

LAUNCH No. 22

Vibreaker Reviews

VIBE 1:

HOLE

Celebrity Skin (Geffen)

Rating: 6 out of 7

By Bill Holdship

You'd be hard-pressed to convince me that Courtney Love has ever had an original idea in her manipulative little mind or heart--and *Celebrity Skin* will do little to dispel that notion. There are "borrowed" rock 'n' roll phrases all over the music (a Patti Smith rip so obvious that it's almost embarrassing) and the album title, itself, was probably lifted from the porno magazine, *Celebrity Skin*, or from an actual band that was one of the hottest unsigned acts in Hollywood during the last decade.

And yet, you don't have to like Love--you can probably even hate her--to appreciate the fine pop album that is *Celebrity Skin*. That's right: "pop." It was often argued that no band could evolve from *Pretty On The Inside* (pure riot grrrl noize) to *Live Through This* without lots of "help," which led to speculation that an uncredited Kurt Cobain had written most of the music on his wife's sophomore outing. Likewise, it's hard to believe that the Hole of *Live Through This* could evolve to the new Hole featured here, but at least the person giving some of the assistance, Smashing Pumpkin Billy Corgan, gets some recognition this time. The five tunes featuring his co-credit--"Malibu," "Dying," "Hits So Hard," "Petals," and the title track--are among the album's best and most musical. In fact, the title track--a little sleaze-of-Hollywood ditty--opens the album with a bang; it's a pop hit right out of the box.

The other thing that's changed is that Courtney's taken vocal lessons--or at least studio technology has gotten really good. On "Awful," you might be shocked to hear how much she now sounds like the Go-Go's meeting the Runaways. Of course, money can buy you almost anything these days--and yet even though the album's two throwaways ("Use Once And Destroy," "Northern Star") don't include Corgan's byline, neither do some of the album's other highlights, including "Boys On The Radio" and "Heaven Tonight," which lead the album to a pure pop conclusion.

Eric Erlandson's guitars are uniformly excellent throughout and "Playing Your Song" is a great rock tune, both musically and lyrically. The album's other outstanding rocker is "Reasons To Be Beautiful," which features not one, not two, but *five* co-writers (not including Corgan). This self-serving, confessional elegy to Kurt Cobain is the track that concludes with the aforementioned Patti Smith (see: "Elegy," most of *Gone Again*) rip-off. And like I said, you almost feel embarrassed for her--but, unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on how you feel about Ms. Courtney), this album's probably too good for that kind of sympathy.

JONI MITCHELL

Taming the Tiger (Reprise)

Rating: 5 out of 7

By Chris Morris

Quite a gal, our Joni--one who can kick off a number with the declaration, "Kiss my ass, I said," and begin another with the time-honored cliché "It was a dark and stormy night" and still manage to keep things fresh. It's a long way from that golden Chelsea morning of Mitchell's youth, but she is, if anything, a more engaging and bracing musician now than she was as every teen boy's sensitive heartthrob in the late '60s. The particulars of her style have solidified recently--most songs feature her flanged guitar, flecked with horn embellishments and highly subdued rhythm accompaniment--but she's still capable of working new warpage into her sound (hear the almost industrial ambience of the lead track, "Harlem In Havana"). And her sensibility continues to be spikey: Take a listen to the wrath she reserves for the record industry on the William Blake-inspired title track (which also appears, for no apparent reason, as an instrumental). A hell of a woman.

PJ HARVEY

Is This Desire? (Island)

Rating: 5 out of 7

By Rob O'Connor

It's weird, but all of the worst aspects of PJ Harvey's work are what bring her the grandest accolades. Last time out with *To Bring You My Love* she caught the Stooges rhythmic pummel but reduced herself in scale by falling back on bogus Nick Cave bible imagery and lame blues clichés; then she got patted on the back for making such progress.

Harvey's greatest artistic shift since firing the band has been delving deeper into the technological reserves with producer Flood. Should she ever completely abandon the drums/bass/guitar fixation that grounds many a flight she might have a chance at the artistic grandeur she seeks. "The Wind," with its cooing whispers and early-'80s orchestra-synth, is a welcome repositioning. "Angelene," "Catherine," and "Electric Light" are wispy mood pieces that befit an artist who's maturing. "The Garden" uses a sexless, neurotic Joy Division drum pattern. "The River," though, is useless and exactly the type of junior high imagery from which Harvey should be forever banned. Is this an improvement? Depends where you're starting from pal.

EAGLE-EYE CHERRY

Desireless (WORK)

Rating: 3 out of 7

By Chris Morris

Genetics are a funny thing. Eagle-Eye's old man, late trumpeter Don Cherry, was a premier free-jazz blower who took up a heavy world-music bent late in his career; E-E's sis Neneh has worked the jazz-punk and dance extremities of the musical spectrum. So you might think the latest recording artist in the Cherry family would undertake an experimental path, right? Wrong-o, boy-o. Eagle-Eye purveys a fairly straight-up-the-middle brand of slightly rocked-up singer-songwriterly fodder--it isn't offensive or tepid, but it isn't especially revelatory, either. Only on the last track of the album, when Cherry sits down at the piano, reaches into Pappy's songbag, and comes up with a graceful six-minute version of Don's "Desireless," does the music really begin to crackle with some unexpected excitement. Methinks this young man should pull down the family album(s) more often.

VIBE 2:

LAURYN HILL

The Miseducation Of Lauryn Hill (Ruffhouse/Columbia)

Rating: 6 out of 7

By Billy Johnson Jr.

Fugees fans have been begging for a Lauryn Hill solo record since the New Jersey trio's 1994 debut, *Blunted On Reality*. Finally, four years later, Hill's solo disc arrives--with no "Killing Me Softly" Part IIs lurking in the

commercial vicinity. The album is dominated by her singing, opposed to rapping, and the music's scope travels from shattering, hip-hop drums ("Lost Ones") and reggae rhythms ("Forgive Them Father") to retro Stevie Wonder vibes ("Every Ghetto, Every City") and Spanish guitar, compliments of Carlos Santana ("To Zion").

Hill, soon the mother of two, has plenty of concerns--expressing her true self rests at the top of the list--but she's got nothing to prove. Her collabs with Mary J. Blige ("I Used To Love Him") and D'Angelo ("Nothing Even Matters") are far more relevant than the simple name-dropping collabs rap records tend to include. Mary J.'s work on "I Used To Love Him," for instance, casts hip-hop's queen of soul over a stuttering piano loop and an uninhibited bass groove that puts the simplistic hip-hop and R&B blends to shame. Even aside from the production, which should simply be defined as soul--no rhythm and blues please--Lauryn's lyrics testify. "To Zion" shuns those who said her career was more important than having her child. "Superstar" condemns celebrities who believe their own hype. "Forgive Them Father" is literally an intercessory prayer. "Ex-Factor," "When It Hurts So Bad," and "I Used To Love Him" address real relationship issues.

The Miseducation Of Lauryn Hill defies everything that commercial pop music represents, but it will still garner a few million sells.

KENNY LATTIMORE

From *The Soul Of Man* (Columbia)

Rating: 6 out of 7

By David Nathan

Based on the quality of the material, production, and the obvious vocal power he expresses on his all-important sophomore album, Kenny Lattimore could well be in line to emerge as the Luther Vandross of his generation. The DC-native's involvement as the co-producer on 10 of the album's outstanding tracks, a collaborating songwriter on eight tunes, and the co-executive producer of *From The Soul Of Man* bodes well for what has already begun as a very promising, long-term career.

The new album reflects the creative growth Lattimore has experienced since the 1996 release of his self-titled debut, which achieved gold status in no small part due to the success of the hit single "For You," which garnered him a Grammy nomination. Lattimore takes chances by using--among others--some new producers from the Philadelphia collective A Touch Of Jazz, spearheaded by "Jazzy" Jeff Townes. Townes

co-produced a super soulful cover of "I Love You More Than You'll Ever Know," a Blood, Sweat & Tears tune popularized in the '70s by the late, great Donny Hathaway. It's a tribute to Lattimore's skills that he even attempts a song associated with Hathaway and pulls it off with power and passion.

Key cuts also include the first single "Days Like This," the standout ballads "If I Lose My Woman" and "Make Believe," the quirky "Destiny," a poignant reading of George Harrison's "While My Guitar Gently Weeps," and the atmospheric "Heaven And Earth." Based on Lattimore's performance on his second album, he can look forward to a platinum-filled future.

R. KELLY

R. (Jive)

Rating: 5 out of 7

By Billy Johnson Jr.

Record labels should cease and desist producing double CDs. Of the 28 entries on R. Kelly's latest, *R.*, the master of incorporating neighborhood vernacular into grinding ear candy simply includes too many tracks, which lessens the otherwise strong impact of the album.

Most of the songs on the first disc are incredible, establishing a relaxing, funky vibe driven by electric guitars, various keys, and a tame whispery singing style from the Chicago-based artist. Here, the aftermath of ruining a relationship prevails (a nice switch from themes like "Down Low [Nobody Has To Know]"). Now R. Kelly's full of remorse. "One Man" seeks to rescue a woman in despair. "Don't Put Me Out" begs for forgiveness. "When A Woman's Fed Up" explains when apologies become irrelevant. "If I Could Turn Back The Hands Of Time" remakes the classic. "Suicide" is simply a moving, self-explanatory piece. There are even nice mid-tempo ballads in the vein of the album's first single, "Half On A Baby."

The second disc is not as strong, except for duets with Celine Dion ("I Am Your Angel") and the raunchy sex-
hibitionist Foxy Brown ("Dollar Bill"). The artist, himself, seems to be having fun on the remaining tracks, but he tends to get mired in too many bad imitations of Puffy and Mase.

Abandoning the consistency of the first disc to explore new ground is a good thing--but not at the expense of the consumer.

VIBE 3:

ROB ZOMBIE

Hellbilly Deluxe (Geffen)

Rating: 5 out of 7

By Rob O'Connor

Yeah, this guy needs a solo album...especially one that's subtitled *13 Tales Of Cadaverous Cavorting Inside The Spookshow International*.

Apparently, it was time for Rob Zombie to break out from the confines of his regular White Zombie line-up and use some different musicians to flesh out a backlog of new material he'd been sitting on. The result is *Hellbilly Deluxe*, an excessively heavy (the best kind), meticulously produced piece of parodic gore-flick metal: the kind of stuff that would be proud to call itself crap with a capital C. (Speaking of which, one of *Hellbilly's* guest musicians is Motley Crue drummer Tommy Lee, who has, on occasion, mistaken his wife Pamela Anderson for a drum.)

"Demonoid Phenomenon," "Superbeast," and "Return Of The Phantom Stranger" suggest Mr. Zombie holds a joint account somewhere with old Lucifer, himself. And while there are times when this sort of B-movie shtick seems positively old-fashioned (Black Sabbath 1970, Misfits 1982, my friend), the mega-production in which dive-bomb rhythms are king refreshes things enough for those looking to keep the faith. Me? I think I hear the "MacNeil-Lehrer Report" calling. Have fun, kids!

HOOTIE & THE BLOWFISH

Musical Chairs (Atlantic)

Rating: 7 out of 7

By Jim DeRogatis

Aside from the fact that the fourth album by South Carolina's favorite sons breaks the string of wonderfully witty titles based on sophisticated double entendres (*Kootchypop*, *Cracked Rear View*, and *Fairweather Johnson*), *Musical Chairs* is a masterpiece of modern popular music. Rarely have such seemingly simple songs been delivered with such *subtle* soulfulness--a depth of spirit that could easily be missed entirely, so low-key and laid-back is it in these depressing days of superficial obviousness.

Mid-tempo, toe-tapping, catchy, endearing, jangly, genial, folkie--these only seem like the adjectives of equivocation. But who needs the propulsion and pretension

that R.E.M. brings to this sound in its hipper version? Why write a sonnet when a Hallmark card will do?

Two of the great musical forces of our time unite on "I Will Wait," "Desert Mountain Showdown," and "What Do You Want From Me Now?" as violinist Boyd Tinsley and saxophonist Leroi Moore of the Dave Matthews Band lend their talents to the Blowfish. Elsewhere, there's a subtle turn toward Eagles country; Hootie is the Don Henley of a new day, only better. Henley would have made a tiresome social critique of the first single "I Will Wait," the sad tale of a lonely sailor's wife. Soul man Darius Rucker only *flirts* with simplistic sentimentality when he sings, "She was left behind so they could stay/God to feel him, this she prays/It would make her feel so much better."

No, there is nothing vanilla about *Musical Chairs*. When has the steamy passion of true love been expressed in terms like, "Hello again/Your words they make me smile/As I drift away/In my little room upstairs"? Is it a surprise to hear that this second single "Only Lonely" was written for a Tom Hanks/Meg Ryan romance?

Hot. *Red hot*. Is there any other way to describe the magical musical phenomenon that is Hootie & the Blowfish? Comparison to the greatest names in popular music--your Beatles, your Bee Gees, your Crosby, Stills & Nashes--even these seem to fall unjustly flat. No, we must reach beyond, to the pantheon of the greatest poets and sages of human endeavor: to the Robert Frosts, the Walt Whitmans, the Shakespeares. Hootie, ladies and gentleman, is not merely a sweet gift to a cynical time, a warm caress on a chilly evening, a glass of milk and a plate of oatmeal cookies. Hootie, ladies and gentleman, is Art.

Or maybe not....

GOO GOO DOLLS

Dizzy Up The Girl (Warner Bros.)

Rating: 4 out of 7

By Craig Rosen

In spite of the fact that they once recorded for the Metal Blade label, Buffalo, N.Y.-based trio the Goo Goo Dolls always had more in common with the Replacements than heavy metal. That fact was driven home on its 1993 album, *Superstar Carwash*, which featured "We Are The Normal," a song co-written by 'Mats leader Paul Westerberg. With the Replacements just a memory and Westerberg's solo career floundering, it's ironic now to find that the Goos have experienced more commercial success than Westerberg, the

Replacements, and even fellow working-class rockers Soul Asylum. And while the Goos may never achieve the legendary status some have attached to the 'Mats, there's no denying the trio is capable of cranking out tunes that are both memorable and accessible to the masses.

"Iris," the monster hit from the *City Of Angels* soundtrack, is also featured here. As far as prom ballads go, it's top-notch with its lilting acoustic guitar, sweeping strings, and singer/guitarist John Rzeznik's earnest-guy vocals. The album's other radio staple, "Slide," rocks a little bit, but is similarly well-crafted.

The Goos are not just two-hit wonders though. Fans will likely find plenty more on *Dizzy* to latch onto, such as "All Eyes On Me," which sounds a bit like a lost '80s song from a John Hughes film. The trio, at times, also continues to sound incredibly 'Mats-like on tracks such as "Acoustic #3" and "Hate This Place."

With their huge commercial success and slick production, a Goo Goo's backlash is almost certain, but don't be surprised if those who sling the arrows are tapping their feet and singing along.

BETTER THAN EZRA

How Does Your Garden Grow (Elektra)

Rating: 5 1/2 out of 7

By Bill Holdship

Back before Better Than Ezra emerged from the faceless pack of L.A. rockers slugging it out on the sleazy Sunset Strip, few critics could have predicted the band would ever get to make an album--let alone one this fine--for a major label.

Truthfully, when the New Orleans band was signed out of its temporary L.A. base, it really seemed to be a lucky fluke. And while their Elektra debut featured the now-familiar radio staple, "Good," which sounded about as good as radio-friendly New Wave pop ever got in the '70s and early '80s, that certainly didn't prepare listeners for the growth BTE would demonstrate on this third release.

Ezra's singer-songwriter Kevin Griffin seems comfortable enough these days to reclaim his band's New Orleans roots--the album was recorded at the band's new studio, right smack-dab in the middle of the Crescent City's Lower Garden District, hence the title--although listeners shouldn't be expecting "Iko, Iko" or the latest Cajun tunes. And yet, in classic New Orleans tradition, the band explores interesting rhythms and new instruments within a pop mode laced with a

laid-back Louisiana spirit. "Je Ne M'en Souviens Pas" opens the album with an appropriate, keyboard-fueled mystical feel before kicking into a pretty cool white-boy rap, bursting with neat sound effects and harmoniums all over the place. "One More Murder" could be about any major American city--but New Orleans has been at the top of the murder capital list for years now, and the Ezra boys have turned the whole tragic notion into a haunting, memorable tune. In fact, the first four tracks here, culminating with the sing-along pop-rock tune "Like It Like That" are as fine as anything you'll hear this year.

From hypnotic mood pieces to latter-day Costello-esque folk-pop, the music on Better Than Ezra's third album is way better than their best work to date. Who'd've ever thunk it?

VIBE 4:

KYLE EASTWOOD

From There to Here (Columbia)

Rating: 5 out of 7

By Tim Sheridan

In a year that has seen several album debuts by famous musical offspring, from Rufus Wainwright to Sean Lennon to Chris Stills, it is interesting to hear the first full album from bassist Kyle Eastwood, the son of prominent *filmmaker* Clint Eastwood. While Eastwood the younger is surely looking forward to the day when he will not have to acknowledge his father as he discusses his music, growing up in the movie industry has had an obvious influence on the artist's style. Eastwood's jazz is very cinematic and he chooses tunes that evoke rich atmospheres, often embellishing them with orchestrations by Vince Mendoza. He also includes tunes originally written for films. A take on Tom Waits' "I Beg Your Pardon" (from the film *One From The Heart*) is followed by a terrific cover of Marvin Gaye's "Trouble Man" (with vocals by Joni Mitchell). But Eastwood also displays a nice range, from the Brubeck-tinged "Stanley Hill Drive" to the R&B flavored "Why Can't We Be Together." The album closes with several good tunes by his pianist, Matt McGuire, but one high point is Eastwood's sole original composition, "Da Da Ba Ba Nu Nu." The tune is a lively bop workout with an intriguing rhythmic line. With such a promising start one can only hope for more good things to come.

RUSSELL MALONE

Sweet Georgia Peach (Impulse)

Rating: 4 out of 7

By Ken Micallef

Russell Malone's soulful jazz guitar recalls swinging '60s stars like Wes Montgomery and the pre-"Breezin'" George Benson. Dark-hued, lustrous, and glowing, Malone's fat tone and graceful arrangements evoke an era when jazz was the real thing, downtown club music as connected to the street as today's hip-hop.

Peach breaks no new ground, but offers lots of meaty munching for those on a laid-back jazz diet. Drummer Lewis Nash, pianist Kenny Barron, and bassist Ron Carter create a relaxed vibe for Malone, a world class player feeling his oats among equally gifted musicians. The title track is a grits-and-gravy funk treat with Benson flavoring; "For Toddlers Only" is humorous *Green Acres* swing; and "Mugshot" provides some heat to the proceedings, a deft tune with Pat Martino-ish phrasing.

Some may prefer their jazz with more spice and sass, but *Sweet Georgia Peach* is easy jazz listening for lazy autumn evenings.

KEB' MO'

Slow Down (Okeh/550 Music)

Rating: 6 out of 7

By John Quaintance

On his third album, *Slow Down*, acoustic blues singer/guitarist Keb' Mo' builds on the solid foundation established by his first two releases, both of which demonstrated a reverence for early acoustic blues and a knack for crafting gentle, hummable originals. (Think early Taj Mahal.)

With *Slow Down*, Keb' Mo' adds an R&B sheen to the production that gives significantly more punch to his always pleasant songwriting. This is one of the best blues releases of the year and should accomplish the tricky feat of satisfying his current fans while broadening his appeal.

Looking back, the artist's eponymous debut relied on an unadorned Robert Johnson sound that endeared him to purists, while the breakthrough follow-up *Just Like You* (which only featured a handful of acoustic numbers) earned him the 1996 Grammy for Best Contemporary Blues Album, in part because he was able to successfully incorporate his sound into a band format.

With *Slow Down*, Keb' Mo's reverence for Johnson is still evident--he's the only artist whose covers have appeared on

all three albums (a laid-back treatment of the Stones favorite "Love In Vain" is included here)--but these days, our modern bluesman is putting some distance between himself and the proverbial back porch. This is a decidedly more contemporary (and less treacly) album than either of Keb' Mo's previous releases, benefiting greatly from a more adventurous mix of settings. "I Was Wrong" and "Soon As I Get Paid" are as far uptown as he's ventured, while "I Don't Know," "A Letter To Tracy," and album stand-out "Better Man" cover territory explored by Eric Clapton and Tracy Chapman on recent blues-tinged efforts. His guitar work is light and loose, and his smooth baritone vocals work as effectively on the more soulful numbers as they do on his bread-and-butter ballads.

SHERMAN IRBY

Big Mama's Biscuits (Blue Note)

Rating: 6 out of 7

By Tim Sheridan

On the title track of this distinctive recording, Sherman Irby lets loose on the alto sax with a fetching mix of country funk and cosmopolitan wit. It is this rich character throughout the disc that sets him apart from countless young players on the scene today. While other young Turks possess all the flash of Coltrane's sheets of sound or Bird's lightning dexterity, not many are focused on keeping it real. But 30-year-old Irby displays an adventurous spirit that makes his excellent tone all that more satisfying.

The CD's playlist is dominated by fine originals, but just as exciting is the artist's unusual reading of Stevie Wonder's "Too High" and a smoky "Take The 'A' Train" that exudes all the mystery of an Edward Hopper urban tableau. Kudos are in order for the support of bassist Gerald Cannon and Clifford Barabaro on drums, not to mention the appearance of Ed Cherry's delicate guitar work on several tracks. It is the honesty of this outfit that is perhaps its most distinctive and admirable quality. Indeed, by the time the band settles into the laid-back groove of album closer "We're Gonna Be Alright," you want to believe them. They earn your trust.

VIBE 5:

THE CHURCH

Hologram of Baal (Thirsty Ear)

Rating: 6 out of 7

By Michael Lipton

Over more than a dozen releases, Australia's Church have crafted a highly-textured, stylized sound that, in addition to being instantly recognizable, helped lay a groundwork of sorts for bands ranging from the U.S.'s Galaxie 500 to U.K. "shoegazers" like My Bloody Valentine and Swervedriver. With its latest release countering the ever-present rumors of the band's break-up, the Church have neither gained nor lost ground. Some of the songwriting may not be up to the level of more consistent efforts (*Remote Luxury* or *Heyday*), but the "sound" is there: dreamy washes that ebb and flow into soothing soundscapes.

The opener, "Anaesthesia," is classic Church: somber and moody with Steve Kilbey's heavily reverbed voice down in the mix and Marty Willson-Piper's guitar lines ringing through. Don't look for any "breakthrough hits" like 1988's "Under The Milky Way," but the single "Louisiana" clocks in at a radio-unfriendly six minutes and gives Willson-Piper ample time to use most of the tricks in his bag. With long delays, he creates a lush bed while treated guitar lines come and go beneath the chiming rhythm.

Hologram once again shows that, as a band, the Church is greater than the sum of its parts. (Of all the members' solo projects, the Steve Kilbey/Grant McLennan collaboration as Jack Frost is the only one that stands out.) As with many of the band's albums, it may take a few listens for the beauty to emerge, but there are enough gems to make this one of the Church's better releases of the '90s. Plus, the first 7,500 copies of *Hologram* include a free bonus disc, an hour-plus instrumental titled "Bastard Universe."

BELLE & SEBASTIAN

The Boy With The Arab Strap (Matador)

Rating: 7 out of 7

By Craig Rosen

If You're Feeling Sinister, the 1997 American debut by Scottish act Belle & Sebastian, was simply stunning. With its mix of mostly acoustic instrumentation and low-key vocals, misery, misfortune, and melancholia hadn't sounded quite so sweet since Morrissey was still with Marr.

Anyone fearing that B&S would lighten up on its full-album follow-up need only listen to the first five seconds of *The Boy With The Arab Strap* for reassurance. "He had a stroke at the age of 24," Stuart Murdoch croons on the album-opening "It Could Have Been A Brilliant Career."

As such, *Arab Strap* isn't a dramatic departure from *Sinister*, but why mess with near perfection? From the pleasant loafing of "Sleep The Clock Around" and the lovely "Seymour Stein"--named for the record executive who unsuccessfully courted the band--to the trippy "Spaceboy Dream," you'd be a fool not to strap this on. It could be the album of the year.

ELLIOTT SMITH

XO (DreamWorks)

Rating: 5 out of 7

By Chris Morris

A little over a year ago, singer-songwriter Elliott Smith was an ex-member of an obscure indie-rock band credited with a few cult releases on Washington's Kill Rock Stars label. Instantly validated by the success of *Good Will Hunting* and his attendant Oscar nomination for the song "Miss Misery," Smith has graduated to the bigs with this DreamWorks debut.

The album benefits from slightly improved production values and a glossier sound than Smith's previous outings, but the recipe is the same: slightly morose, introspective songs, tunefully crafted with the occasional obscenity tossed in for alt-rock cred.

At their best, the tracks on *XO* betray a fondness for neo-Beach Boys harmonizing and Wilson-esque sensitivity; at their worst, which happily isn't very often, they skew towards cloying Crosby, Stills & Nash-like chirping.

In general, though, this is solid stuff that bears comparison with labelmate Rufus Wainwright's snappy debut.

GOMEZ

Bring It On (Virgin)

Rating: 6 out of 7

By Chris Morris

Damn, this is good!

This Yorkshire, England, quintet arrives with a debut album that emulsifies a barrage of influences without managing to sound like anything you've heard before. Fresh-faced singer Tom Gray affects a Tom Waitsian rasp at times, and the vocal similarity is heightened by some bullhorn-style treatment, but that's as close as any obvious similarities get; Gray is also capable of a wan sweetness that's decidedly his own. The music runs the gamut from disturbed folk-pop to sample-clotted weirdness (these guys

have heard Beefheart, too); the overall ambience is decidedly strange--sometimes hushed, sometimes rocking in a very non-linear way, but the tunes never sound oddball for their own sake. Gomez is that rarity among English bands: a group that appears to exist outside fashion. *Bring It On* is a simply fabulous bow that leaves one hungering for more.

THE VAULT:

MILES DAVIS

The Complete Bitches Brew Sessions (Columbia/Legacy)

Rating: 5 out of 7

By Mac Randall

Miles Davis's *Bitches Brew* occupies a place in modern music roughly comparable to that of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in modern literature: hailed as a masterpiece by just about everyone, actually listened to by just about no one. Sure, the album was Miles's first to go gold, and second to win a Grammy, but it's hard to imagine that more than a fraction of the people who've bought it over the years have played it with any frequency. Simply put, *Bitches Brew* is not good-time music. It's not music that gracefully blends into the background. It is dense, chaotic, maddening, unrepentantly urban, and it demands your attention. It is the sound of a visionary musician and many, many talented colleagues (including two, sometimes three keyboardists, two drummers, and assorted percussionists) jettisoning all thoughts of conventionality or commerciality in favor of lengthy, open-ended modal explorations. Not the kind of thing most folks would choose to slap on for laughs.

Of course, Miles's revolutionary 1970 double album has influenced lots of players, but even that influence has been, I think, overestimated. Most of the so-called "fusion" bands that arose out of the *Bitches Brew* sessions--like Weather Report, Return To Forever, and the Mahavishnu Orchestra--adopted the then-exciting new concept of combining rock grooves and instrumentation with jazz improvisation but failed to capture the menace, the sense of impending doom, that their mentor had conjured with such depth. It's arguably only in the '90s, with the rise of artists like Tricky and DJ Shadow, that we've finally seen the true successor to the dark, electronically enhanced Miles of 1969/70. Which is why it's appropriate that this four-CD reconsideration of the period should be appearing now, complete with nearly 90 minutes' worth of previously unreleased material.

The title *The Complete Bitches Brew Sessions* is actually something of a misnomer. The official *Bitches Brew* album, which takes up all of the first disc and a third of the second, was recorded over three days in August 1969; no outtakes from those sessions are included here. Miles went back into the studio five more times, each time with a slightly different group of musicians, between November 1969 and February 1970; the results make up the rest of this set, but it's unlikely that any of that music was ever slated for what became *Bitches Brew*. (Some of it trickled out over the years onto the albums *Live-Evil*, *Big Fun*, and *Circle In The Round*.) Stylistically, the material from the later sessions is very un-Brew-like, closer in tone to the more serene, contemplative Miles of that album's predecessor, *In A Silent Way*, while the inclusion for the first time of Indian instruments (sitar, tamboura, and tabla) on several tracks also points forward, to the drone-centered Miles of *On The Corner* and beyond.

There's lots of beautiful playing here, particularly guitarist John McLaughlin's fiery lines on "Corrado" and Miles's patented lonely trumpet stylings on a cover of David Crosby's "Guinnevere" (further proof that Davis never stopped looking to the pop world for inspiration). There are also some amusing studio exchanges between Miles and producer Teo Macero (both sound pretty exasperated with one another at times). But much of the unreleased material is spoiled, at least for this listener, by percussionist Airto Moreira's incessant use of a Brazilian instrument called the guica, which sounds alternately like a dog's bark, a deep yawn, a peal of laughter, or someone shifting position on the seat cushion of a plush diner booth. Though interesting at first, this unpredictable racket quickly becomes a distraction, then an annoyance, and finally a supreme irritation. If you can get past the guica, you'll get plenty out of this set. If you don't think you can, I'd recommend sticking with the original *Bitches Brew*.