vocals, undulant grooves and softcore jazz chord changes. And that's not necessarily a bad thing. What's more, this is not a case of post-mod retreading, but a latter-day payback for the band that founder (and leader) Jean-Paul "Bluey" Maunick started back in the early '80s, when the '70s were barely history. That sound fell out of fashion by the mid-'80s, but has found new purpose and audience in these mid-'90s. History lessons are hard to avoid in pop music, particularly in an age when looking back comes naturally.

Like the similarly '70s-fixated Jamiroquai, but with silkier grooves and less grandiloquent lyrics, Incognito also reaffirms the old British penchant for skillful recycling of Americana. In this case, retro sophistofunk is the putty, and--truth be told--it sounds pretty fine. Chalk it up to the statute of cultural limitations coming around, turning that which was moldy back into what is hip.

Guitarist-songwriter Maunick runs the band with the ear of a producer (his side gig all these years) and has no compunction in using multiple vocalists: Chris Ballan, Imani and the especially searing Maysa Leak mix it up, creating a soul revue vibe. The vocalists embellish romantic themes, as on "Beneath The Surface," "Fountain Of Life" and "Hold On To Me," where they hold on to a simple anthem of a chorus, refusing to let it go, in soul tune tradition.

Instrumentals like the loopy opening prologue "Solar Fire" and "She Wears Black" (featuring righteous retro keyboard work from Graham Harvey),

tilt the balance toward the jazz end, but this isn't a jazz album by any stretch. Incognito just harks back to a time and cultural place where pop hooks, soul idealism and musical invention lived in a harmonious groove.

VIBE 3:

LIVE

Secret Samadhi (Radioactive)

Rating: ****

By Craig Rosen

"Selling The Drama" was the name of one of the big hits on Live's 1994 breakthrough album *Throwing Copper*. Rarely has a song title so aptly captured a band's modus operandi. This quartet, comprising four earnest, small-town Pennsylvania school chums, writes big bombastic songs filled with passion, angst and, yes, drama.

That's not necessarily a bad thing in a day filled with cutesy Weezer wannabes and one-hit wonder novelty acts, but when listening to the 12 songs on *Secret Samadhi*, Live's third album, you can't help but wish that singer/lyricist Edward Kowalczyk would lighten up a little. On occasion, Kowalczyk--now known as Edward, rather than Ed, thank you--drops a funny line. He rhymes "church" with "Lurch" (as in *The Addams Family*) in "Rattlesnake," complains that "puke smells like beer" in "Century" and ponders the hypothetical scenario, "If the mother goes to sleep with you /Will you run and tell Geraldo?" on "Freaks." Yet Kowalczyk sings those lines with all the solemnity of a judge delivering a death sentence to a serial killer, rather than deflating some of the histrionics with a nod and a wink.

While Kowalczyk sticks with the ultra-serious tone throughout the album, Live does mix things up a bit musically. "Lakini's Juice" rocks with Chad Taylor's grinding guitar. "Ghost" is buoyed by the hypnotic backing vocals provided by Elysian Fields singer Jennifer Charles and "Merica" swings with a looseness inspired by an R.E.M.-like instrument switch. In addition, the bittersweet "Turn My Head" should join U2's "One" in prom-dance heaven.

In all, even if there's no fun allowed, *Secret Samadhi* proves that Live remains a very good rock band. They won't be truly great, however, until they discover that drama is even more effective when it's mixed with some humor.

THE OFFSPRING

Ixnay On The Hombre (Columbia)

Rating: *** 1/2

By Chuck Crisafulli

It would be awfully satisfyin' to the snickering cynic segment of the market if Orange County phenoms the Offspring had followed up their smash breakthrough *Smash* with a real stinker of a disc, proving both the power of entropy and the beauty of schadenfreude. No such luck here--*Ixnay* is a steaming, snarling beast of a record, fiercer than its predecessor but

packed with even catchier tunesmithing than the quartet displayed last time around (you 'member "Come Out and Play" of course.)

After 10 years of churning up mosh pits, it's unlikely that singer Dexter Holland and his crew would suddenly go all sucky and flat, but their octo-platinum success might have gone to their heads and made them all serious-like. Fear Not. Ixnay opens with a psycho disclaimer from psuedo circus barker Jello Biafra warning sensitive types of the evil, danger and sarcasm that lies ahead. As for the subsequent music, the Offspring are, in fact, good enough to be dangerous. "The Meaning Of Life," "Cool To Hate" and "Me & And My Old Lady" take playfully doubtful, smart-ass views of the state of things, and the tunes are ripped out with such bracing rock energy and pop sense that one can't resist being swept away by the commotion.

As for stretches, "Gone Away" is oddly U2-ish, "Way Down The Line" sounds like old Kinks being poked with a cattle prod and master-brew "I Choose" ferments a funky groove, Raspberry-sweet harmonies and references to J.D. Salinger into a monstrously good tune. Awe cripes, it's another thoroughly invigorating, helluva fine record from this bunch. How can you get angry at a band kind enough to include a lounge-cheese "Intermission" break so's you can catch your breath? (For a differing opinion, leave the disc in long enough to hear a surprise dissent from Larry "Bud.")

JAMES

Whiplash (Fontana/Mercury)

Rating: ****

By Craig Rosen

James are the Rodney Dangerfields of Britpop...er, make that British pop. They get no respect in America, even though they actually predate that catchy little term used to describe popular music hailing from Britain. In fact, when James's stunning debut EP, the Village Fire, was issued in 1985, certified British pop icon and Smiths' frontman Morrissey was among the first to sing its praises. But times have changed: The Smiths have gone their separate ways, and Pulp, Blur and Oasis have taken their place. Now the Chemical Brothers and Prodigy are all the rave and most Americans still don't know James from any other group of Limeys. That's too bad, because for more than a decade James has been one of the most consistent British bands around, no matter what the fashion of the day.

The band's latest effort, Whiplash, is no exception. The album began to take root while James were in America to play Woodstock II (Who knew? Who cared?). Following that triumph or tragedy, James frontman Tim Booth teamed with Twin Peaks composer Angelo Badalamenti on the album Booth And The Bad Angel. As a result of the influence of that project, and the band's continuing work with Brian Eno, Whiplash is filled with a stunning array of atmosphere and potential hits.

"She's A Star," for example, is a hit single in the making with its George Harrison-like guitar riffs and undeniably catchy chorus, which features Booth breaking into a falsetto. Yet on Whiplash, James aren't content to work within the traditional pop framework. With "Greenpeace,"

"Go To The Bank," "Avalanche" and the title track, the band has added electronic elements to the mix, effectively updating its sound without losing its human touch. In short, getting Whiplash has never sounded or felt so good.

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.

VIBE 4

PAT METHENY GROUP

Quartet (Geffen)

Rating: ****

By Tristram Lozaw

Pity the poor jazz guitarist, forever trying to ditch Wes Montgomery comparisons or "smooth jazz" and "fusion" tags. Pity the poor, small-minded listener who still ghetto-izes Pat Metheny's fleet silkiness to such stereotypes. Because, despite his time in jazz's pop spotlight, Metheny is a formidable experimenter who has directed bold, gate-crashing sessions with Ornette Coleman, Sonny Rollins, Charlie Haden, Joshua Redman and others. And as the various stylings of Quartet show, Metheny's adventures can be as lively as they are broad.

Never harsh, sometimes harmolodic, Quartet relies mostly on acoustic sounds for its pristine, 24-bit digital recording. The CD's 15 tracks were drawn from the moment--quickly devised or improvised--and are high on invention. The uniquely cohesive, neo-melodic collage of "Dismantling Utopia" emerges from Lyle Mays's well-placed piano sparkles against the detunings, quirky oscillations and musique-concrete percussives of drummer Paul Wertico. "Montevideo" zips along on rhythmic clatter akin to cowboys-and-Indians figures embroiled in a New Orleans romp. Steve Rodby's menacing bass gurgles through "Mojave," as well as "Badland," which could serve as the groundwork for a sparse, brooding world music/classical piece.

The CD has sweet moments as well: the gloriously romantic "When We Were Free," the soft and plaintive "Seven Days" and the seductively chilly "Double Blind." And though some synth-fusion cheese slips through, there's usually something--Rodby's punchy bass lines on "Language of Time," for instance--to keep a too-New Age sonic palette at bay. Quartet should long be remembered as an album with many magnificent moments.

JOHN MAYALL AND THE BLUESBREAKERS

Blues For The Lost Days (Silvertone)

Rating: ***

By Michael Lipton

Through 40 records and almost as many years, I've never quite figured out exactly what John Mayall did that was so extraordinary. Like fellow Brit Mick Fleetwood (a Bluesbreaker alumnus) and, to some extent, Roger McGuinn, Mayall's strength seemed to lie in his capacity as a music scholar, talent scout and bandleader more than in his ability as a musician. Although the players that passed through Mayall's various bands in the mid- to late-'60s built the foundation for two decades of British rock--from Cream, Keef Hartley and Colosseum to Free and Fleetwood Mac--except for a few notable landmarks, Mayall's records have been consistently mediocre.

While his latest disc suffers from an over-bearing, heavy-handed blues-rock sound (thanks largely to Joe Yuele's stiff drumming), it does serve to showcase the talents of guitarist Buddy Whittington. The versatile and aggressive Whittington turns in fine playing throughout, from the slow blues of "Blues For The Lost Days" to a sparkling run-through of Freddy King's "Sen-Say-Shun" and some quick picking on "You Are For Real."

Ironically, the disc's weakest moments are the straight-up blues cuts. Despite Mayall's trademark vocal and harp work, "Dead City" never goes

beyond a tired, 12-bar exercise. In the Mose Allison-sounding "All Those Heroes," Mayall aims to pay homage to some of the blues' founding fathers. Unfortunately, the tribute (which begins with a banjo and includes bass string popping and congas) comes in the form of some incredibly corny lyrics and unconvincing music.

Effective takes on Eddie Harris's "How Can You Live Like That," featuring Whittington and pianist Tommy Eyre, and Z.Z. Hill's "It Ain't Safe" point to the fact that, as much as anything, the fault may lie in Mayall's original material.

On the plus side, the Hammond-powered "Stone Cold Deal" swings with brisk snap and "Trenches," a tale of WWI, is a fine example of Mayall's quirky folk-blues style.

Most of all--and this holds true for the majority of post-'60s blues artists--if you're after good blues, pick up the Muddy Waters box or any number of incredible reissues that are readily available.

ABERCROMBIE-WALL-NUSSBAUM

Tactics (ECM)

Rating: ****1/2

By Ken Micallef

In its ongoing trend of exhuming all things '60s, jazz has rekindled its love affair with the grits-and-gravy organ trio. Exemplified by Jimmy Smith, Jack McDuff and Richard "Groove" Holmes, this romantic genre recalls an era of tiny, all-night clubs offering popular jazz from gritty urban centers like Philadelphia and Detroit, cities which were once rich with culture and life.

Thirty years after the fact, trying to recreate music born of industrial prosperity and gospel fervor can be a hollow task. Many labels have ushered in this prodigy or that soul confectioner equipped with quick fingers but typically lacking soul or creative vision. As Wynton won't tell you, music can't simply ape the past, it must reflect modern, everyday life.

Tactics exudes the sweat and slime of the greasiest organ trio jazz, but adds the swirling, netherworld vision that typifies the ECM label. Backed by the punch-drunk, chunk-o-funk drumming of Adam Nussbaum, guitarist John Abercrombie and organist Dan Wall spit and churn notes like some psilocybin-happy devil riding a bull in a tornado. "Chumbida" builds off a Latin rhythm, with Wall spreading a mushroom cloud while Abercrombie unleashes a torrent of wah-wah-wrecked one-liners; "Bo Diddy" finds a New Orleans fatback groove in soot-drenched picking and a raucous Bo Diddley drum tattoo. The trio also sails near the tornado's center, finding sweetness in standards like "You And Me And The Night Music" and "Long Ago And Far Away." Having worked in many configurations in the past, here the trio integrates years of experience into a sound that is equal parts mystery, majesty and gut-wrenching chops.

Recorded live at New York's Visiones in summer of 1996, Tactics lets you imbibe Scotch & soda at a small bar-side table while the band cooks, all from the comfort of your laptop linkup.

THIRD RAIL

South Delta Space Age (Antilles)

Rating: ***1/2

By Chris Morris

Yes, that really is James Blood Ulmer chanting "I wanna get dusted, I gotta get dusted bay-bay" on a cover of Philly bad-rappah Schooly D's "Dusted," which is the lead track of South Delta Space Age. Ol' Blood, formerly of Ornette Coleman's harmolodic posse, is down for some serious funking here--in fact, he tells us he wants to "funk all night"--and he's got some major hands on board to help him.

Third Rail is, by all appearances, another of studiomeister Bill Laswell's ad hoc projects. Ulmer takes the main chair on guitar and vocals, while Laswell takes his usual slot on bass. The lineup is filled out by Joseph "Zigaboo" Modeliste, late of New Orleans' Meters, on drums, and a pair of keyboardists--P-Funk/T.Heads vet Bernie Worrell and jazzbette Amina Claudine Myers.

This alliance of jazz and funk players generally makes for meandering and slightly lazy fun, defused in the end by a lack of ambition and thoroughly lightweight writing. Chanking splayed chords and sleepily muttering half-baked lyrics, Blood is working in the same bag he grooved out of more fruitfully on such '80s opuses as Are You Glad To Be In America. On the mighty Hammond B-3, Worrell has enough honk in his conk to keep things moving on the MG's time-honored compass points, while Myers displays a weaker instrumental profile. The real ace here is Ziggy, who keeps things kicking; only the stolid rock of "First Blood" defeats the funk that courses naturally through his veins.

Neither terrible nor overwhelmingly exciting, South Delta Space Age boasts just enough juice to cut it at your next git-down. But if Third Rail really want to kick it next time out, they'd better hit the studio armed with some tunes and a few fresh ideas.

VIBE 5:

MATTHEW SWEET

Blue Sky On Mars (Zoo)

Rating: *****

By Jon Young

The embodiment of all that's right about power pop, Matthew Sweet champions a style almost as predictable as the blues--and almost as abused. Much the way multitudes of hack bands trashed the legacy of Muddy Waters, Elmore James, et. al., Beatles geeks have trivialized the Fab Four with lame retreads of their soulful goodness. Sweet himself turned in crummy knockoffs before hitting his stride with the Girlfriend album a few years back. Today, he specializes in tangy tunes that refresh the genre through subtle rule-bending and a heap of plain ol' talent.

Blue Sky On Mars boasts a funkier vibe than its predecessor, the bracing 100% Fun: Instead of recruiting ace guitarists Robert Quine and Richard Lloyd for another tour of duty, the less accomplished Sweet provides most of the axes, resulting in a homemade feel. (In the same spirit, producer Brendan O'Brien sometimes pounds a rumbling acoustic piano.) "Come To California" practically boogies, while "Into Your Drug" relies on stinging fuzztones and cheesy pre-digital electronics. Although the wistful "Behind The Smile" revels in the kind of graceful sentimentality that encourages cliché, Sweet's crisp execution minimizes the corniness. And just to prove he's more versatile than initial impressions suggest, "Hollow" combines tortured guitar à la Neil Young with the ominous observation that "An evil bigger than you could know/Has taken root."

Sweet also proves he's not perfect on the album's tedious closer, the aggressively melancholy "Missing Time." Otherwise, the boy makes old-fashioned sounds seem brand-new, the standout being "Over It," a brisk 95-second survey of love's debris. But Blue Sky On Mars has enough highlights to fill a greatest-hits album. A warm, winning singer with a knack for ringing melodies and deceptively complex lyrics, Matthew Sweet is simply swell.

FREEDY JOHNSTON

Never Home (Elektra)

Rating: ****1/2

By Dev Sherlock

After a less-than-stunning debut, singer-songwriter Freedy Johnston's career took off with the release of his second album, 1992's *Can You Fly*, a pretty remarkable collection of mostly-acoustic-based, heartfelt songs and stories. The album landed him on every music critic's year-end list--and on a major label--but it also made for a pretty daunting high-water mark for Johnston. To wit, his next album, *This Perfect World*, which found him somewhat oddly paired with producer Butch Vig (Nirvana, Smashing Pumpkins, Garbage), comprised an exceptional batch of songs, but simply failed to match its predecessor. With his latest, however, Johnston is again in stunning form.

There are so many clichés when it comes to the attributes of great songwriting, but Johnston's songs truly are hummable, memorable, mature and, in most cases, universal--and he deftly pulls this off without sounding trite. How he avoids the trap of the hokey singer-songwriter is a wonder, and probably part of his appeal, too. Then, part of it may have to do with his unassuming voice--however sweetly multi-tracked, he will never be mistaken for Barry White.

Johnston also worked this time with producer and renowned session guitarist Danny Kortchmar (James Taylor, Jackson Browne, Carole King), who provided a warm environment for Johnston and his gentle strumming. But, given the occasional lap steel guitar and Freedy's occasional twang (not to mention his midwestern roots--though he now lives in Hoboken, NJ), he probably has more in common with prairie-rockers like the Jayhawks, Wilco

and Uncle Tupelo than old-school singer-songwriters. And that's something to be thankful for.

WIDESPREAD PANIC

Bombs & Butterflies (Capricorn)

Rating: ***1/2

By Rob O'Connor

Southern rock ain't what it used to be. And that's a good thing. Endless boogie noodling was never a captivating sound to my limited imagination. Widespread Panic like to noodle, but for the most part they keep it straight ahead and focus on the songs. Personally, I'd like to think it's Vic Chesnutt's influence, as the great singer-songwriter himself recorded an album with these guys under the name Brute and contributed the finest track--"Aunt Avis"--to this here disc. But whatever the reason, the result is a far more cohesive album than expected.

"Radio Child"'s got all kinds of little intricate lines snaking through, but the rhythmic shake's a keeper and the singer's resemblance to Steppenwolf's John Kay is a bonus feature. On the downside, whoever the hell's imitating Axl Rose on "Tall Boy" ought to be taken out back and shot alongside those pesky alligators because it takes a medium-to-average song and renders it unlistenable with god-awful and grating testosterone-derived vibrato.

And why any band feels the need to push an organ to the front of the mix remains a mystery to me. Loud organ sucked when Deep Purple and the Allmans did it and it sucks now. Listen to "Hope In A Hopeless World" and you'll hear a song headed straight for the heights of the Rolling Stones' "Doo Doo Doo Doo Doo (Heartbreaker)" get bogged down in stagnant organ chords and hackneyed lyrics about the pain of being alive. (The next track "Happy" is not the Stones' tune, I should add.)

But still, Bombs & Butterflies shows a band finding the right track. They just have to learn to stay on it.

NERF HERDER

Nerf Herder (Arista)

Rating: **1/2

By J. Kordosh

My idea of the perfect contemporary band? OK! A bunch of easy-to-listen-to, slightly punkish, Star Wars-obsessed dweebs who write songs rife with hip cultural references and (this is the most important part) use only their first names in their own liner notes!

I refer, of course, to Live.

Just kidding, LAUNCH subscribers, soon-to-be-subscribers and the unwise. Actually, that's a pretty good cursory view of Nerf Herder, a.k.a. Steve, Parry and Charlie, a.k.a. the Weezer of Santa Barbara, who are--and here's some irony for you--the subject of this review. Well, not them, but their record. You get the idea.

Parry 'n' friends have enjoyed a vogue on MTV with "Van Halen," a clever litany of VH titles from their early years coupled with a timely attack on Sammy Hagar, never an easy target. When Nerf Herder say that Sammy lost his "cool," you've gotta wonder what cool they figured Sam ever had to lose. And why it all adds up to one helluva great song concept. And why--when they say they'll never buy Sammy's records again--we'd think for a second they ever bought 'em in the first place.

This kind of thing is going on all over Herder's first major label record. It all sounds good/funny/hip, but it's just a little too coy for my liking. I could mention that Steve is not credited with being "the bass player" but as the guy who "collects Pez" and just rest my case, but let's go on a bit. On "Golfshirt"--which sounds so much like Weezer that the guys in Herder might as well stop talking to each other--they sing (re: punk's seminal days) "I was listening to Rush and trying to feather my hair when all that stuff went down." No, you were watching Sesame Street, Parry; that was me doing the hair-feathering. On "I Only Eat Candy" they reject Christ, Satan, vegetarianism and carnivorism all in the same song! (Actually, this one is kinda funny.) "Sorry," on the other hand, is an imaginative list of stuff to be sorry about to a girl (why are girls always kicking bands like this in the teeth?), like "having sex with your sister."

Obvious and faked calculation or good-natured yucks? Well, when Darth Vader said "Obi-Wan can no longer help him," I'm not sure if he was talking about Luke Skywalker or Parry here. Or Sam Hagar, for that matter.

THE VAULT:

AL GREEN
Anthology (The Right Stuff/Hi Records)
Rating: *****
By Richard C. Walls

Al Green is one of those popular music figures who in the '90s is much praised and little heard. Although many agree that he's one of the greatest soul singers ever, his period of widest commercial success lasted just a few years in the early '70s. What's kept Green from James Brown- or George Clinton-like sustained stardom, is that he's remained true to his singular brand of gospel-inflected soul music, oblivious to the trends and winds of disco, funk and rap. Anthology is a four-disc, 61-track boxed set of Green at the peak of his powers, and testimony to the timelessness of his personal vision.

Green's voice is an instrument of rare subtlety, not as raw as Brown's or as brutal as Otis Reddings', not as macho as Wilson Pickett's or as mellow as Sam Cooke's, but still capable at times of surpassing them all in intensity. Green started out as a gospel singer and, after his popular success, ended up as one. The richly ambiguous pleasure of his voice is the pained mellifluousness of someone passing through the world of sensation, aware that his life is bracketed by higher ground. There's more than a

little testifying in Green's love songs and more than a little sex in his sermons.

Anthology covers the basics as well as throwing in the requisite rarities, beginning with a few rough cuts Green made in '67 before moving on to the first hits. One of the most effective of the early cuts is a cover of the Doors' "Light My Fire" with the singer removing the song from its original psychedelic/gothic mode and turning it into a stripped-down bluesy plea with unexpected touches of playfulness (he seems especially tickled by some of Morrison's more pretentious lyrics).

Green's most popular song, '72's "Let's Stay Together" is presented in two versions, the original studio one and also as part of a medley (the other song is the Carpenter's "We've Only Just Begun," a primo example of Green's transforming powers) which was taped for a TV show. These TV appearances--there are eight of them here--as well as nine documentary-like excerpts from the movie Gospel According To Al Green, make up the bulk of the box's "extra enticements."

The headiest moments on the box are when Green's religious/secular mix meshes into something wholly his own, e.g., "Jesus Is Waiting," with its explicit gospel lyrics set against a slyly circular melody that rises and falls like the most carnal love song, and "Too Close," on which he hurls toward salvation as if it were the ultimate orgasm. The yin and yang of Green's vision is neatly summed up by two back-to-back cuts: "But One Thing I Like About Jesus...", which is just flat-out preaching and the pop beauty "Belle," which is just flat-out lovely. You can tell that one mood feeds the other--that Green's fiery faith is what heats his low-simmering love songs.

The set closes at the end of the '70s and it should be noted that Green's made a lot of fine music since then. But this is an excellent introduction to a unique stylist--someone who makes spiritual music even non-believers can't deny.