

Blaqstarr's in a galaxy far, far away

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"THE DIVINE EP," *Blaqstarr* (N.E.E.T./Interscope)

Blaqstarr needs to get out more. Not out to the clubs or anything like that, but outside with the trees and the birds.

The Baltimore producer, songwriter and performer is too deep inside his own head on "The Divine EP," and worse, too deep inside the studio. His experimental hip-hop sound is a vacuum of formless noise, and though intriguing stretches surface in the cluttered mix, listeners are likely to be overwhelmed with claustrophobia.

Blaqstarr is perhaps best known for his work with M.I.A., and his solo work parallels hers for its nonformulaic boldness, yet "The Divine EP" fails to inject any real sense of humanity equivalent to hers.

Instead, his release is all gimmickry, launching with the finely minced and overly processed vocals of the meandering opener "All the World," and ending with the dubious tandem of tortured modulated vocals and tortured keyboards, both leashed to a fluttering undertone on the faux-ballad closer "Turning Out."

Blaqstarr hits his stride, seemingly by accident, on other tracks — particularly on a crackling "Oh My Darlin'" that creates a spell-binding grind with its grainy groove, and also on a "Wonder Woman" that fuses strumming and snapping into a futuristic take on simmering Delta blues.

The visceral sonic outbursts camouflage another disturbing characteristic of "The Divine EP": obsessive and non sequitur lyrics that might come from the mind of a slightly deranged child.

Still, while there's no singing along to Blaqstarr on "The Divine

EP," there's always something new around each bend.

Rating (five possible): 3

"TRE3S," *Chikita Violenta* (Arts & Crafts)

Many modern rockers probably don't write love songs because they only truly love themselves, and even they have the presence of mind to know narcissism is a hard sell.

Mexican indie band Chikita Violenta displays self-adoration to spare on its new "Tre3s," and undoubtedly that off-putting air was compounded by guest appearances by performers from several Canadian indie bands, not to mention the input of producer Dave Newfeld of Toronto's Broken Social Scene.

As Chikita Violenta tries to make something new out of traditional instruments, the self-consciously messy "Tre3s" frustrates with its studied instability and reliance on escalating walls of distortion. And gimmicky vocal treatments may be the band's worst indiscretion.

Yet enticing melodies are sometimes buried in those echoing voices and discordant squeals of electricity, and often chugging rhythms tether the mayhem to a riveting foundation. Plus "Tre3s" teases with excursions into trippy psychedelia, even if only briefly on "Holiday" or in the loosely formed "ATPG" (the title of which is revealed to stand for "all the pretty girls").

So "The Pause" charges into a dramatic apocalypse before its eventual collapse, and Newfeld and the band work it with the chunky churn of "Supercycle," the cohesive romp of "Laydown" and the tribal beat of "My Connection." But the gains are offset by aggressively bad touches such as the fractured mania of "All I Need's a Little More," the addled pace of "Siren" and a tailspinning

"Tired" that essentially hydroplanes off the road of momentum.

Rating: 3

"CRUSH" *Telepath* (Telepath)

"Crush" is a world-music free-for-all jam bringing together an international band of musicians.

Key words: "jam band."

No matter how much enthusiasm Telepath's Michael Christie musters for his pieced-together hodgepodge of sound, the grooves take over most every track and amble in that space where jam-band music tends to go -- a mind-bending hypnotic place that warms the soul but doesn't stimulate the brain.

Not that "Crush" isn't engaging. Christie assembled e-mailed contributions from an international army of guest musicians and singers. Christie plays drums, bass, guitar, keyboards, flutes and more with others chipping in horns, sitars and violins mixed up with voices in multiple languages — and sometimes no language at all, just wails and moans.

Western, Indian and Arabic signatures blend together in "Crush's" small world, sometimes tied to Caribbean rhythms and dub overlays.

The messages tend to be generically upbeat, from Williamtell's hopeful soul on "Freedom" to "Justify's" vision of "No more leaders, (lying) and cheating" set to a forceful mash of reggae and hip-hop. And it doesn't get any better here than "Down the Block," a block-party-appropriate track built on "mando-guitar," trombone, sax, violin, a gripping groove and festive chants.

Yet the collection often slips into the anonymity of likable-enough songs heated by inviting rhythms, though lacking in distinction.

Rating: 3

