



# COMES WITH A SMILE

REVIEWS

ART OF FIGHTING / BABY LEMONADE  
MIKE BADGER / THE BEACH BOYS / BECK  
BEN & JASON / THE BLACK HEART  
PROCESSION / BONNIE 'PRINCE' BILLY  
BRIAN / BUILT TO SPILL / CAT POWER  
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THE HIGH LLAMAS / JESSAMINE  
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CONTROL / JIM O'ROURKE  
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WILCO / KELLY WILLIS / THE WONDERMINTS  
XTC / ZITA SWOON / AND MORE



### **Art of Fighting – The Very Strange Year** (*Half a Cow*)

Solemn, soothing and seductively slovenly, Ollie Brown, Peggy Frew and Cameron Grant's sprawling six-tracker takes the unhurried path laid down by Red House Painters with a slacker's attitude. Brown's wavering vocal weaves its words around the rolling rhythm section, resignation seeping through his pores – "I don't understand you, but I want to" he sings on the sweeping *Wild Beast*. With the fragility of Mark Kozelek's epic balladry and the lazy stroll of Joel R.L. Phelps' Downer Trio, AOF take their time to reach a song's denouement, instead the journey is the destination. It's an hypnotic trip.

### **Baby Lemonade – Exploring Music** (*Big Deal*)

A refined follow-up to the patchy 68% Pure Imagination, this is archetypal nineties power-pop, on a par with the likes of Velvet Crush and The Wondermints (whose Darian Sahanaja and Nick Walusko guest and co-produce) whilst the harder, rockier tracks and lead breaks bring a touch of Redd Kross to the party. Cue lots of summery, shimmering guitars and layered harmonies topped with a glossy sheen, with Rusty Squeezebox's soulful vocals shining brightly throughout, making the most of some pretty banal lyrics ('Every summer, sky is ocean blue. Every summer makes me think of you'); not that power-pop is known for its literary aspirations. Despite an abundance of talent and occasional moments of sonic bliss, it's a little undemanding and in need of some Posies-esque schizophrenia to break the monotony. Exploring Music could have dug a little deeper.

### **Mike Badger – Volume** (*Viper*)

With the ragged, no bones tone of a good home demo, Volume marks Mike Badger's first release since his days as founding member of Liverpool's proto-Oasis, The La's. While his replacement in that band, Lee Mavers, went on to become either an eccentric, perfectionist visionary or an opiate-assisted slacker (depending on which update you choose to believe) Mike Badger has waited until now to break his musical silence, finding interim success with his artwork. Volume is a homely, sweetly understated collection of songs that blanket a latent poppiness under the intimacy of Badger's gruff strum and soft, deep-set vocal. For the most part he goes it alone, backed only by a pair of acoustics, underpinned occasionally by shades of accordion, piano or cello, or with florid interludes like the brief chamber coda to *When We're Alone*. Opening track *Where Love Is*, with a falsetto vocal from Space's Tommy Scott, sets a slightly fey mood, dispelled elsewhere by the Spanish suggestions of *Turn To Her*, or the ring of vintage Simon & Garfunkel on *Reach For The Stars*. Of the instrumentals which break things up, *Piano Sativa* is a slowly unfolding, sorrowful whirl with a likeness to Gymnopédie, while *Twilight in D* closes the album with a measured, fading chime of guitar and strung-out rumble of cello. Volume doesn't rewrite any rules, but its low-key charm leaves you hoping Mike Badger won't leave it so long next time. **MW**

### **The Beach Boys – Endless Harmony** (*Capitol*)

The Beach Boys' embarrassing, self-parodying releases since 1980 are shamed again by more archive delights.

A few standards in Big Stereo and two concert promos that equal zilch still leaves twenty live and studio tracks circa 1966-1975 when they could do no wrong. A live 1966 surf'n'cars medley is still full of youthful zest rather than the distorted metal madness evolving elsewhere. Thereafter their live act, like their image, was – in the USA at least – deemed passé until a big group of black South African members from The Flame plus help from Chicago boosted their hip cred and their live sound, leaving the sunshine intact. The most interesting live track is *Wonderbill*, where The Flames' heavy *Don't Worry Bill* is spliced into the delicate-as-an-orchid Smile tune *Wonderful*. The studio stuff must originate in Beach Boy heaven. *Soulful Old Man Sunshine* is The Beach Boys performing big band swing with joy, soul and guts (Carl nearly blows a fuse). Alan Jardine's *Loop de Loop* should have been featured in Those Magnificent Men In Their Flying Machines but its earlier incarnation *Sail Plane Song* is very cool. Here the band (minus Mike 'Calendar Girl' Love) play everything themselves and, for once, seem to inhabit the same state/State as the Airplane, Dead and the Prunes. Mike rocks gently on the veranda on his tuneful *Brian's Back*, a respectful recognition of the mighty oak, which is quite lovely. For some of us though, the other significant Beach Boy is Dennis. By 1972 a powerful, passionate songwriter had emerged. His *All Alone* ('If I could live my life again...' but it wouldn't be you Dennis, would it) and *Barbara* are slow, romantic tour de forces from the biggest heart on the planet. Why most of this stuff has been boxed away is crazy but we are talking about the Hawthorne Hotshots. In all a very nicely

compiled album from a band once constantly redefining itself, jumping on no-one's bandwagon. They were the bandwagon. **SR**

### **Beck – Mutations** (*Geffen*)

Nowhere as roughly hewn as his low-key 1995 release *One Foot In The Grave*, *Mutations* was nonetheless trumpeted as a companion piece to that album, rather than a linear follow up to his last, the million-selling *Odelay*. (Whatever. Seems like an irrelevant qualification to make really, the sound of a marketing office without faith in the artist's output or the audience's intelligence.) The man himself has never been shy about proclaiming his love of the raw sounds of folk and blues, and it's as a post-modern regurgitation of this tradition that attempts at pinning Beck down most often settle for. Without sounding derivative or laboured, *Mutations* delves into this rich well with one hand, leaving the other free to update the blend with snatches of feedback, wheezing harmonica, harpsichord, sitar and a laid back attitude. Close in spirit to *Odelay's Jackass*, with it's reclined strum, *Mutations* churns up country, psychedelia, and folk balladeering, all in a muted version of the stylistic soup that made Beck the hippest kid in the playground. *Lazy Flies* is a Beatles-esque avalanche of words, while *Tropicalia* is an easy-going bossa nova. Free of any disingenuous lo-fi production or sulking introspection, *Mutations* is more relaxed than *Odelay*, if slightly less engaging. It seems like Beck isn't trying so darn hard, and *Mutations* is all the better for it. **MW**

### **Ben & Jason – Hello** (*Go Beat*)

Reviewing blindly, the sparsest of

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sleeves and a press release long since parted from its subject, this mini-album is a mysterious mixed blessing. First listen reveals a sterling recording - always a bonus - and a Radiohead meets Belle & Sebastian elegance topped by a vocal style reminiscent of that guy from Purescence minus the amphetamines. Unequivocally English in tone, despite some Jeff Buckley inflections, it's a dreamily acoustic ramble of a record with an evasive centre - it's either breezy Beautiful South emptiness or 21<sup>st</sup> Century folk music, I can't decide. Occasionally rather vapid and contrived (*This Is Our Song*) whilst sometimes genuinely affecting (*Adam and Lorraine*, *Everybody Holds Hands...*) Ben & Jason have me intrigued.

**The Black Heart Procession – Self-titled** (*Headhunter/Cargo US*) There were few greater crimes in 1998 than the fact that this record failed to make a monumental mark upon the collective minds of the UK's music fans. The Black Heart Procession, brought to my attention by an astute American friend, stands as the year's most desolate, emotional and devastating record, matched only, and only possibly, by Sophia's wracked *The Infinite Circle*. Without wishing to give the impression that this is an unbearable listening experience, quite how the closing track *Heart The Size Of A Horse* came to be recorded without the band collapsing in weeping heaps during every attempt is as great a mystery as the fact that they have maintained such a high level of intensity throughout. In its chiming major key piano line, in stark contrast to the heart rending minor key numbers preceding, it offers as uplifting an experience as

one could wish for. This is no Red House Painters miserabilist experience, you see. Musically this has more in common with Tom Waits or maybe a less hammy Nick Cave. The extraordinary arrangements, with piano flourishes to the fore and sparse keyboard drones, singing saws and the whistling of the wind underneath it all, see that The Black Heart Procession manages to spotlight the aching wonder of sadness, the fact that pain is sometimes such a sweet emotion. And to tip the scales back in favour of inner strength there are several almost jaunty, upbeat tracks. Dispensing with self-pity and instead replacing it with a sense of calm and indulgent resignation, this is a fine, fine album, as good as any released in 1998. **WWW**

**Bonnie "Prince" Billy – I See A Darkness** (*Domino*) Like a fugitive from justice, Will Oldham has switched pseudonyms again and *I See A Darkness* sounds like his most tender album yet. While keeping a grip on his brand of gothic folk, Oldham has loosened the cloak of contrivance that drapes over his past efforts and given way to something more sincere than the arch tales of faux hick baseness we're accustomed to. That drunken quaver is as endearing and irritating as ever: sometimes infantile and out of control - deliberately losing the battle to hold those notes - sometimes weary and aged, as on *Another Day Full Of Dread* where he cockily pledges, 'by dread I'm inspired, by fear I'm amused.' The melodies have the same antiquated strength to them, notably *A Minor Place* which recalls anthemic early single *Ohio River Boat Song*, with its double-tracked vocals and slapped snare, but here his heart is worn

somewhere near his sleeve. With their loose, measured crescendos of organ and guitar, Oldham's songs manage to be both downbeat and uplifting. 'Death to everyone is gonna come,' he sings, making it sound like a cause for celebration. **MW**

**Brian - Bring Trouble** (*Setanta*) A special treat of tartly sweet melancholic delights. The new full length from Brian (AKA Ken Sweeny) is exactly that. With lovely lilting pop-tastic vocals Brian have delivered the perfect summer soundtrack. I feel a spring in my step and a flower behind one ear. It may be summer, but the sun doesn't always shine. You only have to listen to *Getting Meaner* and it all comes tumbling back down. *Right Through Tuesday* is a testament to that if ever there was one. *Bring Trouble* is a bittersweet affair that will please if only the slightly heartbroken. **TLJ**

**Built To Spill – Keep It Like A Secret** (*City Slang*) 1997's *Perfect From Now On* has been kept, like a secret, close to the hearts of all who find solace amid the powerful, meandering guitar lines and vulnerable, peerless voice of Boise, Idaho's Doug Martsch. As his record label duly acknowledge it should have been revered by all but alas, unfashionable attributes such as musicianship, passion and songwriting mastery failed to excite the fickle, uncaring, marketing-led masses. With *Keep It Like A Secret*, *Built To Spill* have stripped away the maze making the route from a to b more direct, thus it's less obviously indulgent (not a criticism) than 'Perfect...'. Unequivocally and unashamedly a rock record, Martsch and his rhythm section of Brett Nelson

and Scott Plouff seem to draw from a hitherto undiscovered second volume of classic progressions to create a record brimming with vitality tempered with knowing wit ('I don't like this air but that doesn't mean I'll stop breathing it') and fresh, intelligent pop hooks. Keep it.

**Cat Power – Moon Pix** (*Matador*) Moon Pix is the hydrographic fourth opus from Chan Marshall and is markedly different from her earlier work. It has an intimate, home-made quality about it due to the minimal production and quiet simplicity of its arrangements, which, far from making Moon Pix bleak, lends a cleanness and purity of sound. Marshall has developed and, dare I say it, perfected the art of meandering melancholy that was only hinted at on *What Would The Community Think* and shed the vocal histrionics that diluted the strength of *Myra Lee*. Her strong, seductive voice floats comfortably over the fluid instrumentation, maintaining intensity through its absence as much as its articulation. Although the songs are said to have been written during a very dark time for Marshall, her lyrics avoid the obvious metaphors and remain enigmatic and evocative. *DIRTY THREEE*'s Mick Turner and Jim White are equally stunning on guitar and drums respectively, playing sympathetically to Marshall's compositions, neither under nor overplaying their roles. The addition of subtle vocal harmonies and rippling guitar on tracks such as *No Sense* and *Say* add a beautiful extra dimension to the songs, but it's Moon Pix's more upbeat tracks; *American Flag* and *Cross Bones Style* which have the most immediate impact. On repeated listens, however, each of the eleven songs



comes into its own as an entity and later, as a part of Moon Pix itself – a larger, finished work. Chan Marshall has created a sparkling masterpiece; one that holds its audience captive for an essentially personal musical experience before gently fading away. **NMS**

### **Cotton Mather – Kontiki**

(*Rainbow Quartz*)

In 1994 Cotton Mather released their debut, *Cotton Is King*, and whilst it was a pleasant pop record, nothing on it hinted at the masterpiece that is *Kontiki*. Recorded on 4-track and A-DAT machines in mainman Robert Harrison's garage Cotton Mather have produced a 24-carat classic. Mixing heartfelt ballads (*Spin My Wheels*, *Lily Dreams On*) with power-pop gems (*Password*, *Vegetable Row*) and lo-fi soundbites (*Animal Show Drinking Song*, *Aurora Bori Alice*). The result is a release dripping with hooks, harmonies and beauty. Criticisms from some quarters have questioned the similarity of Harrison's voice to that of JOHN LENNON (*that'll be me then – Ed*) and, sure, it's a reference point; but it's a minor quibble given the inventiveness, depth and quality of the recordings. Listening to it now, eighteen months after its original US release, I still find myself wrapped up in the experience. On it's belated UK release, *Kontiki* has caused quite a buzz, (*She's Only Cool* made 'single of the week' on Radio 1), garnering rave reviews and, with live shows to boot, commercial success may lie just around the corner for Cotton Mather. **SM**

### **Dakota Suite - Songs For a Barbed Wire Fence (AMOS) Alone With Everybody (Glitterhouse)**

It's the emotional nakedness that some

find a tad disturbing. That uncomfortable voyeuristic feeling that you're privy to the lowest moments of someone who was pretty low to begin with, like eavesdropping on an argument or spectating at a panic attack (albeit a really mellow one). On record though, it's a more restrained indulgence, with Chris Hooson's narcissistic doubts and demons offset by a more ranging musical scope than the band present on stage. *Songs For a Barbed Wire Fence* is their first album proper, overdue for release after three warmly received EPs, each of which - along with a few extra tracks - is collected on *Alone With Everybody*. Hooson's lethargically expressed lyrical gaze rarely wavers from self-examination, as each song's refrain hinges on a statement of doubt or loss. Like Charles Bukowski (whose short story *You Kissed Lilly* is the inspiration for their song *Because I Could Not Stop For Death*) it's the poetry of the outsider: 'did you put your ear to the breastplate of God / and find it breathless? / Have the things you've seen left you blind and scared?' All of which might become cloying if not for a rich musical bedding that places them alongside the likes of the *Tindersticks*. Even the intimate confessional strums steer clear of over-indulgence (just), with effortless electric lead lines or the slack slide of *Johannasong*; the sophisticated tinkle of a Fender Rhodes or the light precision of John Shepard's drumming. In comparison *Alone With Everybody* is, by nature, a slightly uneven collection, as much in terms of mood as anything, as *Songs For a Barbed Wire Fence* is nothing if not convinced of its own sorrow. Aware of this, they've helpfully printed the dictionary definition of 'anhedonia' on

the inner sleeve: 'the inability to feel pleasure; the loss of interest in formerly pleasurable pursuits.' Paradoxically there is a sense of pleasure, or at least contentment, to be found skulking around sections of *Songs for a Barbed Wire Fence*. The slow-paced instrumental interludes which interperse the songs speak of a kind of melancholy satisfaction, seeming to say, 'I'm unhappy, but I kinda like it.' **MW**

### **Dieselhed – Elephant Rest Home (Bong Load)**

A regular drinking buddy of an album from Dieselhed. The spirit of Gram Parsons resides in the *Red Chair*, whilst the Stones' country leanings lie easy on the *Futon Song* (which could squeeze comfortably into *Exile On Main Street*) and modern-day alt.country folk from Wilco to The Handsome Family would willingly find space on their couch. Naked, sparse and darkly humorous ('I'm sorry for drawing moustaches on your porn mags, I know you've been collecting them for years'), like a twisted southern cousin of Scud Mountain Boys' *Pine Box*, *Elephant Rest Home* collects the minutiae of small-town life and dresses it up in loose-fitting acoustic, twang and slide.

### **Jason Falkner – Can You Still Feel? (Elektra)**

At long last. An ever-shifting release date, two title changes, a remix, a re-sequencing and a re-recording later, the long-awaited and highly anticipated successor to *Presents Author Unknown* is among us ("From thought to actions an eternity / I can't get this thing off the ground," he foretells). Any doubts such delaying tactics may have bred are effortlessly

swept aside by the latest triumph in an exemplary discography that now includes four essential pop meisterworks (Jellyfish's *Bellybutton*, The Grays' *Ro Sham Bo*, both solo records) and a plethora of unreleased and b-side material (not least the near-legendary 'lost' covers album). Falkner's love of British post-punk and New Wave assures a respite from the cliché-ridden power-pop deluge of recent years in favour of intelligent, original compositions teeming with musical invention and an idiosyncratic lyrical bent. From hook-heavy, infectious gems like the love-struck *Honey*, *Grays-era Eloquence* and recent single *Holiday* via the genre-defying classic *I Already Know* (idyllic, narcotic groove gives way to towering crescendo) to stirring ballads *Good Night Sweet Night* and the majestic, aptly-titled *Revelation*, Falkner has returned with an exemplary album. 'At the end of the day all I can say is yeah, yeah, yeah...'

### **Grand Drive – Road Music (Loose/Ryko)**

Brothers Danny and Julian Wilson make good their prediction of 'a total classic' with *Road Music*, essentially a compilation of the three 'limited edition' EPs of last year enhanced with a couple of new tracks. *Tell It Like It Is*, the lead-off track from their first release, opens proceedings, the first of many anthemic tracks (see also *Jukebox*, *Undone* and *On A Good Day*) balanced by the epic balladry of *The Natural* and *Wrong Notes*. Of the new songs Julian's *Shadow Of The Man* exhibits a hitherto unheard Seventies influence, his delivery part Paul Simon/James Taylor vulnerability, part Van Morrison/Rolling Stones soul, whilst the buzzing acoustic intro of Danny's *Far*

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*From This Road* belies its lovelorn message, a less-inebriated *FACES* ballad. Having shaken an all-too-obvious Jayhawks influence *Grand Drive* have found their feet and, with *Road Music*, (and the promise of a new album before the end of the year), stated a firm claim for the title of Best Band in Britain.

## **Granfaloon Bus – Good Funeral Weather** (*Trocadero*)

As the alt.country bandwagon's wheels begin to buckle beneath the weight of both originators and disciples, Granfaloon Bus seems to have overtaken on the inside lane, boosted by the combined creative talents of four musicians/songwriters and the collective spirits of legends both living and lost. Echoes of Gram Parsons and Neil Young may be discernible in the twin vocals of Felix Costanza and Ajax Green, (incendiary Young-esque guitar makes an impromptu appearance on *Potboiler*), but Grant Lee Buffalo roam among opener *Seeded Clouds*, Joe Ely strolls freely through *Some Kind of Other Love* and the host of musical exotica (Chinese trumpet, vibraphone, mrimba, timpani etc) that pervade the album suggest a resolute desire to avoid the pitfalls of the depressing no-depression stereotype. With the sardonic wit and wordplay of Will Oldham and Smog, the left-field arrangements of Jim White and the musical aptitude of Joe Pernice, they possess sufficient fuel to make it under their own steam.

## **The High Llamas – Lollo Rosso** (*Alpaca Park*)

Man on the case, Sean O'Hagan, procures the six trendiest avant-garde artists on the planet to make the remix

of *Cold & Bouncy* and produces the surprise of the year. In interviews from the last two years O'Hagan has been at pains to not over stress the *BEACH BOYS/BRIAN WILSON* influence. That influence may have peaked with the Hawaii album and waned considerably on *Cold & Bouncy*. Out go all the old NEIL YOUNG, STEELY DAN and LENNONISMS too. Instead we are asked to embrace a music with little specific human personality and yet which, curiously, has a 'free us and refresh us' quality rather than a cold alienating effect. Even more than most remix albums the invited players put their own stamp on the seven tracks and several produce career highlights. *MOUSE ON MARS' Showstop Hic Hup* is a great opening track – play it loud and it is Premier League dance music whilst at living room volume its gentle humour and eastern flavour recalls the best moments on Taora Tahiti. *KID LOCO'S The Space Raid Remix* finds its own intoxicating little groove but, before we get too comfortable, pulls the rug from under our feet and replaces the experience with something even more sexy. When you consider the other artists featured – CORNELIUS, SCHNEIDER TM, STOCK HAUSEN & WALKMAN and JIM O'ROURKE – it could be a good introduction to rock's avant-garde. Those who hope for Holland and Smile may be stretched a little uncomfortably. Those who've tired of conventional song structure and melodic developments will have fun. **SR**

## **Jessamine – Don't Stay Too Long** (*Kranky*)

Dawn Smithson's vocals on *Esewards* evoke the cathartic intensity of CHAN MARSHALL'S *Moon Pix*. It's a beautiful opener, Andy Brown's electric piano

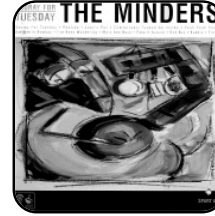
runs and Michael Faeth's percussive embellishments establishing an hypnotic groove. Even better is *It Was Already Thursday*, where guitarist Rex Ritter takes things further into funk territory with wah-wah-wonderful results. Things take a prog-lite turn on *Pilot-Free Ignition*, the tempo raised the mind-state subsides and, despite some effective guitar from Ritter, is lost on the rambling, inconsequential *Continuous* which fails to heed the warning of it's album title. The brooding menace of instrumental *Burgundy* puts a darker spin on Jessamine's delicate weavings before *Hand Held* regains the cinematic rush of the opening pair, Smithson's voice again an insidious blend of innocence and experience. A record at times intoxicating, at others diluted with indulgence.

## **John Wesley Harding – Trad Arr Jones** (*Zero Hour*)

Whilst interviewing Wes for this very edition (seems like a lifetime ago) he mentioned NIC JONES and here, swiftly on the heels of the power-pop leanings of *Awake* comes this affectionate tribute – 'Ghosts, Sex and Murder: they're just like my songs only 400 years older' as he says. JWH's pronounced accent, unconcealed by simple acoustic backing of guitar and accordion, recites tales (some sub-two minute, others over six) that belong to another time, seemingly another place. Sadly, despite the obvious love of his subject, the resultant recording lacks a contemporary edge (Dylan's Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts successfully updated the form) and it stands more as a curiosity and an honourable indulgence than a bonafide John Wesley Harding album.

## **Damien Jurado – Rehearsals For Departure** (*Sub Pop / Ryko*)

Departure seems an apt term as Jurado completes his transition from neo-punk to folk troubadour. Ten concise fables that draw lyrically from human failing and the resultant breakdown of relationships and musically from the tradition of DYLAN and DRAKE, are updated with a keen pop sensibility, subtle instrument-ation and perfectly judged production from KEN STRINGFELLOW (*THE POSIES*). Opener *Ohio* has the fingerpicked guitar and harmonica combination of *Blood on the Tracks* set behind a wistful vocal melody (sadly reminiscent of DR. HOOK'S *Sylvia's Mother!*) and a mood-setting narrative of resignation. The Nick Drake inflections of *Eyes For Windows* veer perilously close to parody; the song saved by the menacing strings and odd, sampled monologue that closes the song. Small-town America gives Jurado a wealth of material for his bittersweet tales – "She tells me how her night was spent nursing coffee and cigarettes / You waited 'til your husband left to pack your things and off you went / He wouldn't notice that you'd left 'til morning when the drink wore off" he sings on the title track. Best of all is the sparse *Curbside*, a breathy confessional of unrequited love – "Where are you now, you're with another / I am sitting by the curbside where we'd hang out under streetlights / How those times still are with me." With a ghostly harmony by Sarah Shannon adding to the pervading sense of loss, it's a genuinely moving performance, one of many of this fine record.



### **Karate – The Bed Is In The Ocean (Southern)**

Geoff Farina's solo album, *Usonian Dream Sequence*, placed his evocative narratives against the barren framework of his own double-tracked guitar. Here their power is undiminished by the Karate trio setting, an ostensibly telepathic union of bass, drums and Farina's guitar that meld jazz-rock and off-kilter indie rhythms recorded simply; unencumbered by effects and with a minimum of overdubs. 'There's a man around, his face is always firetruck-red. I've heard there were angels in his head, but now he holds a baseball bat instead,' he sings, with resignation, on opener *There Are Ghosts*. Farina's delivery is consistently convincing, his half-spoken recitations at times threatening to drown in negativity – 'All I see is problems without the solutions. And God don't make things that you can rearrange. But that's ok, because I can't take the change' – occasionally balanced by an unerring romanticism – 'I know you're sincere because I've got it on my machine. I turn it up loud, like you're here now.' A more mature, less turbulent record musically than previous Karate records, *The Bed Is In The Ocean* boasts some compelling songs (*The Same Stars* and *The Last Wars* stand among the best of last year) – Geoff Farina's view of the world an imposing, realistic alternative.

### **Pete Krebs & The Gossamer Wings – Sweet Ona Rose (Cavity Search)**

An infusion of swinging soul elevates much of Krebs' latest to near-party fayre, a nice contrast to the expected acoustic introspection. The sprightly opening pairing of *Johnny Come Lately* (not the Steve Earle classic) and the title

track are enhanced with brass and organ respectively, the latter also providing the name of Krebs' musicians of choice this time around. His last collaborative project, with the excellent folk-rootsy Golden Delicious, also produced some of his finest solo performances, two of which (*Dressed To The Nines* and *Ashes Back To Vegas*) are reworked here. Krebs' lyrical style remains confessional in tone, with a neat turn of phrase ('You know the highway in the summertime is just an afternoon and a steady blurring line' he sings on *Thunderstorms and Alcohol*) delivered in his homely voice. With a knack for penning memorable pop songs (the nostalgic *Analog*, the buoyant *Quickly Steals Away*) and affecting ballads (*Patiently*, *Dressed to the Nines*) with aplomb, Krebs should find favour among fans of Evan Dando, Josh Rouse or Elliott Smith. He's that good.

### **The Lapse – Betrayal! (Gern Blandsten)**

'Though I've returned with my head hung low and my palms pressed flatly, upwardly together, in due time I plan on leaving again and when I do my fingers will fold to form a gun and flip to fuck a chorus of pussies who still answer to that brilliant thought that revealed itself to them in the third grade. What was it again?' Chris Leo's return, aided and abetted by fellow ex-Van Pelt-er Toko Yasuda, is an uncompromising, vehement document made all the more bruising by the simultaneous loss of soothing melodic counterpoint that was The Van Pelt's stock-in-trade. Leo's musicality is no less imaginative; more a sonic parallel for his socio-political forthrightness – 'I hate people because the compromise

I would have to make to like them, I believe (though I may believe falsely), would cause me more pain than the loneliness and disgust that at times is all consuming.' Yasuda's contributions seem naïve and child-like in comparison ('A boy meets a girl, a girl meets a boy ... when I gave up and smiled the words shined and died in my hands') acting as interludes between the angst-ridden, self-doubting anger of Leo's manifesto. Outspoken and original.

### **Looper - Up A Tree (Jeepster)**

A charming tale of pen pal-dom in the north to the sound of a typewriter and Stuart (Belle & Sebastian) David's soft Arab Strap-esque vocals on top. But this is much poppier, and possibly more romantic than the Strap. Teenagers of the world unite. I don't know how old this lot are, but they make me feel at least 14½. And that's nice. Sweet. Looper aren't just about teen love and letters though. To prove this point you've got to open your mind and ears and sit through some 40 odd minutes of this crazy twee thing. Plenty of cute whistles and hums and xylaphonic fun. Up A Tree has a varied sound full of welcome little surprises. Quite a pleasurable experience all in all. They must live together. **TLJ**

### **The Minders – Hooray for Tuesday (Elephant Six / SpinART)**

A beautiful, nostalgic trip back in time that many a current plagiarist could learn from, *Hooray for Tuesday* is a perfect Sunday morning pick-me-up that sounds equally cool on speaker-shaking Saturdays. Apples in Stereo guru Robert Schneider at the production helm, Martyn Leaper's songs transcend copyist notions of Beatles-esque in favour of an authentic

flavour that falls between the happy-go-lucky innocence of '62 and Teenage Fanclub's Byrdsian update. With affectionate nods to The Small Faces and The Hollies, we'll assume it's Schneider's Wilsonian production and recording expertise that sweeten the Brit grit with some California sunshine. The result is breezy, shimmering, pretention-free and smooth-as-you-like. Why have Cotton when you can have silk?

### **Ninian Hawick – Steep Steps (Dreamy)**

Crikey! In a word. Blimey would be good too, but for now Ill stick with crickey. If the opener, *Scottish Rite Temple Stomp* isn't one of the greatest pop songs ever, then the others should be rounded up and shot. Not since the KLF kidnapped Tammy Wynette has anything made me dance like a crazy thing in the way this does. But what to follow a Scottish song, bagpipes 'n' all? How about one in French? Confused? Go with it, it's only just started. The majority of this mini album are instrumentals and if Simon Jeffes dreamed up the Penguin Café Orchestra after eating some dodgy fish you can only hazard a guess at what Ninian's John Crozier had for lunch, but still you'd want some. Strange beats fight with fractured rhythms while the ghost of the Penguin Café looks on and laughs, almost as if it's providing the soothing soundtrack for food poisoned dreams. The remix of *Scottish Rite...* floats by enriched by echo and all the bagpipes they couldn't fit on the original. Then *The Minch* comes along to pull you back to reality with its naked piano. The alarm clock start to *Phrasebook Wands* provides a manic crash into your day, frenzied, but with

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a calming voice, only for *The House at Dumbarton Oaks* to remind you that all is not as it seems. Too soon the albums over and just two words remain. 'Crikey' and 'Buy'. **LA**

## **Stina Nordenstam - People Are Strange** (eastwest)

Nick Drake is found alive, well, tattooed and bandanna-clad, playing drums with a southern Californian cock-rock outfit...Ian Mackaye is spotted toking on a doobie, knocking back the Special Brew and high five-ing with his buddies at an ELO reunion gig... Bill Callahan becomes the fifth Teletubby. God knows what further illusions could be shattered to follow these up, but wee Swede Stina Nordenstam's covers album is surely a contender. It's...well, interesting. As much for her iconoclastic choice of songs as her skewed interpretations. (But isn't 'interesting' a word that's summoned when what you really want to say is 'confusing,' or 'crap'?!) You'll find no obsequious tributes or attempts to claw back some faded credibility in these songs. Mixing the whispered acoustic intimacy that made her 1994 album *And She Closed Her Eyes* so beguiling, with the more claustrophobic hammering sound of her follow-up *Dynamite*, *People Are Strange* stirs together both the familiar and the obscure, taking in songs by The Doors, Leonard Cohen and Tim Hardin, alongside folk tunes and- it says here- a 19th century ballad, *Jeannie With The Light Brown Hair*. Even over-familiar songs are twisted unrecognisably by Stina's hesitant phrasing and eccentric vision, like the uncomfortable bedroom rendition of Rod Stewart's *Sailing*, sung to the backing of a rain storm in Stina's cracked, helium tones. Sounds

contrived, no? Never the drama queen, she manages a whispered version of Prince's *Purple Rain* which, with drum and bass fills and swirling pseudo-orchestral static, transforms the song from an extravagant clamour of desire to a sinister murmur of closeted longing. It's stunning, but, like your batty aunt with the hygiene problem, this album is asking to be kept at arm's length, visited only when you really have to. Maybe repetition really is creative death, and the value of never revisiting her past triumphs is enough of a premium for Stina to deem this album a nominal triumph. Play *People Are Strange* back-to-back with *And She Closed Her Eyes* and see a tear in a grown man's eye. **MW**

## **The Olivia Tremor Control - Black Foliage. Animation Music. Volume One.** (Flydaddy)

Hooray! A new release from Athens own Elephant Six Collective stars The Olivia Tremor Control. No disappointments here; just a fabulous follow up to the highly acclaimed *Dusk at Cubist Castle*. My only gripe is that they haven't included my favourite *Not Feeling Human*. But most is forgiven with the inclusion of the *Black Foliages*, and other exhilarating moments through the different Combinations (from the *Dream Appeal* tapes) scattered throughout. The aptly titled *The Sky Is A Harpsichord Canvas* is just one example of how weird and wonderful this record is. The coolest thing is how they entwine the reality of pop and the anti-Disney excursions into their own make believe animated world. Listen to *Place We Have Been To* (last track on side two - even if you've got a CD!) or *The Sylvan Screen* (side three) and marvel at the insanity

of this whole pop world we are living in. As with The Olivia's former release (and even the live shows) *Black Foliage* is more than an album of songs. It's an amazing journey to and through a land only available within our own imaginations. It's a nice trip. **TLJ**

## **Jim O'Rourke - Eureka** (Domino)

It's pop Jim, but not as we know it. And pigeonholes be damned as O'Rourke's latest excursion takes his trusty guitar technique (Quick! Passing reference point, John Fahey. Grab him!) and introduces it to the lush, the layered, the laid-back and the lyrically loquacious (can I stop now?). The ensuing assemblage boasts an inordinate measure of delicacies which, from the hypnotic repetition of its near nine minute opener *Women of the World* (sole lyric 'Women of the World take over, 'cause if you don't the world will come to an end, and it won't take long') with its Aerial M-like guitar motif, to its corny Dylan meets Wilson sub-two minute closer, *Happy Holidays*, contains enough revelatory (obviously) moments (the David Sanborn-plays-Carole King-in-a-jazz-mood-with-steel-drums of *Through The Night Slowly*, the delicate swing of the Arto Lindsay-esque *Ghost Ship in a Storm*) to placate the ear-candy craving child in all of us. Headphone heaven.

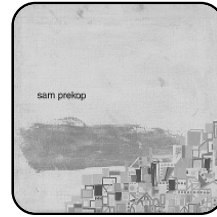
## **Joel R.L. Phelps : The Downer Trio - 3** (Pacifico)

Phelps' pained and strained voice is one that, while not technically accomplished, ranks among the more expressive in contemporary music. Here, against the sparse backing of acoustic and pedal steel guitars, upright bass, horns or traditional trio set-up with brushed drums and gently

stroked electric guitar he takes us on a late night ride into early morning. Rarely breaking into a canter his cracking tones evoke ADAM DURITZ's most intimate moments (rare that they are) during songs that put an old school spin on the alt.country palette. The trio (Phelps, William Herzog and Robert Mercer) utilise subtle instrumental variations on each track, apparently recorded live (never more than three instruments discernible at one time) behind narratives that wouldn't sound out of place among BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN's pre-CBS output. However, besides a passing resemblance to an unplugged Calexico on *Chaplin's Radiotelephone*, this is a unique, seductive and beguiling sound which, as it's cover suggests, feels like floating on clouds or succumbing to the pull of the tide.

## **Liz Phair - Whitechocolatespaceegg** (Matador)

She's back, the original and still the best angry woman of rock. Married and a mother, time has tamed her, there are no explicit songs and only three songs with swearing. So has she sold out? No, even if she sings 'it's nice to be liked, but its better by far to get paid'. She's shown everyone how to do that stuff, so why just re-hash her previous albums. Subtlety is now the key. No songs about sex? Listen to *Headache* on headphones and say that, those breathy backing vocals and mumbled lyrics, she can teach these youngsters a thing or two. No hard hitting songs? What about *Polyester Bride*. It may sound trite, but listen closely. A girl wonders if she should 'bother dating unfamous men' and wants to avoid 'those kind of men', so she seeks advice from a barman, who gives her free



drinks because he likes her eyes. He tells her 'you're lucky to even know me' before delivering homespun mottos that she takes to heart as if it were the most profound wisdom ever. Ironic, dontcha think? Elsewhere she swaps musical styles with ease, pop, blues even a country feel, yet all sung with a brutal frankness that sets her apart from the rest. She still takes no prisoners, claiming 'all those other bastards were only practise' after meeting Mr. Right and 'I've got seven other men in the ditches behind me'. You can take her home, but she'll never be your girl. Indeed, she even contemplates lying to a guy 'to make the day blur into the night'. Sweet!?! No Thank You, WCSE is anything but that, but it still gives you a huge rush. Older and wiser she is, so listen and learn. **LA**

### **The Pins – All the Night Sky**

*(Stick it to the Man)*

Recorded live and in sequence in their own basement practice room, this third full-length from Minneapolis four-piece The Pins has all the intensity and intimacy of a private gig. The addition of electric piano and moog to the standard power-trio set-up gives a further dimension to a set that fuses the swirling, carefree meanderings of Galaxie 500 with the in-yer-face guitar of, say, Built to Spill. Sadly they lack Wareham or Martsch's melodic knack and idiosyncratic delivery, neither guitarist Rich Barlow nor keysman Steve Shaskam possessing a distinctive vocal punch. In many ways theirs and drummer Beth Van Dam's voices combine to form a further layer on The Pins' sonic canvas, one that seems to have thrown away the rule-book in favour of an instinctive ebb and flow.

Neither as subdued as Low or as alienating as Flying Saucer Attack, theirs is a night sky darkened by foreboding. (P.O. box 8475, Minneapolis, MN 55408)

### **Pizzicato 5 – Playboys & Playgirls** *(Matador)*

The prolific Pizzicato 5 cleverly blend their recent sample-heavy edges with the smoother lounge-core of the Sister Freedom Tapes and, brass and strings to the fore, take on John Barry's Bond aesthetic. Infectious in any language, and with a faux-naivete equal to a decade's Eurovision entries, the wide-eyed Five's signature overwrites any reference points (the hippy harpsichord of *Concerto*, the Teena Marie disco-lite of *Such a Beautiful Girl Like You*, the title track's acid jazz groove) with a flourish. Shouldn't I be wearing a tux?

### **Sam Prekop – S/T** *(Thrill Jockey)*

Fundamentally The Sea & Cake with a new rhythm section, Prekop's first solo outing leans towards the easy jazz aesthetic of early S&C tracks like *The Fontana* and *Jacking The Ball*, his breathy vocal and tasteful, evocative guitar augmented with keys courtesy of the ubiquitous Jim O'Rourke and strings. The empathetic interplay with fellow guitarist Archer Prewitt (the lynchpin of the Sea & Cake's sound) continues to bear fruit, whilst the contrary relegation of John McEntire to percussive embellish-ments (crediting McEntire with 'triangle' seems absurdly at odds with his reputation!) seems to have taken the experimental controls away from the master multi-instrumentalist and placed them firmly in the hands of Prekop. In place of McEntire and Eric Claridge come Chad Taylor and Josh Abrams respectively, a

restrained, swinging rhythm section that allow the songs to breathe, unhindered by studio noodlings. Some primitive piano tinkling enlivens the instrumental *The Back*, whilst the delicate guitar intro of *Don't Bother* recalls Kenny Burrell's mellower moments. *Faces And People* betrays the personnel and heritage of Chicago's scene, it's sampled, looped backdrop interchangeable with many of those from Tortoise or Isotope 217 (whose Rob Mazurek makes a delightful cornet coda on the track), an anomaly among the timeless, soulful remainder. O'Rourke's production is delicate and well judged, his own contributions on slide guitar (*So Shy*), organ (*Showrooms*) and the briefest of backing vocals (*On Such Favors*) particularly effective. Sam Prekop has delivered a lazy, summer day of a record; a sumptuous, laid back affair.

### **Retain – Sweet Luck of Amaryllis** *(Carrot Top)*

One track was enough to convince me. Hearing *Lone Star Drive*, the first of thirteen, whilst horizontal helped soothe away the stresses of what had been a tough, tiring week. Sure the sleep-deprivation had me at the mercy of such angelic voices and blissfully judged music, but here before the cold blues and greys of one last session at the keyboard, I'm being seduced again. At turns delicate and heartbreaking (*Good Morning Bird*), playful (*What The Devil Said*) or simply sublime (*Lone Star Drive*, the cover of Come's *Broken Hearted Wine* or *Swallow* - like Juliana Hatfield duetting with Nick Drake) Sweet Luck of Amaryllis is an album for lonely, rainy afternoons miles from the one you love.

### **Sebadoh – The Sebadoh** *(Domino)*

If Lou Barlow's heartfelt lyrics are contagious, I'm coming down with it too. The recent release of The Sebadoh is exactly what we've all come to expect from thee American lo-fi heroes with an added extra oomph by way of the irresistible *Flame*. Oh, I know what you're thinking... "It's so catchy, have they sold out?" [Uh, no.] Maybe it has something to do with the appearance on Top of the Pops that sits somewhat uncomfortably, but I urge everyone to rise above it. Lou, Jason and new drummer Russ are about as close to the truth as you can get. No pretense, just utter belief in their emotions and expressions. And as far as the usage of modern technology goes, well, it is 1999. I don't see any harm in experimenting a little. Especially when the results are an album that is so enjoyable. **TJ**

### **Sleater-Kinney – The Hot Rock** *(Matador)*

Following one of '98's most critically cherished albums (*Dig Me Out*), the stakes are upped for The Hot Rock. Thankfully the band have refused to rest on past glories and make *Dig Me Out 2*, instead making a surprisingly melodic, mature record. The key ingredients remain the same – Corin Tucker's unrivalled vocals, Carrie Brownstein's consistently imaginative guitar lines and Janet Weiss' formidable drum skills – but here are deployed with more restraint and (yikes!) finesse than before. Likewise the venomous lyrics of previous work has been bypassed by a more considered, no less confessional, tone ('I'd set your heart on fire but arson is no way to make a love burn brighter'). *God Is A Number* and *Banned from the End of the World* face



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up to life in 1999, the first tackling the onslaught of technology ('Grow up on the internet, get off on TV; tell me about God and Country, music, heart and history'), the latter impervious to the impending millennium ('A new world rushes on and we'll just play along... The future is here, look in the mirror. We're the band from the end of the world'). Some may miss the sheer aggression and spark of Dig Me Out and its predecessors, but The Hot Rock allows another side of Sleater-Kinney to shine.

## **Smog - Knock Knock (Domino)**

Like an Eric Satie for the dispossessed, Bill Callahan has been wringing tormented mileage out of these hypnotic, encircling melodies for ten years now. And if Knock Knock isn't exactly a Mardi Gras-style display of effervescence it's perhaps as close as he's ever going to get. Opener *Lets Move To The Country* may be as catatonic as Callahan's stage presence but there's a previously exiled looseness there, a brightness to the guitar and a warmth as his deadpan tenor intones, 'let's move to the country / just you and me.' All too often the backing barely registers a pulse, as one-handed piano is sustained by a scarcely perceptible snare or gathering swell of guitar. But every so often we get a *Held*, where an almost funky guitar line threads above a *We Will Rock You* rhythm. 'When I take the prisoners swimming they have the time of their lives,' he sings on *Night Guard*, and it's in the compelling curiosity of these slowly unfolding narratives that the true perverse beauty of Smog lies. **MW**

## **John P. Strohm – Vestavia (Flat Earth)**

'Do you like this song, 'cause if you do I'll sing it all day long for free,' sings indie-pop's perennial sideman, a generous proclamation given that the song in question is *Wouldn't Want To Be Me*, the stirring opener on Strohm's second 'solo' album. The song, albeit in a different version, turned up in the UK last year courtesy of the Easy! Tiger label, a tasty taster for Vestavia (named after a suburb of Strohm's hometown, Birmingham, Alabama), the similarly infectious *Drive-Thru* on the flip. The familiarity of those two gems makes getting to know Vestavia that much easier, like a couple of old friends guiding you through. Far less country-tinged than 97's Caledonia, Strohm's latest pushes the guitars to the fore and revives the outdated notion of classic, riff-based rock (*For a While, Better Than Nothing*) and soaring, power-ballad choruses (*Sylvia's Gone*) with nostalgic nods to US rock's past (the Byrds-via-Petty *In Your Dreams*). Lyrically, Strohm's a realist - 'I know that I'm alive but it don't feel like livin'... 'cause when you're 25 life's so unforgivin' - with occasionally oddball source material - quite what inspired him to sit down and pen *Eva Braun* and *Lobster Boy*, only he can tell you - and a rare honesty that add up to a personable, personal record I'd willingly listen to all day long, free or otherwise.

## **Sunny Day Real Estate – How It Feels To Be Something On (Sub Pop)**

Notoriously media-shy in the wake of their adored debut *Diary* (1994); near-legendary after their premature demise (a second album, the patchy self-titled 'pink album' was released

posthumously in '95) and subsequent religious conversion of frontman Jeremy Enigk, Sunny Day Real Estate were the unlikelyst of reformations for '98. Yet, despite bassist Nate Mendel's refusal to be enticed away from Foo Fighters the reunion transpired. Fellow Fighter William Goldsmith resumed his role behind the drums, Jeff Palmer (Mommyheads) stepped into Nate's shoes (and has since been replaced by ex-Posies Joe Bass) and the subsequent album has a strongly cohesive singular vision. Enigk's unrivalled voice remains the defining instrument within the band, one that elevates opener *Pillars* to classic status - it's an astonishing introduction. Nothing else here quite manages to scale such dizzy heights, but *Roses In Water* competes admirably, the acoustic, hypnotic *The Prophet*, the slow build of *Guitar And Video Games* and the operatic *Days Were Golden* containing enough momentous peaks to tingle the stiffest of spines. Enigk's spiritual side is manifested only in his enig(k)matic delivery and God-given talent. Believe.

## **The Sunshine Club - Visit to a Small Planet (Glitterhouse)**

With a mood that's signposted in the title of their strolling opener - *Happy! Sad* - The Sunshine Club offer up a rootsy cocktail for anyone with a taste for a blend of Mark Eitzel and the Cowboy Junkies. With string-soaked romance and lo-fi somnolence in equal measures, *Visit To A Small Planet's* downcast heart is lifted by the rolling playfulness of songs like *Rainy Day Friend* (recalling RED HOUSE PAINTERS' *Cabezon*) and the raucous psychedelic interlude of *Steiner Street*. *Sunshine Maker*, mixing ragged acoustic guitar

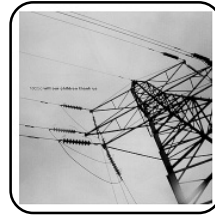
and a glassy squall of violin, makes the death of hope sound beguiling as vocalist Denise Bon Giovanni (forever on the verge of tears) sings, 'Sunshine maker / I believe in you'. Elsewhere Giovanni gives good Dusty Springfield on their version of Bacharach's *The Look of Love*. Like a down home PJ Harvey or the Sinead O'Connor of Black Boys on Mopeds, *Visit to a Small Planet* has the glimmer of a mellow gem. **MW**

## **Tram - Heavy Black Frame (Piao!)**

Heavy Black Frame hangs on the edge of evening; with swoony guitars and dark and dusty drumming; Paul Anderson's sweet melodic vocals makes Tram's new full length a work of art. The sublime opening track *Nothing Left to Say* indeed says it all. The sleepy sound of *Expectations, Like Clockwork* or *You Can Go Now (if you want)* transcend a gentleness that seems as vulnerable as sadness and as delicate as taffeta. While some of the melodies tend to remind me a bit of Rattlesnakes (odd, I know), the difference is clear. This is a beautiful record that is best played in a dimly lit room all cozy and soft and warm. No lager here; just a cup of cocoa and a sentimental mood. **TLJ**

## **Various Artists - Dreams Are Free (With Purchase) (Dark Beloved Cloud)**

This compilation starts off with *Attitude & Couture* (imagine Stravinsky with daughters...) and follows a route from roots & folk into the mesmerising world of the Spaceheads. This fabulous offering from *Dark Beloved Cloud* is no Alt-country bandwagon. Which is a good thing. With the likes of Jad Fair & Jason Willett, the weird & wonderful pHOAMING EDISON, Sarge's catchy punk pop number *The Girl's Bad News*



**LA** Laurence Arnold  
**TLJ** Tracy Lee Jackson  
**NMS** Naoise Mac Sweeney  
**SM** Shaun May  
**SR** Stephen Ridley  
**WW** Wyndham Wallace  
**MW** Martin Williams

*all other reviews by Matt*

... (Just think, if this were on vinyl, I'd only be on side A) I am assured that there's an escape from bland after all. But on this CD, our journey doesn't get a break and what could be classed as side B carries on with such delightful songs as *Winter* by Uncle Wiggly, and *What Can I Do?* by the Autumn Teen Sound. Oh, and I guess mentioning that Purple Ivy Shadows have made a contribution along with these 'coolest person alive' Graham Smith of Kleenex Girl Wonder will raise a few eyebrows. So, as you can see, it's a star-studded affair that should be going 'round more often than gracing your fabulous CD wall rack. Listen often. **TLJ**

#### **Variou Artists – Will Our Children Thank Us (Foundry)**

Fledgling label Foundry Recordings' first full-length is a superbly sequenced summation of all things p-p-p-post-rock in 1999, its multi-layered, multi-coloured palette casually ignoring the limited canvas that term implies. Appliance open the record with *Throwing a Curve Ball* reminding us (via a guitar tone to make Metallica proud) that there is room for humour within this most snooty of genres. The melodic funk of Billy Mahonie's *Glenda* make it eminently danceable, our friends Electric Sound of Joy turn in the playful three minute pop that is *Fonk* whilst The Wisdom of Harry's *Close Frank Falling* takes the Tortoise trademark bass-riff/vintage keyboard axis and plots a rhythmic stroll topped with the first of a trio of lazy vocals, Novak's acoustic *Peggy's Well* falling between it and the album's centrepiece – the imposing *Biggest Lie* by Piano Magic. From a Dean Wareham meets Lloyd Cole delivery atop a rolling guitar motif via the brooding backward middle section

to the closing two minutes of reverb swamped controlled feedback and spaced-out synths; it's a magnificent mini-epic. Sadly the electronic indulgence of Isan and Rothko's nine-minute experiment demand a little too much patience, reminding me of many a teenage night spent with Tangerine Dream, but State River Widening's light-hearted *Moriko Mori Shoots The Make-Believe Ballroom* redresses the balance, its three and a half minute marriage of infectious melody and synthetic texture a sweet synopsis bookending a cohesive, eclectic assortment. Absorbing stuff.

#### **Tom Waits – Mule Variations (Epitaph)**

Waits sixteenth album is his first all-new collection for six years. Deeply rooted in the Blues, *Mule Variations* contains half a dozen pure blues tunes, albeit swamped with Waits' unique lyrical slant and arrangements. *Get Behind The Mule* found its inspiration in a quote from Robert Johnson's father about his son - 'Trouble with Robert is he wouldn't get behind the mule in the morning and plow (sic)' – and *Lowside of the Road* draws from an incident in the life of Leadbelly; hell he even begins *Cold Water* with 'Woke up this morning...' Waits' Heartattack and Vine (1980) contained the Springsteen-covered *Jersey Girl* and, if ever the exercise was to be repeated, *Hold On* sounds like an obvious contender; it's one of many affecting ballads that grace *Mule Variations*. The carnivorous *Filipino Box Spring Hog* dates back to '93 when it turned up (in a different form) on the Born To Choose benefit compilation, a track Waits considers 'surrural' (between surreal and rural); in effect a twisted update of traditional down-home themes. As ever it is Waits'

bourbon-drenched delivery that will inspire seduction or a swift switching off. As a summation of his repertoire, this new album would be as good a place as any to take your first sip.

#### **The Webb Brothers – Beyond The Biosphere (label TBC)**

Although I can't quite grasp the sci-fi aesthetics and media-induced hype surrounding Messrs Webb JR, *Beyond The Biosphere* remains, for the most part, a feature-packed half hour of compelling entertainment. On first listen it's a fired-up new wave throwback, the Costello-ish *Sour Grapes* and classic sub-two minute indie thrust of *Cold Fingers* a kick up the backside of post-rock insularity. Then the delicate repetition of *What Have We Become*, the resigned harmonies of the title track and brooding cello of *She Drifts Into My Room* remind you this is no teen-combo with their eyes set on a fast buck. Beneath their red-suited sheen, The Webb Brothers focus on the mundane with unerring conviction, the negativity of *The Filth Of It All* articulated eloquently in lines such as 'Just can't get used to the filth of the world climbing through my bedroom window. She smells like sin, I wonder where she's been sleeping tonight.' And with the ironic 'clap your hands' refrain of closer *I'm Over And I Know It*, The Webb Brothers close proceedings with their own 'Rock'n'Roll Suicide'. It's a dark world that lies Beyond The Biosphere.

#### **Chuck E. Weiss – Extremely Cool (Ryko)**

Weiss belongs to the genus 'maturus musicianum' and, in accordance with the traditions of his kind, his extra-

studio exploits are far more notable and widely known than his recordings (which, until now, comprised a sole offering in 1981). His infamy stems from his connections with LA's trendy 'underground' (immortalised in song by Rickie Lee Jones' *Chuck E's in Love*) and long-standing friendship with Tom Waits. Waits has both produced and co-written *Extremely Cool* and his signature is clearly stamped on the finished sound. But, although the album bears the traces of Waits' inventive arrangements and percussive instincts, Weiss is bluesy where Waits is country, rock'n'roll where Waits is swagger'n'stroll and downright cheesy where Waits is heartfelt. Like film noir, Weiss draws you into a world where the women are sexy, the men sharply dressed and it's perpetually 1:32am. There are no windows in this smoky bar; bourbon is the drink of choice and all that matters are the intoxicating rhythms and the stories being told. For, as each track unfurls, Weiss spins tales of shady characters, back room dealings and fallen angels. Such murky ambience may be out of place in the IKEA-furnished living room of your suburban semi-detached but, with the lights turned low enough and a brushing up of your southern drawl, you may just pull it off. **NMS**

#### **Wilco – Summer Teeth (Reprise)**

No Depression is dead and who is more qualified to tell us than Jeff Tweedy, one of its instigators. Pop is now king, or so you'd think when Summer Teeth kicks in. Big, fun songs, Phil Spector meets George Martin and we can all sing along. That is 'til you realise what you're singing. Its as if Elmore Leonard had set his books to music with Tweedy's characters wandering

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confused and bewildered through an uncaring world. No Depression on Prozac. He screams that 'maybe all I need is a shot in the arm' to help him understand a lover who has changed, while a piano loop mixes with swirling keyboards to add to the melee, but doesn't seem to want to change. The feeling of confusion is a common thread and only finds resolution *In a Future Age*, the album's closer, but he's not there yet. First he has to go *Via Chicago* and it's a hell of a Styx (the river, not the band) to cross. Guitar feedback haunts the song as he 'dreamed about killing you again last night'. Brutal anger bubbles like the feedback and when it explodes you feel as if you've been kicked hard and are free-falling through darkness, arms outstretched with no-one to catch you. When his cracked and broken voice returns you realise you're not alone in the plummet, he's alongside you. Even his advice in the preceding *How to Fight Loneliness* – 'just smile all the time' – is worthless now, he was just being kind. But there is salvation. After a 23-second silence two bonus tracks turn up. *Candyfloss* is just that and even has some opera in it! But to make sure you still know the score, another version of *Shot in the Arm* follows. In the words of the man himself 'I prefer the first one', but it's the only let-down. Brutality has never sounded so sweet. Summer Teeth all are real. **LA**

## **Kelly Willis – What I Deserve (Ryk)**

Willis' fourth album boasts many a notable name among its cast (Chuck Prophet, Lloyd Maines), songwriting collaborations with Jayhawks' Gary Louris and John Leventhal, and covers of songs by Nick Drake, Paul

Westerberg and others. With such stellar input, it's hard to fathom why the resultant album is swamped with anonymity. Willis' own contribution is not to blame, she possesses a warm voice that resonates with charm. No, what suffocates the songs is the bland performances and sterile production that cry out for some stinging Louris leads and cracked harmonies. The cover of Drake's *Time Has Told Me* trades tragedy for maudlin sentiment (do you really need the royalties Mr Boyd?), typifying the banality of the album. For the undemanding Shania Twain-adoring crowd, *What I Deserve* is a very safe country record. Post-Uncle Tupelo, this isn't enough.

**The Wondermints – Bali (Neosight)** Several or nearly all styles with Americana are fully accepted and enjoyed within the UK. Power-pop, of the sunny LA variety, on the other hand, is still the ignored, unmentionable freak brother, omitted from or hidden at the back of the family portrait. If the intention of the likes of Baby Lemonade, The Negro Problem and wacky scene-leaders The Wondermints is to take a retro romp through that pop paradise that was LA circa 1967, let it not blind us to their original talents. Big fan, Mike Myers, used them on the Austin Powers soundtrack – maybe a less cost prohibitive introduction, all three 'Mints albums are available on import only – and, listening to Bali, I'm reminded of the Springfield psychiatric patient that Homer befriends who believes he is Michael Jackson. This band don't just dig Burt Bacharach, Brian Wilson or John Barry they darn near become them though the tunes are clearly their own. There's also fond regard for apparent

for the stylings of The Strawberry Alarm Clock, Grapefruit (!) and ELO. In fact quite a cornucopia to digest. But a couple of careful listens reveal very little filler and loads highlights. *Wanderlust* is Syd Barrett and Dave Gilmour trying to freak us all out. My Id/entity is the great missing song from The Doors' Soft Parade. What is also worth knowing is that not only are these Wondermints cleverer than you by half, they are also mischievously funny and quite mad. Final and title song Bali and the eighty-six (that's right) following 'hidden' tracks of Pacific surf noise (which include one primitive, crackly radio commercial for Marine Boy!?) will be a humorous or uneasy slip into the Twilight Zone. The cover art is a hoot too. Why don't Xfm play records like this? **SR**

**XTC – Apple Venus (Cooking Vinyl)** At last! And I had no idea I was going to like it this much. Okay, so I may be a little biased. I've always been a fan. But I have a theory; I believe that XTC don't spew out any old album. It has got to be this good to pass through. And thank you XTC for thinking of me. I mean, how did they know what I wanted to hear? *River of Orchids* is just so perfect from start to finish. I don't think I've been inspired like this since *In An Aeroplane Over The Sea*. Oh, it's so nice. Just listening to Andy Partridge tell me how much he'd like that and... those harmonies... It's just so wonderful. Touches all the right places.... And then the trumpet comes in... and we are *Frisolous Tonight*. From the darkest moment of *Your Dictionary* to the flirtatious *Fruit Nut* I've been carried away on a grand ship with velvet banners and sparkling rhinestones by the *Knights In Shining Karma*. Off to

the *Harvest Festival* in *The Last Balloon* and I don't know how long it will take, but I intend on enjoying every minute of flight time. Every song is a treasure uncovered now that I've got the map. **TU**

**Zita Swoon – I Paint Pictures on a Wedding Dress (Warner Benelux)** Belgium! According to some, the worst swear word in the entire universe. A country famous for Tin Tin, chocolate, waffles and a great motor racing track. Music? Nah! Plastic Bertrand, right? What about Deus? Remember Stef Carlens offshoot band Moondog Jr.? What became of them? Spotted in a Brussels record store and craved for its cover, should I buy it? Is the 'Top 50' sticker an incentive and how much is 695 Francs? The song titles alone are great. *Song for a Dead Singer*, *Rabbit Field* and *About the Successful Emotional Recovery of a Gal Named Maria*. An earlier album had a sign saying 'Formerly Moondog Jr, and I was running for the till. The record was all the cover suggested. Enigmatic, intriguing, confusing and strange. Beck, eels, The Sugarcubes and The The collide in the Grand Place and find that they get on fine. Whichever way you turn a different sound beckons. Infuriating, sometimes. Bewitching, sure. Rewarding, absolutely. Samples, drum machines and pedal steel greet each other in true European spirit, devoid of pretensions and refreshingly honest. The drawbacks? You have to go to Belgium to get it is the biggest. Sure, some of it giggles and Stef's voice can be irritating at times, but the overall sound and feel sets it apart from the usual eurotrash, so head for Belgium and let Zita Swoon revive you. **LA**

# Late But Great ... Our Best of '98

1. **Jason Falkner** 17A (*Elektra Advance*)
2. **Semisonic** Feeling Strangely Fine (*MCA*)
3. **REM** Up (*Warner Bros*)
4. **Victor Krummenacher** Saint John's Mercy (*Magnetic*)
5. **Grant Lee Buffalo** Jubilee (*Slash/London*)
6. **Eels** Electroschock Blues (*Dreamworks*)
7. **The Maggies** Homesick (*Chickenman*)
8. **Matt Wilson** Burnt, White & Blue
9. **Flick** The Perfect Kellulight (*Columbia*)
10. **Owsley** S/T (*Re-nown*)

## MICK DILLINGHAM (*Minus Zero*)

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- Richard Buckner** Since (*MCA*)  
**Buffalo Tom** Smitten (*Beggars Banquet*)  
**Cat Power** Moon Pix (*Matador*)  
**The Hank Dogs** Bareback (*Hannibal*)  
**Karate** The Bed Is In The Ocean (*Southern*)  
**Lotion** The Telephone Album (*SpinART*)  
**Natalie Merchant** Ophelia (*Elektra*)  
**Pernice Brothers** Overcome By Happiness (*Sub Pop / Ryko*)  
**The Posies** Success (*Pop Llama*)  
**Elliott Smith** XO (*Dreamworks*)

## MATT DORNAN

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- Richard Buckner** Since (*MCA*)  
**Jason Falkner** 17A (*Elektra Advance*)  
**Loud Family** Days For Days (*Alias*)  
**Mercury Dime** Darkling (*Yep Roc*)  
**Mercury Rev** Deserters Songs (v2)  
**Owsley** S/T (*Re-nown*)  
**REM** Up (*Warner Bros*)  
**Semisonic** Feeling Strangely Fine (*MCA*)  
**Elliott Smith** XO (*Dreamworks*)  
**Chris Von Sneidern** Wood + Wire (*Mod Lang*)

## BILL FORSYTH (*Minus Zero*)

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1. **Cat Power** Moon Pix (*Matador*)  
*and then, in alphabetical order...*
- Air** Air (*Virgin*)  
**Blonde Redhead** In An Expression of the Inexpressible (*Touch & Go*)  
**Delgados** Peloton (*Chemikal Underground*)  
**The Divine Comedy** Fin De Siecle (*Setanta*)  
**Serge Gainsbourg** Histoire de Melody Nelson (*Mercury*)  
**Graddyadd** Under The Western Freeway (*Big Cat*)  
**Komeda** What Makes It Go (*N.O.N.S.*)  
**Money Mark** Push The Button (*MoWax*)  
**Elliott Smith** XO (*Dreamworks*)

## PAUL HEARTFIELD

1. **Neutral Milk Hotel** In an Aeroplane over the Sea (*Merge*)
2. **Elliott Smith** XO (*Dreamworks*)
3. **Sophia** The Infinite Circle (*FlowerShop*)
4. **Ana D** Satellite 99 (*Elefant*)
5. **The Wisdom Of Harry** Staying In With... (*Lissy's*)
6. **Solex** Solex vs. the Hitmeister (*Matador*)
7. **Belle & Sebastian** The Boy with the Arab Strap (*leesper*)
8. **Andrew Bird's Bowl of Fire** – Thrills (*Import*)
9. **Lisa Germano** Slide (*AAD*)
10. **Lambchop** What Another Man Spills (*City Slang*)

## TRACY LEE JACKSON (*Dreamy Records*)

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1. **Cat Power** Moon Pix (*Matador*)
2. **Tortoise** TNT (*City Slang*)
3. **Elliott Smith** XO (*Dreamworks*)
4. **Martin Hayes** The Lonesome Touch (*Green Linnet*)
5. **Pete Krebs / Golden Delicious** (*Cavity Search*)
6. **Natalie Merchant** Ophelia (*Elektra*)
7. **Ruben Gonzales** Introducing (*World Circuit*)
8. **Willard Grant Conspiracy** Flying Low (*Slow River*)
9. **Donal Lunny** Coolfin (*Metro Blue*)
10. **Calexico** The Black Light (*City Slang*)

## NAOÍSE MAC SWEENEY

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1. **The Hank Dogs** Bareback (*Hannibal*)
2. **Randy Newman** Guilty (Box Set) (*Columbia?*)
3. **Beck** Mutations (*Geffen*)
4. **Money Mark** Push The Button (*MoWax*)
5. **The High Llamas** Lollo Rosso (*City Slang*)
6. **Gastr Del Sol** Camofleur (*Domina*)
7. **Pell Mell** Star City (*Matador*)
8. **The Cardigans** Gran Turismo (???)
9. **The Beach Boys** Endless Harmony (*Capitol*)
- 10 (tie) **Baby Lemonade** Exploring Music (*Big Deal*)  
**Wondermints** Bali (*Neosight*)

## STEPHEN RIDLEY

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- Black Heart Procession** S/T (*Headhunter*)  
**Cornelius** Fantasma (*Matador*)  
**Lambchop** What Another Man Spills (*City Slang*)  
**Mark Hollis** S/T (*Polydor*)  
**Mercury Rev** Deserters Songs (v2)  
**Pan American** Pan American (*Kranksy*)  
**The Pastels** Illuminati (*Domino*)  
**Sophia** The Infinite Circle (*FlowerShop*)  
**The Bill Wells Octet vs Future Pilot AKA** S/T (*Domino*)  
**Wheat** Medeiros (*Sugar Free*)

## WYNDHAM WALLACE

- Echo & The Bunnymen** Peel Session (Bonus Disc) (*London*)  
**Kristin Hersh** Strange Angels (*AAD*)  
**Hole** Celebrity Skin (*Geffen*)  
**Madonna** Ray of Light (*Maverick*)  
**Liz Phair** Whitechocolatespaceegg (*Matador US*)  
**Silo** Instar (*Swim*)  
**Sleater-Kinney** Call The Doctor (*Matador re-issue*)  
**Solex** Solex vs the Hitmeister (*Matador*)  
**The Sugarcubes** A Collection (*One Little Indian*)  
**Throwing Muses** In A Doghouse (*AAD*)

## JASON WHITE (*Mean Fiddler*)

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- Arab Strap** Philophobia (*Chemikal Underground*)  
**Richard Buckner** Since (*MCA*)  
**Mark Eitzel** Caught In A Trap... (*Matador*)  
**Godspeed You Black Emperor!** f#a#∞ (*Kranksy*)  
**The Lemonheads** Best Of (*Eastwest*)  
**Pernice Brothers** Overcome By Happiness (*Sub Pop / Ryko*)  
**Pullman** Turnstyles and Junkpiles (*Thrill Jockey*)  
**Silver Jews** American Water (*Domino*)  
**Various Artists** Loose: New Sounds of the Old West (*Vinyl Junkie/Loose Sounds*)  
**Townes Van Zandt** Anthology (*Charly*)

## MARTIN WILLIAMS

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1. **Rufus Wainwright** S/T (*Dreamworks*)  
*and then, in alphabetical order...*
- Richard Buckner** Since (*MCA*)  
**Cake** Prolonging The Magic (*Capricorn*)  
**Fun Lovin' Criminals** 100% Columbian (*Chrysalis*)  
**Mark Hollis** S/T (*Polydor*)  
**Arto Lindsay** Noon Chill (*Ryko*)  
**Pernice Brothers** Overcome By Happiness (*Sub Pop / Ryko*)  
**REM** Up (*Warner Bros*)  
**Josh Rouse** Dressed Up Like Nebraska (*Slow River*)  
**Elliott Smith** XO (*Dreamworks*)

## ALISON WILSHAW (*Rykodisc*)

### Lest we forget...

- Bedhead** - Transaction De Novo / **Beekeeper** - Ostrich / **Billy Bragg & Wilco** - Mermaid Avenue / **Caesar** - No Rest For The Lonely / **Don Caballero** - What Burns Never Returns / **Geoff Farina** - Usonian Dream Sequence / **Bill Fox** - Transit Byzantium / **Ganger** - Hammock Style / **Sue Garner** - To Run More Smoothly / **Golden Smog** - Weird Tales / **Hood** - Rustic Houses Forlorn Valleys / **Jessamine** - Don't Stay Too Long / **June of 44** - Four Great Points / **Loftus** - S/T / **Robert Mazurek** - Playground / **Mojave 3** - Out of Tune / **Motorpsycho** - Trust Us / **Orange Humble Band** - Assorted Creams / **Joel R.L. Phelps** - **The Downer Trio 3 / Quasi** - Featuring Birds / **Ken Stringfellow** - This Sounds Like Goodbye / **Superdrag** - Head Trip in Every Key **Ui** - Lifelike / **You Am I** - No.4 Record / **Zombies** - Odessey and Oracle (Reissue)